



First United Church of Oak Park

Between the Lines: The Holy Spirit & Hope

Acts 8:4-25

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This text from Acts was the basis for my ordination exegesis exam. I spent a lot of time diving deeper into the text, looking at Greek, researching, making connections, so that I could write 6 different essays about it. This was two years ago now and when I reread the text and my exam, it gave me pause. I sat back and thought, “where did I get all of that?!” Which is why I have titled this sermon “Between the Lines: The Holy Spirit & Hope,” because I would be surprised if any of you, after hearing this text read just now, thought to yourself, “wow, this passage is full of hope and the Holy Spirit is front and center!”

So, I invite you to join me between the lines, to bring out the Holy Spirit and hope...We enter these verses of Acts immediately following the martyrdom of Stephen, the event that precipitated the scattering of the Apostles. And Philip ends up in the city of Samaria to proclaim the word of God, the good news of the Gospel.

The Gospel of John tells us that “Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies, and had been for centuries.” This hatred began after the death of King Solomon, when his kingdom was divided into the two rival states of Israel and Judah; it then deepened through centuries of warfare, multiple exiles, and the mixing of peoples, cultures, customs, and religions in these lands. As a result, Jews of Judah no longer considered Samaritans to be Jewish, and so they despised one another.

Now, we find ourselves in the story of Acts, after about 1,000 years of discord between these peoples. The apostles have been sent out to spread the Good News to all people, “in Jerusalem, Samaria, and all corners of the earth.” Perhaps Philip drew the shortest straw, and he finds himself in Samaria, and even though there has been a feud between his and these people for centuries, the call to be a disciple of Christ is bigger than such historical and social issues. The fact remained, he was charged by Jesus himself and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be God’s witness: a mission, a calling, he doesn’t take lightly.

Samaria should be familiar from the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we just saw acted out. In the parable, Jesus himself used the strained relationship between Jews and Samaritans to illustrate his answer to the question, “who is my neighbor?” His audience would have been surprised to find that it was not the priest or the Levite who stopped to help a man on the side of the road who had been robbed and beaten, it was a Samaritan. Jesus knew this story would be a challenge to the Jewish people he was teaching, which is what made it the perfect example of who your neighbor is. For *whom*

would you find it most difficult to love, and love as, yourself? Someone you hate, of course! And that is Jesus's point, your neighbor may not be who you expect or who you want to love, but we are called to see all people as our neighbors, we are called to love all people, and for Jews that meant even Samaritans.

This passage in Acts is evidence that the apostle Philip was truly trying to follow Jesus' example and explicit instructions. He is seeking to unify people in the name of Jesus Christ, regardless of their geographical location, social status, religious affiliation, or cultural context, because all people are called to be the people of God; Love of neighbor, breaking down cultural barriers, unifying people after centuries of hatred: these are noble endeavors, actions that are messages of hope, messages that hold true and can speak to us even now.

We live in a country and a world far more concerned with the boxes you would check on an application or census—gender, race, political affiliation—than with things that would actually tell us something about our fellow human beings, that would highlight our shared humanity, where creating labels, putting people in boxes, and erecting barriers to divide is the norm, arbitrarily creating “us” and “them,” when in reality there are far more similarities between us than differences. We perpetuate an inequitable power struggle all in an attempt to maintain control and control where power lies. We act out of fear, of delusions of scarcity, when in reality, just because one person has something, doesn't mean you can't have that too, there really is enough for everyone.

We struggle so hard to see who our neighbor is and how we should treat them, we fail to love them as ourselves because too often we don't take the time to look at them. We were all created in the *imago dei*, the image of God, but if we never look at our neighbor, how will we ever see the face of God? All people being created in God's image, loving your neighbor: these tenets of our faith have been preached to us for thousands of years. Jesus started it in the first^t century, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mr. Rogers, and other modern prophets have picked up the torch, but still, our neighbors go unseen, our neighbors remain unloved by us. Which is why we need this message of hope, this example of Jews witnessing to Samaritans, Samaritans willing to care for the beaten and robbed Jewish man on the street. Because for all the differences they had—they were still journeying the same road.

The complicated history and relationship between the Jewish and Samaritan people is a powerful illustration to love your neighbor, but if you look at the text again, the Jewish/Samaritan dynamic is a footnote compared to the new character we meet, Simon Magus. The word, *magus*, refers to a member of a priestly order of ancient Persia or a sorcerer, and Simon is introduced to us as a man of magical abilities, he wields a power that amazes people, makes them listen to him eagerly, and hold him in high regard.

For a time, magic, and practitioners of it, were common. They were consulted for their abilities to interpret dreams, make prophecies, as well as for their knowledge of astronomy, and healing abilities.

For the apostles, who sought to convert people to monotheism by spreading the news of the healing, salvific, miraculous power of Jesus the Messiah, the one true God—magicians were bad for business. Men, like Simon Magus, presented themselves as being more than mere magicians. He enjoyed the power and respect of his position and would have his audiences believe he was more than human, when this was an affront to the claim of who and what Jesus was: the divine son of God. And so magic, and those who wielded it, became adversaries of sorts to apostles who would continually struggle to distinguish the power of God from magic.

But wait, Simon wasn't an adversary to Philip! Once he meets him and hears Philip proclaim the good news about the Kingdom of God and Jesus Christ, Simon believes, he's baptized, and the text says that he "stayed *constantly* with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place." How amazing, how inspiring, how truly miraculous must the signs have been that Philip displayed for this magic man to give up his own form of power and follow another?

In a world consumed by power struggles, and the consequences of those struggles for power, it is unusual to find someone willing to relinquish their power. This act, this change of character for Simon is, in itself, a message of hope. That a Jewish apostle would travel to and preach the Good News of Christ in Samaria, and not only make a believer out of a respected practitioner of magic, but inspire him to relinquish his power, is more than a message of hope. It is a testament to the mysterious and powerful being that is the Holy Spirit.

However, it's only when the Holy Spirit officially makes her debut in the story that things seem to go awry for Simon Magus. When Simon witnesses the Spirit being received by those who had been baptized, with the laying on of hands by Peter and John, he offers them money to be given the ability to bestow the Spirit on others himself. This elicits an angry response from Peter, who is offended that Simon would equate the power of the Spirit to magic tricks, would suggest that a price could be put on such power, or would assume to know or understand exactly what power it was he was asking to be able to wield, even if he had good intentions.

Because Simon did not yet know, had not yet experienced the fullness of the Holy Spirit. He did not witness the Spirit descend as a dove to anoint Christ at his baptism, nor was he there when the Spirit alighted the apostles as a flame at Pentecost. He didn't know it was the Spirit that was breathed into the lungs of the first human, that brought him to life. It would have been impossible for him to truly know and see the Holy Spirit at work, moving, but unseen, understand how the Spirit is uncontainable and free, unpredictable and mysterious, pure power with the ability to inspire, unify, and impart hope. For the Holy Spirit is not something that *belongs* to anyone or could possibly be

controlled. The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is God's gracious gift that transcends time and space, connecting all that was, is, and will be—makes it possible for the message of God's love to reach all corners of the earth and be received by all people—even those who might have previously been excluded from God's promises, those who would have been considered the “them” to the apostles' “us,” like Samaritans and magicians.

Between the lines, the lines of life, the lines of Scripture. The Holy Spirit is woven into the story, our story. Woven into the fabric of time, of history, of herstory, inspiring the authors of our sacred texts, bringing these words to us here and now, working her magic, even in a two-year-old exegesis exam, speaking, spreading, sharing, messages of love, love for our neighbor, love for all people, messages of hope, hope for our world, hope for our lives and the messages of love our lives can be. Will we listen? Will we care like the Samaritan? Will we witness like the apostles? Will we allow power to plague and divide us? Or will we let the power be? Can we learn to relinquish power? Can we learn how to wield our power for love and for hope? For our neighbors, for the powerless, for the oppressed, for the most vulnerable among us? This is our call, after all; we all journey the same road, the Holy Spirit drawing us into community, unifying us to be a radically loving people, imparting hope so that we may do so as well. These are God's gracious gifts, the Holy Spirit and hope. May we receive them and allow them to guide us as we live out our call as disciples. Amen.