

Sunday January 13, 2019  
1<sup>st</sup> after Epiphany

**PRAYER:** We praise you, God, for the mysteries of water: blanketing the earth with snowy peace, washing the air, cleansing the earth with rain, rising in mists like incense, flowing in soft currents which join in rivulets to the mighty ocean, ending our thirst and giving us life. We praise you, God, for your Spirit poured into our lives, as plentiful as the waters. The Spirit gives us birth, refreshes us, and gives us provision for the journey through all desert regions. For the gift of water, we praise you, God! Amen.

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE:** “The Lord is merciful and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor punish us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” (Psalm 103:8, 10-12)

**OFFERTORY SENTENCE:** King Solomon in Proverbs 3:9 reminds us that our God ordained responsibility is to present to God the very best of what we have. Solomon writes, “Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops.” May God’s spirit lead us to do just that as we offer our gifts to him?

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** O Gracious God of all creation, whose very voice brought all that we survey into being, from the wonders of nature, to the grace of relationships, we praise your name. When you called for light, little did we realize that the light we most desired was a light to sweep away the darkness within us. When you called for form to arise from the void, little did we realize that the void that needed filling was in our souls. Thank you for calling us into existence, and for not abandoning us to the whims of fate by sending your Spirit as a comfort and hope. We thank you that we can look to you in times of need, rely on you to drive away our doubt, depend on your judgment to curb our folly, and live in the hope that one day Jesus shall fully reign in this world.

Loving God, we are keenly aware this morning of those in our midst whose days are filled with uncertainty. For others we know who struggle this day, we pray you will lift them from feelings of futility, and enable them to grasp your abiding concern. Give us a measure of the compassion that Jesus showed. Help us to be open to all in need, that we may become instruments of your mercy.

Our hearts are much attuned in this season of winter to those, ourselves included, who lack any kind of luster, and who wander aimlessly through life. Grant to us all a sense of your will for our lives, the strength to pursue it, and the discipline to do what you would have them do. Erase from us the need to be critical of those who do not conform to our standards. Teach us forbearance as they seek to discern your intentions.

As we gather today on this celebration of Jesus’ baptism, help make this day and all our days a celebration of our own baptism. Fill us anew with your Spirit, and cleanse us of past sins, which estrange us from Christ and from one another. Send us forth as Christ’s disciples, abounding in the hope of new life and proclaiming good news to aid the afflicted. Give us your blessing, O God of all creation.

**BENEDICTION:** May God touch you with the Holy Spirit and with power; may you go forth from this place to do good and heal all who are oppressed by evil, for God is with you. Amen.

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Acts 8:14-24

“Not For Sale”

It was a bit of an awkward moment, I must admit, as I walked into a room and saw my “friend” whooping and hollering. “What’s the matter?” I inquired. “Nothing at all. I just finished a jigsaw puzzle in record time!” My friend beamed. “How long did it take you?” I asked “Well, the box said ‘3 to 5 Years’ but I did it in a month!” Do you like puzzles? Any kind of puzzles? I admit I really enjoy puzzles; all kinds of them.

Crosswords are one of my favourites, but I can indulge in a Sudoku, hidden object puzzles, word searches etc. I also enjoy riddles, and you all know by now how much I love word play; especially puns. A couple of weeks ago in a sermon, I was talking about the exclusive stories all families have, that only family members know. One of those stories among we Maguires, involves my dear father, who one year was given in his Christmas stocking a Rubik Cube. Remember those things?

He spent hours on that thing. Hardly putting it down to eat. So enamored was he, that he took to bringing the cube with him when he took a bath. One night he reported he dreamt how to solve it, and awoke in the middle of the night attempting to use his dreamed solution. It didn’t work. I don’t think he ever solved it, and eventually he just gave up on it. I read about one man who solved it, but it was discovered he had simply taken the puzzle apart and put it back together.

Puzzles can be fun, but eventually, without a solution, they can drive us crazy. This passage before us from Acts, is actually a larger reading than the lectionary lesson for this day which is only verses 14-17. These three verses appear in the lectionary today, because this is the Baptism of Jesus Sunday”, and baptism is the subject of these three verses. However, the larger passage is so interesting, and so full of stories to reflect upon, and there are puzzles here to solve.

But let us first get a picture of what is going on here; the back story if you like. The church at this point is but a year-old infant. It has been undergoing tremendous growth with thousands coming to faith. The church though, in its rapid growth, had attracted serious opposition. So much so that Stephen was martyred, and one zealous Pharisee takes special pleasure in hunting down believers. This Pharisee we know as Saul; who at his conversion becomes Paul.

Facing persecution, jail, and even death, believers are scattered to the wind. Ironically, in trying to stop the church’s spread, Saul had through persecution, caused it to spread into new territories. One of the reasons he was traveling to Damascus was to chase those who fled. One of the young men who scattered, was a godly deacon named Philip, who went to Samaria, and began to preach about Jesus and work miracles. Many people of all ages came to faith, and were baptized.

Word of this successful evangelism reaches the church leaders back in Jerusalem, so the Apostles Peter and John are sent to investigate. When they reach the fledgling group of believers, they discover something is missing. The people sincerely believed in Jesus and were duly baptized, but on first read it seems as if Philip had neglected to talk about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. So, we read that the two Apostles laid hands on the people, and prayed that they might receive the Holy Spirit and they did.

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Out of this story we also read that one of the converts in Samaria was a man named Simon, who was by trade a sorcerer. He traveled about doing tricks, and assuring people of good luck and predicting the future etc. The more successful he was the more money he made. Also, the more gullible people were the more money he made. At some point Simon encounters Philip and observes what he is doing and hearing what he is preaching.

Simon is so taken by what Philip is able to do by the Holy Spirit, he takes to following him around and marveling at the miracles. However, after his conversion, Simon still can't do what Philip does. Then he witnessed the gifting of the Holy Spirit from the Apostles and its empowering of others, and he offers to buy the secret from the apostles. His motivation in the offer is somewhat clear. He wants the Holy Spirit to return to his magical enterprise, only with more success, and therefore more wealth. He is rightfully rebuked and told to repent of this evil.

That's the story in which the puzzles I mentioned occur. It's a passage that has bothered scholars for years, and challenged theological principles, and church practices. When passages do not fit into our carefully laid out theology, we can be tempted to ignore said passages, or interpret them in ways that are not appropriate. Perhaps that is why only three verses made the lectionary. We can decide not to wrestle with the hard stuff. But these three verses are in the heart of the hard stuff. How can you ignore it?

The first puzzle that we encounter has to do with this young man Philip. What right did Philip have to preach the Gospel? He is after all just a deacon. He has never been to a bible college. Never been ordained. How does anyone know he is getting it right? After all, he seems to have omitted the stuff about the Holy Spirit. We Baptists pride ourselves are being the "priesthood of all believers". We think that any believer should be able to do church things.

Is that how we really think, even as a Baptist? There are a lot of fine churches, Baptist included, who expect, no demand, that those who preach, lead the Lord's Supper, baptize etc., must be ordained. The ordained, we conclude, are the "professionals". When a layperson does preach, or lead communion, or baptize someone: in the back of our minds may be the thought, despite our Baptist leanings, that its not kosher. Can I use that word?

Even the Apostle's themselves were questioned about their authority to preach. In Acts 4:7 the Sanhedrin confronts Peter and John who were arrested for preaching the gospel. They ask, no demand, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" They are not rabbis, nor Pharisees. They are simple fishermen. These questions about legitimacy in preaching linger on into today. In many places if you don't have a diploma, a Master's degree, or even a Ph.D. don't bother climbing into the pulpit.

I actually know a Baptist church where at one time, you had to have a British accent to preach. Other churches have other requirements like the place of education. For example, McMaster grads like myself, are not welcome in some CBOQ Baptist churches and others would never consider an American trained preacher. Other things church sometimes look at include: gender, ethnicity, and other criteria that other employers could not use to discriminate. It seems people do not mind being bored, as long as the one boring them has a college education. God doesn't work like that however.

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In 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 Paul writes, *“When I came to you, brothers, announcing the testimony of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and power, so that your faith might not be based on men’s wisdom but on God’s power”*.

Paul is saying that he came not to dazzle anyone. He wasn’t there to impress anyone. In fact, someone died while listening to Paul. In Acts 20 Paul was preaching in Troas and a young man Eutychus was listening and fell asleep by an open window, tumbled out and died. The report says though that Paul revived the young man, they gave him something to eat and Paul then continued to preach. I don’t think anyone has died yet, listening to me.

Paul’s motivation was that he simply wanted people to know about Jesus, and meet Jesus. In the end what matters in the pulpit is not a degree, or eloquence, but does the speaker love Jesus and want us to know him. So, the answer to the first puzzle about who has the right to preach, is frankly anyone who loves Jesus enough to talk about him.

The second puzzle is more challenging to me. Why hadn’t the Holy Spirit fallen on these Samaritan believers? It took Peter and John to come down and lay hands on them to have the Holy Spirit fall on them. Why? I always thought that if a person sincerely believed in Jesus, and repented; the Holy Spirit falls on them. Baptism is then a sign and witness to that experience. The Samaritan in this passage had believed, and were baptized even but still no Holy Spirit.

According to Acts 2:38 they should have the Spirit. This verse read, “Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” What is scarier is Romans 8:9, where Paul states, “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” That seems to say that you cannot be saved without the Holy Spirit.

Now I should say that some of our brothers and sisters have no problem with this passage; namely our Pentecostal friends. They hold in their theology that besides conversion, you need a second event of the baptism of the Spirit. Usually they state that to confirm this second baptism, a manifestation has to occur, like speaking in tongues. I however, do not buy that. Especially given Ephesians 1:13-14 where we read,

*“In (Jesus) you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promises Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”*

So, how do we solve this puzzle? Well, the clue may be in the fact that Peter and John did something. Did you catch what they did? The passage tells us that the Apostles laid hands on the new believers in Samaria. Now, nowhere in the bible, and I mean nowhere, does it say that laying hands on anyone saves them. But we do find in scripture that besides denoting a blessing, the laying on of hands does three very significant things.

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In Acts 13:3 it is reported that the leaders of the church laid hands on Paul and Barnabas. This is the model we use for ordination. It was what I experienced when I was ordained. This laying on of hands marks someone for leadership. It is an endorsement of the ministry they have in Jesus. In Acts 9 we read that hands were often laid on someone in need of healing. In this passage Ananias lays his hands on Paul, to restore his sight.

The third example is the one before us today, and that has to do with granting the “charismata” the Greek word we get “charismatic” or “Charisma” from. The Greek word here, means gifts given by the Holy Spirit. Remember it was these gifts that attracted Simon the sorcerer. Gifts were given to the church to strengthen her. Gifts given by the Holy Spirit are mentioned by Paul especially. See 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12.

Luke is recording for us the idea that some gifts of the Holy Spirit, could only be confirmed by the laying on the hands of the Apostles. In 2 Timothy 1:6 Paul confirms that by writing to Timothy, “I remind you to fan into flame the gift (Charisma) of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.”

It seems then that the Samaritans were already saved, and had the Holy Spirit in them. What was lacking, it seems, are the gifts of the Holy Spirit. So, the second puzzle’s answer seems to be that the reason the gifts of the Holy Spirit were lacking among the Samaritans, was that the Apostles had yet to lay hands on them. But that raises the third puzzle, and the hardest one to solve. Why did it take the Apostles to confer these gifts? Why couldn’t Philip do it?

Well truthfully the bible doesn’t say? The best we can do is infer an answer. Its not ideal. Kind of like an unfinished Rubik’s cube. To begin to take a stab at this, let us remember that the New Testament is not yet written when these events occurred. There were certainly oral traditions, and maybe a rough copy of a gospel floating around, but half of the New Testament was written by Paul, and he is not yet a believer in Acts 8.

At this point, the Apostle’s teaching was the New Testament. An Apostle was by definition (see Acts 1:21-22) someone who had been with Jesus, saw his ministry, and witness his death and resurrection.” On a side note. One of the very serious debates in the early church, was whether or not Paul was an actual Apostle, given his conversion after the resurrection, and that he never was a part of the original twelve. Paul in the bible constantly, asserts that he is an Apostle.

In Acts 2 we are told that the early church devoted itself to the Apostle’s teaching. Why? Well, that’s all they had. They were the New Testament in the flesh. Everything the early church knew, and stood for depended on these Apostles. They were the source of much of the Gospel record. By the time the Apostles all died, mostly by martyrdom, the New Testament was in written form, preserved by the next generation of believers.

So, here is the church springing up in Samaria. Peter and John were sent not just to lay hands on them, but to educate them on the Gospel. Give them a first-hand account. This also tied the Samaritan to the Apostle’s authority, and bound the universal church as one. Today we no longer need the Apostles, because we have the scriptures. Everything we need to know is in the bible. Everything we know about Jesus and what he did for us is in the bible.

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That is why I encourage everyone who hears something preached by me, or someone else, to test it with scripture. Now I know there are heated debates about the interpretation of scripture on many subjects, but still, our approach to discovering the truth comes down to the words printed in the Bible. Our disputes among believers comes down to how we understand the words, and apply the words, but the words remain.

Just a cautionary note however, in that the English version of scripture is a translation from two very old languages, whose word meaning is often different from our own. This is especially true in the New Testament Greek, where words carry cultural significance which no longer applies to our modern society. Caution must always be exercised in taking verses out of context, and not seeing it, as best we can, through the lens of the early believers.

In the end, these three puzzles are like any other puzzle. Although they may amuse us, they are actually meant to challenge us. They are not intended to be simplistic or easy. The biblical puzzles, and there are many of them, are designed to make us wrestle with the word to help us to grow, dig deeper and draw closer to God. In fact, one could argue that the bible is one big puzzle meant to challenge us. Why would God even bother with the likes of us?

The answer is written on every page of the bible. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind, but now I see.”