

Sermon for Sunday, April 28, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"FIRECRACKER CHRISTIANS"

I Corinthians 1:17-31

Text: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." I Corinthians 1:18

Now, I suppose almost everyone here today has a problem of one sort or another. There is a certain brokenness in the lives of all of us. I know there is a certain brokenness in my own life--things that I have to deal with that are problems. This morning I want to talk about the power that is available to us to deal with human brokenness. Maybe you have come here this morning and in sorrow, there is a brokenness within you. Maybe there is some sin you have committed or some sin you are involved in and that you are ashamed of and there is a brokenness within you. Maybe there is something physically wrong with you and you are here with a brokenness in your body or maybe there is a marriage, a relationship with some other person in which there is a certain brokenness. What I want to say to you this morning is that there is power available to you and me to heal, mend and make whole the kinds of brokenness you and I have this morning.

In the New Testament there are several words which may be translated by the English word, "power". I want to share these words with you. One of the Greek words translated "power" is the Greek word "arche". We get a number of English words from it that will give you a key to the kind of power it means. Arche--monarchy, anarchy--arche then means the power vested in ruling, or in government. For example, St. Paul tells us that the Jews sent spies to spy on Jesus and as he put it that they might take hold of what he said so as to deliver him up to the archy--the power and jurisdiction of the governor. Now, another word sometimes translated as power or authority is the Greek word "exousia" and it means that power which a person has which is derived--a derived power. For example, Jesus was brought before Pilate and he wouldn't say anything and finally Pilate gets exasperated and he said, "You will not speak to me? Don't you know that I have power to release you or power to crucify you?" And that was true. From the Roman government who ruled the world he had the derived power of life or death over Jesus Christ. Incidentally, Jesus reminds Pilate that whatever power he has is derived not from Rome but from God and he says to Pilate, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above. (John 19:11) Exousia--derived power--a good example if you want to mark your Bibles is in the gospel of John, Chapter 1, verse 12, "As many as received Him to them gave he exousia--power, right--authority to become children of God.

But when the New Testament speaks of the power of God, the power that comes from the Father, the Greek word "dynamis" is used. Now, this has the connotation of the miraculous and refers to power that belongs to God. Now this power of God's that I want to talk about this morning which is available to you in your life, is an unusual power. Now, if I say the word power probably several images come to your mind and not necessarily good images. But when the Bible talks about the power of God, this power may come from what from our vantage point seems to be weakness and defeat. Thus, when Jesus was crucified the Jews mocked him and ridiculed him and said, "If you have all that power, why don't you come down from the cross." Yet St. Paul tells us that it was that very cross which seemed a symbol of defeat and weakness that was the source of God's power in the world. As our text for this morning puts it, "For the preaching of the cross, the symbol of defeat and death, the preaching of the cross is the power, the dynamis of God.

Now, that is a strange thing, isn't it? The source of God's power in the world is the cross--a symbol of defeat and weakness and failure. Yet that cross has become

the focal point, the pivotal point, of human history. And while Christ crucified was stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles who could not imagine God weakly dying upon a criminal's cross, St. Paul says that the cross of Jesus is the power of God let loose in the world.

Once in the early centuries when Christianity was very young, and old Roman reportedly said of this new religion, "it cannot stand, for it is founded upon a cross, upon the death of its own leader, upon a catastrophe, it cannot stand." Yet, centuries later a Christian named John Bowring put his finger on the very power of God. Sir John was at one time the British governor of Hong Kong. An earthquake had occurred in the area and Sir John went out to inspect the damage and in one place amidst buildings that were crumbled, in ruin as a consequence of the earthquake, there stood a church that had been untouched by the tremors of the ground. Its steeple stood high above the rubble and ruin and upon the top of that steeple was a cross. Sir John was so moved by that experience, that sight, that he wrote a poem about it and we sang it just a moment ago--"In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time..." The old Roman with his prediction and his civilization have long since perished by the cross--the power of God--still towers over the wrecks of time. Yes, the word of the cross is the power of God.

Let's talk for a moment about what kind of power that cross has. You see not only is it the source of God's power, it has a special kind of power. Dr. E. Stanley Jones whose name is familiar to all of us tells us that once he saw in a pagan temple, painted on the wall, a mural of the god Bhagway bending over the prostrat form of a man--showing his subjection over a fallen man, and with his fingernail he is tearing the man open. The priest of the pagan temple whispered reverently to Dr. Jones, "It shows the power of our god." Commenting on this Dr. Jones said, "I see in the pages of the New Testament a picture of Christ bending over the prostrat form of man and with infinite healing and with infinite tenderness reaching down to touch him and to minister to every need of soul and body. 'It shows his loving power,' we whisper to one another, our hearts reverent and gripped to their very depth." You see, this is the heart of the whole matter, for the power of God revealed upon the cross is the power of love. Love that is capable of bending over the prostrat form--a broken man--people like you and me and touching us with healing.

I know of a certain church that had a beautiful stained glass window and one day during a storm the window was blown in and it fell across the pews and you can imagine what happened to that window. The pieces were picked up and put in a box to be thrown in the city dump. A member of the church went out there and covered it and a few months later he drove up in a truck in front of the church. There was a big box in the back and he brought it in and opened it up and there was the window, with infinite care and labor this skilled artisan had restored that window to its original beauty. So it is that the power of love revealed upon the cross takes men and women like you and me and it takes up off the garbage heap of life, it takes up from the trash pile of humanity, and it is capable of putting us back together again. It is capable of healing us and restoring the brokenness of our lives. Now that is the kind of power we find in the cross of Jesus. A power capable of remolding and reshaping lives which seem to have been hopelessly smashed and broken to pieces. I could tell you stories without end of lives I've seen that were apparently hopelessly broken and shattered and yet when those lives have been touched by the healing power of the cross of Jesus I've seen healing and restoration take place.

Yes, the source of God's power in the world is the cross of Jesus and the power that

is able to heal. As some poet has put it,

Between two thieves, one either side
The Lord of Life was crucified;
Men marvelled at a sight so rare,
And, sitting down, they watched him there.

And none that saw could understand
Why darkness covered all the land;
And none who heard that cry, "I thirst,"
Knew why the Sinless One was cursed.

Nor understand these words so true;
"Father, they know not what they do";
For God alone, and none beside,
Knew what was done when Jesus died.

But ever since that blood-stained day
The eyes of men have turned that way,
And owned that life itself were loss
Without the glory of that Cross. (F.W.Pitt)

Though what looked like weakness was the power of God let loose in the world.

There is an old fable about the Empress Helena who went to the Holy Land to find the cross upon which Jesus had been crucified and, of course, it is a fable but it has a truth about it that is worth learning. Excavations were made and sure enough they found three crosses. The problem was how were they to tell which was the real one. They took a dead body and put it upon first one and then the other of the crosses. As soon as the body touched the true cross it came to life. That is just a fable and it isn't true but it does bear truth--that touched by the cross of Jesus--the power of God--touched by the love of God revealed on Calvary, we come alive--we are born again--we are transformed into new creatures by the power of God.

Now let me say one other thing. Not only did God let his power loose in the world through the cross as sign of weakness but since Pentecost God let this power loose in the world another way also. God chooses through human personality--through weak fragile broken vessels that are people like you and me--God chooses to put his power inside of us. Not only can you be healed and renewed and restored by that cross but the power of God can work through your lives.

Let me make an important distinction here. Up until the time of Pentecost the power that the disciples exercised was a derived power. At no point in the New Testament as nearly as I can tell is anyone but Jesus and God spoken of as having dynamis, the power of God in his life. But with Pentecost God puts that power inside of people. God wants people like you and me to have that kind of power.

Now the Greek word dynamis has several English words that we get from it. For example, from dynamis we get the English word dynamo, dynamic--a dynamic personality--a powerful personality, but one of the words that we get from the Greek word is the English word dynamite. There is a world of difference between a stick of dynamite and a firecracker. Do you know what a firecracker really is? It is a toy stick of dynamite. It is an imitation of the real thing. Its construction is the same, the principle of explosion is the same. The difference is this: a stick of dynamite is capable of transforming its environment and about the only thing you can do with a firecracker is blow up your hand or a tin can about ten feet in the air. It is an imitation of

the real thing. It is a toy stick of dynamite. Those early Christians had the dynamite of God. They had the power inside of them of going out and transforming the face of human society and they literally blew their world upside down. The world that you and I know is a consequence of spiritual dynamite blowing apart old structures and old societies and creating a new thing after God. Now that is the sort of power that God means for you to have in your life today. Somehow we have reduced God's power to firecracker proportions.

At my house I have a lot of light switches, plugs and appliances and so on. I have all of these things available to me. When darkness comes I can turn on a light in every room. I can turn on several lights in every room. I have great power available to me to use to give me light--to give me energy to run appliances and different things. But suppose when night comes I take one little plug and plug in one little lamp and turn it on. That is all I use--that is the only use I make of the resources that are available to me and I sit there in semi-gloom with nothing available to me to use. Would you not say that I was foolishly using or failing to take advantage of the power resources available to me? That is exactly what you and I as Christians have done. God has put at our disposal incredible resources of spiritual power--power that enabled eleven men to go out and change the world. Power that is available to this congregation to go out and change the face of our community and here we sit with one little light. We are firecracker Christians. Imitations of the real thing when there are sticks of spiritual dynamite available to us to serve the Lord.

There is an old story told about a cottage in a certain small town that caught fire one day and the family was trapped inside. Everybody had gathered quickly as they do in small communities. Nobody knew what to do and finally one man braved the walls of flame to dash into the burning building and he was able to bring out two of the children although the rest of the children perished. In those days they didn't have the facilities to care for orphaned children that we might have today. The time came when the children were put up for adoption. The mayor of the city came before the judge and claimed the children. He wanted to adopt them. He didn't have any. He said his claim on the children was, he could offer them a fine home, he could offer them position in the community, he could offer them education, he could offer them all the things they could need. The only other claimant for the children was the man who had brought them out of the fire. The judge said to him, "what claim do you have for these children?" The man just stretched out his fire burned hands and said, "this is the only claim I have."

Jesus Christ stretches out his hands to you and they are hands that have been marked and pierced by the nail. That is the sign of God's claim on your life. He wants to heal it and make it whole. Beyond that He wants to put His power in you. He doesn't want any firecracker Christians. He wants some sticks of spiritual dynamite to go out into the world to blast and change the face of the evil society. That is the kind of person God wants you to be. That is the kind of power he has for you and here we sit this morning, you and me, we are firecracker Christians and there is a spiritual power available to us such as we never dreamed of.

The only question I want to ask you this morning is this, "Are you, with the resources available to you, a stick of spiritual dynamite for God or are you a firecracker Christian? Which?"