

The Rev. Charlie Holt:

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of Your Word, and we ask that the ministry of the Word might be Your Word for the sake and glory of Your Son Jesus. Alum in our hearts and minds, and the knowledge and love of Him. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

It must be fall break, noticing the numbers a little bit, but it's interesting.

We're in the middle of the Spirit-filled life and reflecting on what does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit? How do we understand ourselves as Christians, as a Spirit-filled people, as a Spirit-filled body of Christ, and as Spirit-filled individuals? And so today we're looking at the idea of empowerment.

What does it mean to be empowered by the Holy Spirit of God?

In the Old Testament, starting from the very beginning, we learn something about ourselves,

that we are a people that have fallen into sin and into a state of rebellion against God. It starts with the very first family, Adam and Eve, as they disobey the commandment of God not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and under the temptation of Satan, fall for His tricks and His lies and His scheming, and give themselves over to His ways and to Satan's lies.

And this creates in us not just an issue of disobedience, but the argument of the Old Testament, and it really reaches a culmination in our Jeremiah passage today, is that not only are we breaking God's commandments and not following His ways and His laws, but there is something now deeply broken in humanity, right to the core of our human nature, that

we have a condition of sin. It's not just sin as in breaking rules, but sin, I want to use the term disease, but it's innate now within us. Paul would call it the flesh nature or the sin nature.

And theologians and philosophers down through the ages have debated over just how bad that sin nature is.

And what the Scriptures argue, and I think the right side of the theological debate, is that that sin nature is so bad within us that we are actually enslaved to it, that we're in bondage to sin.

And we don't have the ability or the power in ourselves, of ourselves, to set ourselves free from it.

This is actually the teaching of the Anglican church. If you look in the back of the prayer book, sometimes I think when the sermon gets a little boring, you start flipping through the book of common prayer and trying to find, well, maybe there might be something interesting in here. Well, in the back section, there's a section there of the historic documents which contains what is called the 39 Articles.

And if you work your way through the 39 Articles to Article 10, you come across something on free will.

And what it says is this, and it literally says, "on free will." It says, "The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith in calling upon God. Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God without the grace of God by Christ, prevenient upon us or preventing us that we may have a good will and working within us when we have that good will." What the early church fathers of the Anglican communion were saying is that our wills are enslaved to sin, and that without the empowerment of God, without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we can't, one, turn and put our faith in Jesus. And then even if we do have our faith in the Lord, we can't do the good works that He's calling us to without His power, His Holy Spirit working within us.

The way that the prophet Jeremiah put it, and not in our passage but in another place, is that the heart of man is wicked and deceitful above all things. That's pretty withering, isn't it?

And then he asks the question, "Who can fathom it?" And that verse is just kind of, that question just kind of rings throughout the pages of the book of Jeremiah as the nation of Israel themselves is taken into exile because of their rebellion against God. And even the temple of the Lord would not be their protection or provision, but they would be given incredible discipline on the part of God. But the Lord says, "I'm not going to leave you in a state with a wicked and deceitful heart, and I'm not going to leave you in a place of bondage and exile, but I'm actually going to do something that will empower you from within to want to follow My ways and desire to keep My laws." Listen to the way that he puts it. For this is our Scripture for today, Jeremiah 31, verse 33, "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It's not like the covenant I made with their fathers on that day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No longer shall they teach one another and say to each other, "Know the Lord, for they shall know Me." From the least of them to the greatest declares the Lord, and I will forgive their iniquities or their sins, and I will remember their sin no more."

The Lord, essentially, what he's saying is we need a heart reset or a heart transplant, even, a new heart that is alive and empowered that wants to follow the law. And this is, Ä¶, Paul brings this up in his important letter to the Romans in Romans chapter 7, where he describes probably a condition that every single one of us have experienced at one point or another in our life, or maybe even every single day.

When we know what the right thing to do is, Paul's in his mind is wrestling with the commandment "Do not covet," which, you know, we look at our neighbor's stuff and we say, "I really like to keep up with the Joneses. I'd like to have that. I'd like to have more things. I'd like to have what they have," and that sin of covetousness where we're always looking at what everybody else has and desiring that for ourselves.

Everybody ever struggled with that?

There's always somebody that has a bigger toy in there or a better house or goes on better vacations than we do or has a seemingly better life, and so this is a universal human struggle with our sin nature.

And what Paul says is, "I really wouldn't have felt too convicted about coveting things

until the law came along and it said, "Do not covet," and then all of the sudden, now I feel really bad because now I know what it means to not covet, and I agree with that. I shouldn't be doing that, but the sin that is within me keeps on doing it. In fact, the commandment, Paul is arguing, makes it actually a little worse.

The taboo of "do not covet" seems to produce in me a desire to covet even more.

And Paul, at the end of Romans, he says, "What a wretched man I am." He's describing the sin nature, that I want to do what's right, but the evil that I don't want to do, this is what I keep on doing. Anybody ever relate to that?

And then Paul says, "You have to under..." This is Romans 8. He says, "You have to understand that the flesh nature does not have the ability, doesn't have the power to please God, but what the law was powerless to do, thou shalt not covet, cannot change our heart.

God does by sending His Son first to forgive us, but then to fill us with His Holy Spirit that we will desire to follow the laws of God from within, that we would have the power. So, is there free will?

Well, on one level, no. Apart from Christ, apart from the Holy Spirit of God, there is no free will. We are in bondage to sin. Our decisions and our choices will be governed by a broken will.

But when we are empowered with the Holy Spirit of God, that prison is unlocked in our hearts and our lives, and all of the sudden, the choices and decisions that we make, they won't be perfect in this sinful and fallen world.

We will still falter, and we'll still make mistakes. That old nature is still there. It's a chronic problem that we won't be fully liberated from until we die and are glorified with new bodies and a new spirit.

But now we have a freedom of will that comes from the empowering and indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit from within.

So, there's the first empowerment that the Lord gives, is an empowerment from within to break the bondage of sin.

Now, there's a second level of this empowerment that we can reflect about from our gospel passage today, where we have an empowerment to persevere in the face of our adversaries.

And here is... Jesus uses a story of a widow before a judge who doesn't fear God and doesn't care about people. In other words, he's a very self-centered judge. He's corrupt.

And yet, for some reason, this judge, by her persistence with him and asking for justice against her adversary, relents.

And Jesus explains why he's telling this story. He says, "I'm telling you this story as a parable so that you will always pray and not lose heart."

So, if you think about the widow, she is a person who, from a worldly perspective, is without power, especially in that day and age.

She is vulnerable. She has no husband to provide or protect her and against this adversary.

We don't know what the adversary was, but she certainly had an adversary, and she was being taken advantage of, which happens in our day to vulnerable widows at times.

And so, what she needs desperately is somebody more powerful than her, a judge who has both the juridical power, the authority, and the power of the sword to deal with that adversary.

And so, she knows that about herself. She knows, "I am weak against my adversary. I am vulnerable. I don't have the strength in myself. I don't have the authority, the power in and of myself."

And so, she persists and persists. She literally bangs down the door of this unjust judge till he finally says, "Okay, okay, okay. I'll deal with your adversary not because I care about you or because I fear God, but because you are persistent."

Now, Jesus then takes this illustration and He says, "That's our situation."

We are all like the powerless widow, desperately facing an adversary that is overwhelming to us, one that we cannot handle in our own strength, in our own power, and in our own authority.

And yet our judge is not a judge that doesn't care about our situation or one that is annoyed by our pleadings with Him.

But our judge is the judge of the universe, God.

And it's His power and His greatness and His authority that if we will just persist in our prayers to Him and ask Him to help us in our time of need and in our places of discouragement,

in times where we feel like we are overwhelmed with life or with our problems or our challenges or our enemies, He cares about us. He's not like the earthly and worldly powers, like that unjust judge, but He is one that loves His people.

And how much more will He answer the persistent prayers requesting His power to intervene in their life?

I want to ask you, are there situations in your life, just like with the sin, are there situations in your life where you feel overwhelmed with your inability to make the right choice?

It's the same kind of thing when it comes to the power of the overwhelming aspect of life is that are there places in your life where you just get very discouraged? I mean, sometimes it might be the geopolitical situation. You just look at the state of the country or the state of the world and you're too much watching the news 24 hours and you think, "Oh, this is just not going in a good direction and it causes a lot of anxiety and stress," because these are things that are, in a sense, out of our control, completely beyond us, or more close to home where you are facing something with your own health, a battle or challenge that sometimes our body is the thing that seems to have a power over us in sickness or disease and we can't seem to beat it or to overcome it or to win.

It could be a financial adversary or a relational challenge with your marriage or with a member of your family or a friendship. Whatever it is, there are so many things in life that are completely outside of our power and outside of our control.

And what the Lord is saying to us is that we desperately need His power and His strength and His authority to come to bear, but it's imperative upon us once our hearts have been liberated by the indwelling Spirit to persist in our prayers.

And I have watched people in my life who have faced insurmountable odds and incredible adversities, and it sometimes is what actually drives them to prayer like that widow.

And as they persist in requesting the Lord's help, they find His presence very quickly to meet them.

The last thing, and I'll end with this, is the power that comes through the role of the Holy Scriptures in our life. And our reading from Timothy, Paul, talks about how the Scriptures, all Scriptures, are God-breathed and useful for equipping and training in righteousness so that every single one of us can be thoroughly equipped for the challenges that we're facing in this world.

And so, here's a third aspect to the power is that God, in the same way that He breathed life into the first man and the first woman out of the dust of the

ground and He breathed through His breath of God, the Spirit of God, and they have life.

Paul says that's the Bible. The Bible is God's inbreathed Word where the power of the Christian life is to be found not just to overcome sin or face the challenges and difficulties of life, but actually to find our strength and our marching orders and our significance and meaning in life. Our reason for being is the Word of God. And so that's the third aspect of empowerment is that we would be empowered by our engagement with the Holy Scriptures themselves.

There's a wonderful scene in the prophet Ezekiel where the prophet is brought out into this valley that is filled with bones, dry, dead bones.

And the angel of the Lord takes Ezekiel and he says, "Do you see this Ezekiel, son of man," is what he calls him, "do you see this son of man, this valley of bones?" And he asks them a question.

He says, "Can these bones live?"

Now when an angel of the Lord asks you a question, it's always best to punt it back to the angel

because they're going to teach you something, you just got to be ready to listen. So, he's asking this sort of rhetorical question and Ezekiel knows the rule, so he says, "You tell me, only you know, Lord." And so, he says, "Ezekiel, this is what I want you to do.

I want you to first prophesy to the Spirit of God, to the wind." This is what prayer is. He's like the persistent widow, "I want you to say to the Spirit of God, "Breathe on these slain."

And then Ezekiel begins to do that. I once was asked by a Jewish man or a Jewish wife, a widow, to go and preach at her Jewish husband's graveside. And this was the passage that I got to preach in the middle of, in a sense, a valley of dry bones. I got to preach this at a cemetery. It was my one great

moment of preaching to dead people. But Ezekiel says, "Spirit of God, breathe on these slain. He obeys the Lord."

And all of a sudden, the wind of God begins to blow on all of these dry bones, and they begin to assemble one another, and the ankle bone gets connected to the, ¶ What is that? The shin bone, and the shin bone gets connected to the knee bone, and the knee, ¶ And then hear the word of the Lord. That's where that song comes from, actually, is that passage where those bones begin to take form and muscle and sinews come upon them. But the angel of the Lord says, "Okay, look at them now." And he sees all of these actually not skeletons anymore, but fully formed bodies, but they're still dead.

And he says, "I want you to prophesy to the bones. Tell them to hear the word of the Lord."

And they stand up on their feet, filled with both the Spirit of God and formed by the word of God, and all of a sudden, they stand up. And what Ezekiel describes is a vast army.

And the angel of the Lord says to Ezekiel, he says, "This is the house of God."

They say to themselves, "Our hope is dried up."

In other words, we have no power.

We're just a bunch of dead bones.

But when the Word of God and the Spirit of God are called forth upon the people of God,

then we become that mighty army, that powerful people that God will not just save, but use to do amazing and great things in this world that desperately needs both of those things, the Spirit and the Word of God enlivening and empowering the people of this world.

So, the call upon us today, and I hope that you will take this, is a call to cry out like that persistent widow to the Lord, or Ezekiel to the valley of the dry bones.

Breathe on these slain, empower me, Lord, fill me with Your Holy Spirit. Set me free from the bondages of sin that I battle against but also set me free to be the person that You've called me to be to face the adversaries and challenges in this sinful, fallen, and broken world.