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May 28, 2017

Psalm 68:32-35

Acts 1:6-14

THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

Abandoned, young, and traumatized - she was very quiet when we first saw her, perhaps a bit overwhelmed by what was going on around her. While the children were at their elementary school, my wife, Nancy and I had gone to the humane society in Atlanta, where we lived at the time, to explore possibilities for a furry addition to our family. We had decided to get a dog, but before taking the children to choose their first real pet, we wanted to make sure there were some good choices available. There's nothing like getting expectations sky high and then coming home without what we had gone there for. We had in mind a medium-sized dog and certainly hoped for one that would be gentle and playful with the kids. There were two particular dogs we saw that we wanted them to check out. So when they got out of school, all four of us went.

I realized rather quickly that we had not adequately prepared the children for what would happen. When we stepped into the room with about thirty dogs all in individual pens, we were engulfed by all kinds of barking – lower-pitched, gruff woofing that would startle someone Labron James' size along with higher-pitched yelps that could give the Dalai Lama high blood pressure. Movie theater surround-sound had nothing on that place. I don't know how many of them were saying, "Choose me, choose me," and how many were just reacting to the other dogs barking. Even for me as an adult, it was a bit like being surrounded by 30 carnival barkers all vying for my attention. So it was in no way surprising that the children were drawn to the only dog that wasn't barking. She was a young black and white Border Collie mix toward the other side of the room that just laid in her pen and looked out at us with her brown eyes. Somewhere between puppyhood and adulthood, the shelter called her Pasta. She happened to be one of the two Nancy and I had pre-picked.

There was a bit of a trail where we could take a dog on a walk to see if it was the one we wanted to take home. We got Pasta on a leash and went outside. It was nice and quiet. She clearly liked the opportunity to be outside to sniff around and do her business. After a brief time walking, I said, “Let’s take this one back and try the other one.” Oh no! This was the one, the kids insisted. I’m not sure if they thought they had to go back in the Bark-a-rama to get the other dog or whether this little one had already begun to win their hearts.

We asked the workers what they knew about Pasta. She had been well-cared for since she had been at the shelter, but they didn’t know a whole lot about her first few months. She and her sister had been found tied to the shelter fence one morning when the workers arrived. None of them knew what the two of them had been through, but they had been left. Her sister had already been adopted, so poor Pasta was all alone in the world. With that information in hand, we took her home. Since we weren’t sure whether she was fully house broken, we placed her in a box in the kitchen and she stayed there, not making a sound. It was almost as if she was slightly sedated – she didn’t seem sick, but she certainly didn’t have much energy or life within her. Nancy and I wondered whether she would always be that way. She was so quiet and good that the kids soon decided she should be called Angel - the only one in the family that could adequately wear that moniker.

We all took great joy in surrounding the newest member of the family with love. We petted her. We fed her. We talked gently to her. Occasionally she would wag her tail, but mostly she seemed frightened, totally overwhelmed by her new situation. She didn’t seem to know what she was supposed to do. Would she ever feel more at ease? Could she trust that her needs would be met? We wondered whether she had a true identity buried within her that needed something for it to emerge. Certainly, God had not created her to be constantly frightened and overwhelmed.

I consider the situation of our family’s first dog to be similar to what it felt like for Jesus’ followers in the time right after his ascension into heaven. They may

have been a bit traumatized by our Lord's departure. How would they face this new situation? How would they find their voice? Jesus had given them direction – they were to be his witnesses starting there in Jerusalem. Then they were to go on into the surrounding regions, Judea and Samaria - the latter was definitely outside their comfort zone since Samaritans and Jews were historically estranged. The good news was also to be shared beyond where they had ever been before, even as far as what was then known as 'the ends of the earth.' It had to be overwhelming.

Jesus had told them they would receive power from the Holy Spirit to do what was needed. What kind of power would enable this group of people to have the courage to venture forth to share the gospel when such a thing seemed so out of character for them? Certainly, they had the physical strength to travel about, but some additional kind of power was needed. They each had the capacity to speak, but how would they be able to communicate the gospel to people who came from a wide variety of backgrounds, whose life experiences were so different from their own? Where would they find the courage to do such a thing when they were the very ones who had run away when Jesus had been arrested and crucified? How could they be themselves, their very best selves, while doing something that required so much help from beyond themselves?

While they were awaiting the promised coming of the Holy Spirit, the Book of Acts tells us they devoted themselves to prayer. 'Devoted' in their situation did not mean a going-through-the-motions kind of prayer. I dare say it meant pleading with God. "Show us what we are to do and how in the world we are to do it" – the kind of prayer with a dozen exclamation points behind it. Jesus had said they would receive power to carry out their mission. What kind of power would prepare and enable them? In this world, there are lots of different kinds of power. But I think the most Godly power that sparks vision and creates courage is the power of love. That's what has transformative power! That's what is consistent with, and is fundamental to the gospel itself! They had experienced the love of God in human form. Now that love that motivated

and defined Jesus in his ministry would fill their hearts and lives through the outpouring of the Spirit. It would be in them and would work through them.

It was a few weeks after we introduced Angel to her new home before we began to see her act like she really belonged in her new setting. After a lot of love, she finally felt comfortable enough to want to explore her surroundings. She seemed to get more confident that we weren't going to be mean to her or to abandon her. Her true self freed up by love started to show. We finally heard her bark – she was starting to find her voice. After a few weeks of love and attention, she began to be able to love us back – she would rub up against us and lick us now and then. Some would say that dogs are communicating something other than love when they wag their tails and give a generous dog kiss to someone, but you couldn't prove that by our experience. I would say Angel not only received love and gave love; she also inspired love. When we would take her on walks throughout the neighborhood, she got to the point where she approached everyone with a wagging tail – so very different from when we first got her. She had become an embodiment of good news, and I'm pretty sure about the key ingredient for the change.

Transformed by the power of love – when we hear the word 'power,' it is something other than love that we typically think of. But I am convinced, in part by an Angel, that what transformed the early church was the power of love. That's the power of the Spirit I pray would come upon us so that we could truly become who we were meant to be and to do what we are meant to do.

