

## WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

### Acts 8:4-24

#### Intro

When I looked at the lectionary reading from Acts for this morning (which are verses 14 through 17), I thought to myself, “that’s such a nice story of the movement of the Spirit of God.”

I still believe that to be the case.

However, the verses didn’t have a context. It was like I was hearing the punch line of a joke without the necessary lead up: it’s nice, but it leaves no real lasting impact.

Then I started to read the rest of the story and it was there that I realized just how deep this story really is.

Yes, it does contain that snippet of the movement of the Spirit of God, but more than that it speaks to both how that power is able to manifest itself, and also how that power is not something that is ours to control. The power of God may work through us, but it is not ours.

Our story is one of the many tales that Acts has collected into one narrative where the Apostles go out and begin to do what they have been called to do (thus the descriptive title for the book of the ‘Acts of the Apostles’).

Sometimes the response of the people who are hearing the message is affirmative (we will hear that this morning). Other times the response is horrible (as was the case with Stephen when he was killed for proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ).

However, in both cases the power of God’s Spirit is not controlled by humanity regardless of how devoutly righteous they may be: it is a gift from the Divine.

This sort of a story is a wonderful reminder that as intelligent as we may be, as influential as we may be, as rich as we may be, we do not control God.

So the question becomes do you live your life in that reality...or do you try and act like you have some control over God anyway? The scripture reads this way.

### **Acts 8:4-24**

<sup>4</sup> Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. <sup>5</sup> Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. <sup>6</sup> The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, <sup>7</sup> for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. <sup>8</sup> So there was great joy in that city.

<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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.” <sup>11</sup> And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with

his magic. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. <sup>15</sup> The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit <sup>16</sup> (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). <sup>17</sup> Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup> Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, <sup>19</sup> saying, "Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." <sup>20</sup> But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! <sup>21</sup> You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. <sup>22</sup> Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. <sup>23</sup> For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness." <sup>24</sup> Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me."

### **"Who's in Charge Here?"**

I felt like I finally had everything on my phone figured out. The apps were where I was used to them being; I knew how to use them; I felt like I was in control.

Then it happened.

I picked up the phone to open it and it said, 'updates installed'. All I could think was, 'I didn't do that!'. At which point I opened the phone to discover that things were not where they should be...and applications that I could open...well, they did not look the same and the way that they used to work...that was not how they worked anymore!!

Have any of you ever had that happen? Have any of you ever avoided updating your operating system (for 2 years) because you don't want to have to face that sort of a reality?

At one point the world was known to be flat...until we realized it wasn't.

At one point certain sexes or races were known to be more intellectually capable...until it was shown that was anything but sniffing the truth.

Did you ever have that feeling like you were in control of things? Maybe it was at your job. Maybe it was around the house. Maybe it was while sitting in your car.

Regardless, you felt like you were up on top of the proverbial ball...and then the ball moved. Maybe it's something small; maybe it's something large but at the end of the day something that you thought you knew and understood (as well as the control that you thought you were able to yield) was revealed to be something that was not near as static (and under control) as you presumed it to be.

Well, the same is true of Simon in our story.

Simon was someone who had influence in his community. The scripture literally says, that people “listened to him eagerly”.

In an Earthly sense, he absolutely had pull. He was on top of the ball. He had control.

That’s why it doesn’t surprise me in the least that when he sees real power that he responds in a way that makes a whole lot of earthly sense: “how much does that cost?! I’ll pay you whatever you want! My influence is great ...but I don’t have that.”

Here is a man who trying to control God. He thinks that God (or at the very least God’s subordinates in the form of the Apostles) live by the creed, “everybody’s got a price.”

So many of us do this with God. We set up a let’s make a deal scenario where we do something ‘good’ in order to get something from God in return (‘God, if you take care of my health concerns, I will give more money to the poor’).

Or we go out and live in ways where we act like we are in the ones in charge, that we know what is best: that God is nothing more than a commodity that can be bought and sold, a power, a presence, an entity that we have control over. We live like Simon who when he saw the real power of God tried to co-opt it so that at least some of the glory that should be given to God and God alone, happens to shine upon him.

But that isn’t how God’s Spirit works. It is not and cannot be bought and sold. It cannot be influenced into use because of any earthly resource that may be at your disposal. The power of God moves in and through people as a gift, a gift to those who are willing to live as servants, a gift to those who have begun to understand that the only real power in the world is the power that is from above, a gift to those who have been willing to not only say but then truly believe that Jesus died for their sins and thereby live a life of discipleship.

Remember Simon said he believed; Simon was baptized; Simon stayed constantly with the Apostle Phillip.

But then, when something appeared that he wanted, Simon fell back into the earthly default positions that he had not been able to let go of. He did not celebrate the movement of God’s Spirit: he lusted after it and wanted to control it. He wanted to be in charge. He, like each and every one of us, sinned.

The big difference is that he got called on it...immediately. It is in his admonition (as voiced through Peter) that we are able to be reminded just how special the gift of God’s Spirit is, and how we, through all of our human ways, have no control over that Spirit at all.

So, as I asked prior to the reading, do you live your life in that reality...or do you try and act like you still have some control over God anyway?

The power of God’s Spirit is an amazing thing to experience let alone flow through you but it is not ours to control. It is a gift. We need to celebrate that gift and when we get in the way of the movement of God’s Spirit (which is something that all of us have done), recognize it, repent before the throne of the Almighty, pray for forgiveness, and then get out of the way.

And being 'in the way' shows up in all sorts of ways. For example, the number of people who have either known me as a pastor or found out that I was a pastor who have asked for me to 'pray for them because my connection with God is secure' is remarkable. Hate to burst your bubble, but just because I graduated from a seminary does not mean that my connection with God is ridiculously secure. God answers your prayers, the Spirit moves, and sometimes it might even be in the way that you wanted...and that has nothing to do with a theological degree. God hears you! And that's because of who God is and not because of any control that we feel that we exert.

The Spirit of God is at work: at work in the world, our country, the towns we live in, in this community of faith. That is an amazing thing. That is something that we should celebrate. That is something that we should open up our lives to by recognizing the authority of God, and how God can move through us through that gift of the Spirit, if we are willing to live lives of discipleship.

So are you? Are you willing to not only say that you believe...and then live that belief out through service to others so that the Kingdom of God is advanced and glory is given solely to the Divine?

#### **After Sermon Prayer**

Holy God, The movement of Your Spirit is an amazing thing. Help us to understand and truly believe in Your authority so that we might be able to live lives where we follow Your leading, so that Your love is able to be experienced by all those whom we know, and are about to know. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.