

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

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I saw a news report on television this week—an interview with the brother of a man who had been murdered, and who had just watched the killer being convicted in court. At one point he said, “I know that my Christian faith requires me to forgive, but I am going to have to hope that God will forgive me for being unwilling to forgive this man. Some things only God can do.” That seems pretty basic and obvious as an observation, doesn’t it? But how often do we live as if we actually believe that statement: Some things only God can do.

It is very easy to slip in to a way of acting that would suggest otherwise—a way that says that I and we can do anything if we are smart and industrious and lucky enough...all by ourselves. Look at all things people can do today that until recently were thought to be impossible. We can cure lots of cancers, we can send spacecraft to Mars, we can see and converse in real time with people halfway around the world. We can know of people whose net worth is counted in the billions of dollars. I can take my phone out of my pocket and have a satellite tell me where I am exactly located on this planet within about 10 feet. And nations can completely destroy whole populations and millennia of history with just the right bombs. With a few more of those we’ll be able to get whatever we want. So who needs God? So who needs God?

People like that man on TV this week, who knows what he’s obligated to do, and isn’t strong enough to do it. To forgive the murder of his brother. That’s why suffering and poor people often have an easier time of welcoming God into their lives. As Jesus himself told us, “It is harder for rich people to enter the Kingdom,” not because they are rich, but because it’s much easier for them to imagine that their resources will allow them to do anything. They often haven’t suffered very much. But some things only God can do. It’s true.

The gospel on this Pentecost day tells of Jesus instructing his disciples to go out, filled with the Holy Spirit, and to exercise a ministry of forgiveness of sins...something that every good Jew of his time knew that only God could do. Jesus himself stirred up hot anger among religious leaders for presuming to pronounce forgiveness upon sinners. It was a scandalous thing to promise.

From our perspective—or at least from mine—so far removed from that first Pentecost night, that commission to share God’s forgiveness can seem a lot more trivial than it is. When I think of forgiving people, I think of accepting apologies from people who have insulted me, or have dented my car, or have betrayed a confidence. Those can be important things too, but in the greater scheme of things they aren’t so enormous.

But nobody has ever murdered my brother, or bombed my neighborhood, or deliberately crushed my reputation unjustly. That’s when the power to forgive really starts to get serious, and sometimes, it’s something only God can do. Who has the authority to forgive Hitler? The only people who ever could do that are dead. It’s something only God can do.

The power to forgive sins is not merely the power of a priest in a reconciliation room to forgive people for cheating or lying. To think that is to make that power far too small. It is nothing less than the power of the Holy Spirit to forgive what would otherwise be simply impossible for human beings to forgive. And that power was not bestowed only on the apostles or the pope or the bishops or the clergy. It was poured out on everybody who was and is known as a disciple. That’s *all* of us who claim Jesus as our Lord. That’s the kind of power we have. To say it another way, with the Holy Spirit in us, we all can do things that only God can do. That’s astonishing.

And the other thing that only God can do is breathe on people, as Jesus did at Pentecost. This too is an event that is easy to imagine as much less astonishing as it really is. We can all exhale and fog a mirror, of course, but that's not the point in this gospel. This gesture of Jesus calls us back all the way to the Book of Genesis, the beginning of creation, when God formed human beings out of the clay of the earth. But they were lifeless clumps until God "breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, and they became living souls." Think of the intimacy and the enormity of that sentence.

The giving of life is something only God can do. That refers not only to the story of the Garden of Eden, so long ago. And not only the promise of resurrection, which we await. It means here and now, with the promise of the Holy Spirit swirling around and in us. Wherever there is death, we have the power to summon new life—something that only God can do. Imagine that.

So where do we encounter death in our own day and age? It's not hard to see it if we would care to look.

- In children without food to eat or parents to love
- In teenagers without any meaningful hope of escaping violence, or to stop perpetuating it
- In chronically ill adults who have given into despair
- In cynical former church members who have walked away
- In addicts of all kinds who have given up hope of ever being well again
- In nations that have accepted oppression, terrorism and threats as the only way to survive

There's plenty of death around, all right. And we are not strong or clever enough to fix it, to breathe healing power into it. Some things only God can do. But God can only do that, for the moment, in and through us...if we would only allow it.

And that's the whole point of Pentecost, of breathing out Holy Spirit into us and equipping us to forgive and heal only as God can do. What a privilege and what a responsibility.

Truly to believe and to live in the conviction that we walk around with God-power every day in every circumstance...that's not thinking too much of ourselves. That's simply taking Jesus at his word when he says that we are to receive his breath and to revive what is dead and to go out and forgive—things that only God can do. Will we? That's up to us to answer.