

Sermons from Archwood United Church of Christ
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Acts 8: 4-17
"Living Baptized"

January 7, 2007

What gets you excited? What changes you?

I thought of that contrast when comparing the experience of the people in Samaria with Simon the magician and Philip the Evangelist. What were their goals? Simon was there for some good entertainment and Philip was there for the great news. Simon wants them to open their pockets to get their change and Philip wants to open their hearts so they could be changed. Simon wants to get you excited so you can forget your problems and Philip wants you to be changed to revolutionize your problems. It's the difference between being amazed and being baptized.

Let's first look at who Simon is, starting with verse 9: *"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."* Simon was an entertainer and he thought well of himself, and tried to get others to think he was great too. And it seemed to work. Verse 10 reads, *"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.'" The people listened eagerly. Who doesn't want to be entertained? They were excited by his talents and skills. In verse 11 it repeats, *"And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic."* In three verses about Simon we are told twice how the people were amazed by him and how eager they were to be entertained.*

Movies and musicals – like the Music Man – are full of characters who ride the train into a small town and dazzle the people into giving them money and fame and then rob the unsuspecting crowd of their trust. It doesn't say explicitly that Simon tried to get their money, but he certainly wanted them to think highly of him. We do know, however, that money was important to him. In the verses that follow our reading for today, Simon tries to buy some Holy Spirit power. Look at verses 18 and 19. Even though Simon had just been baptized, he knew

a good show when he saw it. It reads, *"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.'"* He still wanted to be the center of attention. He saw a new way to get people to be amazed by him. Instead of being an entertainer with magical powers, he saw a way to be an entertainer, but with spiritual powers.

As much as I should resist judgment, I can't help but see a parallel and think that at least some of what passes for worship today is a show to be watched and enjoyed, put on by someone who enjoys the attention a little too much. You can go home feeling full of excitement and wonder "what just happened?" Maybe a little harsh, but I think you get the point. Simon amazed people for a while. Philip baptized them for life. A temporary fixation, or a permanent relation.

Who is Philip? Remember the people were *amazed* by Simon, but according to verse 12, they actually *believed* Philip. It reads, *"And 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."* But as the later verses make us question, was it just so he could buy the power? Was he amazed by it because it was exciting or because he saw the power of God to change lives?

The text here really gives us no clue about Philip because it's not about him. He points beyond himself to the good news. He didn't need the people to think *he* was great. What we do know about him comes elsewhere in Acts. We know that he was one of the 7 commissioned by the church in Jerusalem to care for the needs of the growing church. He is not the apostle Philip who followed Jesus; he is Philip the evangelist. He's also the one that famously baptized the Ethiopian eunuch who was riding by in a chariot.

Philip was a key figure in the early church to make it clear that the good news of Jesus Christ was inclusive. It was not just for the Jews but also the Samaritans, their despised neighbors. Let's not gloss over that point. For the Jewish Christians it was controversial that the Samaritans were included. In fact, the verses that end our passage for today about baptism by water and by the Holy Spirit are there to make it clear that it was the *same* baptism for Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans received the same Holy Spirit in baptism. At that point in the development of the early church, this was an important distinction that we might not fully appreciate.

Further, to also rectify a social injustice of inequality, by their baptism, it's clear that the good news of Jesus Christ was not just for men but also for women, who also served as leaders in the church. Later, by his actions with the eunuch,

it's clear that the good news of Jesus Christ was not just for those whose bodies were pure and perfect but also the eunuch whose "manliness" had been removed, a man of an alternative sexuality – someone outside the purity codes established in Leviticus – and of African descent. Clearly, inclusiveness was to be a hallmark of the early church. It's the kind of good news that the Samaritans not only eagerly listened to but believed. They were through with being just entertained; they were ready to be changed.

Now, what *is* that change? Change not for change's sake but change that transformed the Samaritans and transforms us into faithful, life-long, stick-to-it disciples of Jesus Christ. What does baptism by water and the Holy Spirit mean for us? What does the good news mean for how we live? I have 7 ideas. The change means, in all things, this is how we live a transformed life. This is how we live baptized. This is for some a *new* change *or* for others *renewed* commitment to our baptism, and all of which is actually exciting, but a different kind - not for its amazing entertainment value:

Here are 7 goals for living baptized:

Love for others;

Joy in serving God;

Peace in disagreement;

Patience in suffering;

Kindness toward all people;

Goodness in the face of opposition;

Self-control in all things

(These are from a prayer to re-commit oneself to their baptismal vows.)

1- Love for others

Love is exciting. But it can also be the wrong kind of exciting. Some people are addicted to the high of *falling* in love but can't stick around when love requires commitment to *living* with love. God's love is exciting, that is, until for some people it grows old. But we have to realize that love without any expectations grows stale and boring. Yes, when we don't do anything with God's love, it becomes boring. And, if God's love is boring, it means you spent more money at the club last night on cover charges and drink orders than you put in the offering plate. What's of highest value? If God's love is boring to you it means you heard a bunch of people praying but didn't listen to God answering. Do we examine God's love for its amazing entertainment value or its exciting power to change us?

2- Joy in serving God

Joy is exciting. Who doesn't enjoy joy? Many of us are eager for joy in our lives and yet we'll look for recipes for the joy of cooking, the joy of sex, the joy of anything someone can sell to us promising some illusive benefit before examining the recipe for joy found in the Word of God: Blessed are those who give, blessed are the humble, blessed are the peacemakers... Is reading the

Bible just not as exciting? Or are we seeking amazing entertainment over the power to change us?

3- Peace in disagreement

Peace is exciting. Well, maybe not exciting, but peace is great, especially the peace that comes when we have agreed to disagree agreeably, or we have resolved a conflict without destroying the other party. It says a lot about love for others when we can survive our disagreements and actually discover new levels of respect for one another. Conflict is often more entertaining, but what a waste of energy when something else could bring positive light while people suffer in darkness. We can get so wrapped up in our petty lives, determined to hang on to our grudges, that we don't notice we've just hurt someone by ignoring them. Never-ending conflict? Respect?

4- Patience in suffering

Patience is exciting. Maybe my line about "exciting" isn't working anymore... There is no entertainment value in watching paint dry. However, if there was ever a spiritual value that changes us, it is patience. It is one of the most counter-cultural things a Christian in America can do. There is nothing we don't want fixed immediately. We want an immediate fix to our relationships, our health, our finances, our children... And if we can't fix it, we'd like a way to cover it up. A good magic show will help us forget our problems. The deeper spiritual truth however – the thing which will most definitely change us -- is that when we live with patience through our suffering, we discover a totally different strength. Strength we didn't think we were capable of. Are you ready for a life-changing, mind-blowing, heart-racing, problem-fixing radical change!? Ironically, it comes more often, with staying power, with patience. Entertainment is instant gratification; baptism is for life.

5- Kindness toward all people

Kindness is exciting. Should I just give up on this "exciting" thing? But, is being "punk'd" more exciting? Could Ashton Kutcher achieve the same fame by treating his celebrity friends with kindness? It doesn't matter. We're not seeking to be entertained, right? Let me just say it and move on: kindness toward all people is the expectation of baptism. Not kindness to your friends and family. Kindness toward the person who annoys you, who pushes your buttons, who makes you want to scream at them...kindness toward *all* people. (Maybe a little help from magic wouldn't hurt here!)

6- Goodness in the face of opposition

Goodness is exciting. Yes. Think of the little underdog small-town high school basketball team that wins the state championship in the last few seconds of the game, when goodness has triumphed over the evil big city team with all the

money and tall players. Well, it's a good movie anyway. But this one reminds us that it's also a spiritual value to treat an enemy better than you treat a friend.

7- Self-control in all things

Self-control is exciting. (I got exciting into my whole list!) Yes, it is exciting when you can overcome your own oppressions - the simple reality that every day without a drink, or a pill, or a smoke, or a Krispy Kreme is a wonderful day. Every day without an argument, or a word of gossip, or a complaint about the unfairness of it all is a day of great achievement. A day like that changes you. Self-control one day at a time, when you look back, is exciting.

So if you'd prefer a life where nothing is expected of you but that you have a good time, where you can spend your money on anything you want, where the feelings of others are of no concern to you, where consequences don't matter ...if you'd prefer a life where you are the center of attention, go ahead.

If, and frankly when, you get tired of those shallow promises, then seek the transformation of living baptized. Or just return to the promises made in your baptism – either by you or your parents – and embrace them again. Let the tough choices change you. The fast and easy ones won't. It's the difference between amazing entertainment that excites you to help you forget your problems vs. being baptized, no, living baptized every day to revolutionize your problems – which is life-changing and more deeply satisfying, if not even exciting. Who would like to *be* baptized? Who would like to *live* baptized?

The Samaritans were finally through with being just entertained; they were ready to be changed. Are you? After all these years, are you still?