

“Philip, Samaria & Simon the Great”
Acts 8.4-25
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
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This morning we continue our study of the Book of Acts, the story Luke tells of the early church spreading from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and finally to the ends of the known world. **Before we get to the story of the apostle Paul who is at the center of the mission to the Gentiles, let's go back and remember the leader called Philip.** If you remember, back in chapter 6 a complaint surfaced in the church in Jerusalem: the Greek-speaking widows were apparently being mis-treated (6.1-7). They were not getting the food and support they needed, so the 12 apostles appointed 7 Greek-speaking leaders to take care of the daily distribution of food. Philip was one of these seven leaders, as was a man named Stephen who not only helped Philip with the widows but also miraculously healed many and preached powerfully to the Jewish Council in Jerusalem. In chapter 7 we read how the leaders took offense at Stephen's boldness and so Stephen was stoned, becoming the first Christian martyr. In the beginning of chapter 8 we are told that severe persecution begins against the church in Jerusalem, and so everyone except the 12 apostles are scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. While Stephen is buried and Saul is leading the persecution, Philip continues the mission in Samaria. Let us listen now for God's word, beginning with verse 4 of chapter 8, as printed in your bulletin:

Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. So there was great joy in that city.

Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, “Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! You have no part or share in

this, for your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness.” Simon answered, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1.8)

With these words at the beginning of the Book of Acts, Jesus lays out the roadmap for what is to come. Empowered by the same Spirit that rested on Jesus, the apostles will witness to the good news of God’s reign beginning in their home base of Jerusalem and then out into the neighboring regions, and even into the farthest parts of the Roman Empire. We have seen already how the Holy Spirit gives the early church community the power to witness to God’s love in the way they share things - having all things in common - and how they are able to do the same things Jesus did in his ministry: healing the sick, reaching out to those living on the margins, proclaiming in word and deed the good news of the boundary breaking love of God. And we have begun to understand that the Spirit that rested on the early church is the same one that rests on us, that as the baptized followers of Jesus in this time and place, we too can be God’s hands and feet and heart in the world in need of good news!

While it may be easy to romanticize the beginning of the early church as a time of joyous growth, the reality we hear about in chapter 8 of Acts tells us a different story. Philip and the other leaders are scattered into the territory surrounding Jerusalem because of the rise of persecution - the stoning of Stephen marks just one example of that persecution. Though Jesus had prophesied that the apostles would be his witnesses in Judea and Samaria, the hard truth is that Philip lands in Samaria because of the persecution at home. And Samaria is not a place any good-standing Jew would want to visit. Samaritans and Jews did not get along, and the hatred and mis-trust were deep-seeded. As one Bible scholar has put it, “Samaritans were outcasts within the household of Israel because the location of their temple was on a different mountain and in a different holy place” ([New Interpreter's Bible, volume IX, Acts](#), p. 137). Because of their practice of marrying outsiders, they were considered to be racially impure and religiously heretics, and in three out of the 4 gospels Jesus himself avoids travelling to Samaria altogether, even if it meant taking a much longer route. And in John’s gospel where we have the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, we hear how shocked the woman is that Jesus even speaks to her. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (John 4.9).

So when we read that Philip went down to Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah - and that the crowds listened eagerly to his message, hearing and seeing the signs that he did - casting out the unclean spirits, healing those who were paralyzed or lame (8.5-7) - this was a huge deal! Very much in the same way Jesus proclaimed the arrival of God’s reign to those discounted by society - the poor and the lame, the weak and the outcasts, Philip is now sharing the good news of God’s salvation to the lost sheep of Israel, the Samaritans. The movement we see in Acts is the Holy Spirit pushing the early believers in directions they may not have chosen for themselves - remember, if it were not for the persecution happening in Jerusalem, who knows if Philip and others would travel to neighboring Samaria? And who would have anticipated that the Samaritans would receive the message with such joy?

One of the themes we see throughout the scriptures is the way God's Spirit is always pushing God's people to share the good news of God's love in wider and wider circles.

Though God chooses the Hebrews to be his people, from the beginning their mission is to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. This theme runs throughout the Hebrew scriptures, a theme that comes alive in a dramatic way in the story about Jonah and the whale.

When my kids were much younger we fell in love with the VeggieTale series. Using computer generated cartoon graphics, VeggieTales present biblical stories in fun ways, and their catchy songs are silly but memorable. VeggieTales even hit it big in the theaters with their [full-length animated film about Jonah](#) and the whale. Watching this in the theater and then at home again and again with our kids, Jonah, played by Archibald Asparagus, resists the call to preach the gospel of love and repentance to the people of Nineveh. But God is persistent in calling Jonah who finally goes to Nineveh to preach about God's mercy and compassion for all people. Despite their wicked ways (portrayed through VeggieTales by slapping each other in the face with fish!) the people of Nineveh respond positively to the message of repentance. God's compassion and mercy are extended even to the Ninevites, and though Jonah pouts about it for a while, the story teaches us about the power of God's Spirit to reach beyond the limits we create.

I believe a similar thing happens with the Samaritans, and Luke provides us with a case study involving the magician called Simon the Great. Though we are not given any details, Simon apparently did amazing miracles with his magic, and he had quite the following of fans. But when Philip comes to town and preaches the good news about the kingdom of God, all the people, including Simon, are baptized. By God's grace working through Philip, Simon becomes a believer. And after being baptized, Simon follows Philip around like a puppy dog - yes, we have no reason to doubt the sincerity of his conversion. And yes, as a magician Simon naturally is amazed by the signs and great miracles that were taking place.

Well, when the news that the Samaritans accepted God's Word reached the apostles' homebase in Jerusalem, Peter and John decide to come and check it out themselves. It's interesting how God's Spirit working through the Greek speaking Philip has gotten out ahead of Peter and John, the representatives of the 12 original Jewish apostles. I believe this is a sign of what is to come, that the Spirit will drive the boundary-breaking love of God not only to Samaria but to the Gentiles from lands like Ethiopia and Greece and all the way to Rome. Next week we will look at the amazing story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, but before we get ahead of ourselves, let's return back to Simon, our magician friend. When Peter and John come to Samaria they do what apostles are supposed to do - they pray! Through the laying on of hands the Holy Spirit is given to the Samaritan believers, and guess what?! Simon, the new convert but long-time magician, wants a part of this action. Offering the apostles money, Simon says to Peter and John: "Give me this same power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit " (8.19).

Just as Peter rebuked Annias and Sapphira for holding back on part of the sale of their property back in chapter 4, Peter -the head apostle- calls Simon out: "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! Clearly your heart is not right before God, so repent and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you" (8.20-21). NT scholar [Matthew Skinner](#) points out we will encounter other magicians in the book of Acts (13.6, 19.19) and they are all presented in a negative way. And the type of magic Simon would do would have looked more like miracles of healing than the "pulling-rabbits-out-of hats illusions" we associate with magicians today (p. 58). Skinner continues that the Book of Acts understands magic as

a money making practice “rooted in a desire for power” and that the story in Acts “frequently presents economic greed as a sign of misplaced spiritual priorities” (p. 58). If you are old enough to remember televangelists [Jim and Tammy Bakker](#), you might get a picture of what misplaced spiritual priorities look like, a sad picture of what greed and “money making rooted in power” is all about. Through claiming certain powers of healing, televangelists have tried to use their power to seduce people to send them money to be used for so-called missions, and then channel the funds for their own personal benefit. Unfortunately the Bakkers and PTL are not the only ones guilty of this abuse of power.

So at this point in the sermon, it would be easy to make out Simon as the bad guy in the story, and then be tempted to let ourselves off the hook. “None of us practice magic like he did, and none of us would try and buy the power of the Spirit in the way he approached Peter, and none of us are televangelists - so we are off the hook, right?” However, the story of Simon reminds us as people of faith we must be careful not to deceive ourselves. Our desire for power and wealth can be disguised in our religious life, and so we must remember that we follow the One who taught us the way of self-giving love. Paul encourages us in this way: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Philippians 2.3-4). I love our Presbyterian way of rooting power in groups of people- it's not left up to just one or two people in authority to call the shots, but rather discernment comes through a group of committed people who are called to prayerfully discern God's will together. And such discernment has a lot to do with listening to one another as we seek to look not out for our own interests but for the interest of the whole.

In closing, a word of hope. We should remember that unlike Ananias and Sapphira and even Judas who all end up dead because of their transgressions with money and power, Simon the Samaritan is given a chance to repent. Though Simon got quite a bad reputation as a heretic and an evil doer throughout the history of interpretation, Luke seems to leave the story open ended. Perhaps Simon will repent of his false notion that somehow the power of the Holy Spirit can be bought, that somehow the Spirit's power can be controlled like the power of magic. Perhaps we too will repent of the things that keep us from fully embracing the work of the Spirit in our hearts and in our lives.

Simon's closing words to Peter are simply these: “Pray for me...” he says. “Pray for me....” May we be so bold to ask for prayer ourselves, trusting that we belong to a God whose love is always reaching out wider and wider. Thanks be to God, Amen!