

Acts 8:4–22 (NRSV)

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.

What Do Others Say I Am?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Acts 8:4–22

Samaria. Enigmatic. It's the other side of the tracks. Or at least it was to the Judeans of Jesus' era. But, of course, we have the story mostly from the Judeans of Jesus' era. The Samaritans tell it a bit differently.

There's an old story that Lyle Schaller used to tell about a man who retired and starting spending 6 months around wintertime in Florida. One year during the six months he was gone, his church back home added quite a few new members. The man came back in April or so, and things were a mess. There was a car in his usual parking spot. There was some stranger welcoming him to his own church as if it was his first time there. And to top it all off, there were people sitting in his pew.

In 586 bce or so the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and took many of the Judeans off into exile. But as empires are wont to do, Babylon ultimately fell, and then the Persians ascended. The Persian ruler Cyrus the Great was quite a lot nicer than the Babylonian rulers, and he let the Judeans go home. They had been away for more than forty years. And guess what. When the Judeans got back in their own land, there were people in their pews. Sitting right in the middle of David's old kingdom were the Samaritans. They were even blocking the way between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. And to make matters worse, the Samaritans thought they belonged there. The Judeans could hardly believe their ears. The returning Judeans believed that the Samaritans were foreigners, probably immigrants from Assyria and other strange places. The Judeans had spent over forty years in exile, they finally came home, and someone who didn't belong there had taken their seat. [Slide 1]

The Samaritans were infuriated by this story. The Samaritans said that they were in fact descendants of the most ancient northern tribes of Israel, Ephraim and Manasseh. They said they had survived the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722. They had survived the fall of Jerusalem in 586. They said, only they had remained in the land throughout. Not only that, they said, but they had also never believed that David should have moved the religious center to Jerusalem. As far as they were concerned, Shechem or Sychar was and always had been the rightful place for Israel's worship. They were the loyal children of the Israel. And while the Judeans were in Babylon, they thrived and grew in the land. Five hundred years later, in the time of Jesus, through takeovers by Alexander and Caesar, this geographic divide and bitter rancor remained. Even to this very day the remaining Samaritans in the Samaritan village on Mount Gerazim retain the ancient traditions and maintain their claim as the true children of ancient Israel. [Slide 2] When I visited there a few years ago, this man, the brother of the high priest, showed me what he claimed was the true Torah scroll written in an ancient version of the Hebrew script. [Slide 3]

Like so many feuds, one would be hard-pressed to get to the bottom of the truth. Suffice it to say, the animosity between the Judeans and the Samaritans was considerable. It makes it easy to understand why the woman at the well in John was surprised that Jesus would ask her, a Samaritan, for a drink. [Slide 4]

This highly charged relationship between Judea and Samaria is the backdrop for today's passage from Acts. [Slide 5 Leave up for remainder of sermon] We are at the very beginning stage of the Christian church, which is mostly in Jerusalem. The Christians were facing persecution. Indeed, just previous to our reading today Saul, who would later become the Apostle Paul, was persecuting the fledgling Christians, and Stephen the Apostle was stoned to death for his faith. Saul had looked on in approval. Many of the Christians were forced to scatter for their lives, as the text says. Philip fled into Samaria. Put another way, when Philip fled, he fled into hostile territory of another kind. In Jerusalem he was not welcome because he was a Christian. In Samaria he was not welcome because he was a Jerusalem Jew.

Nonetheless Philip began to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and work miracles. He gathered great crowds. He preached the kingdom of God. He cast out demons. He healed the lame. Many were amazed, and there was great joy among the people.

Even Simon Magus, Simon the Magician, was impressed. Simon was known throughout the area of Samaria as an unparalleled miracle worker. Some said he was a god or from God. But Philip's abilities outstripped even Simon's, and Simon believed in Philip's preaching. Simon the Magician and many others were baptized by Philip. After that Simon stayed with Philip constantly.

Now comes a very curious development. Philip wasn't one of the twelve disciples. He had been ordained as a kind of helper. And when word got back to the disciples that Philip was converting many Samaritans, two of the disciples, Peter and John came to Samaria.

Think about this. Philip wasn't really a disciple. As far as the Judeans were concerned the Samaritans weren't really Jews. The whole thing smells of heresy. One can well imagine that the disciples were coming to Samaria to put a lid on things. Or at least, one might assume, they were coming to Samaria to exert some control.

There is evidence to support such thinking. First, it turns out that though the people had experienced Philip's baptisms, they had not received the Holy Spirit. For that Peter and John had to lay hands on the people. Then the Spirit descended on them. When the Spirit came, holy power was even more in evidence. The authority of the disciples added to Philip's baptisms. Philip's baptisms seem incomplete.

At this point Simon the Magician reveals his true colors. He tries to buy the power to lay hands on people from Peter and John. He wants to buy their power. Peter and John roundly rebuke Simon and more or less curse him. On the other hand, the Samaritans whom Philip baptized and on whom Peter and John laid hands became the first people outside the Jerusalem circle to become Christians. And these converts weren't just anybody. Between the Samaritans and the Judeans there was great mistrust and enmity. These conversions marked the beginning of the church expanding beyond its native soil, and the magnitude of the gulf that was crossed could hardly have been greater. It's the beginning of the church universal. It's a fascinating story.

But within this fascinating story is a fascinating question. It is a question of authority. Philip doesn't seem to have authority, at least not completely. Peter and John seem to get the last word. It is their touch that affirms the full conversion of the Samaritans. It is their judgment that decides the Simon the Magician is not a legitimate follower of Christ.

I have to admit, I have a bit of a negative reaction to Peter and John getting to say who is in and who is out. Our church website says, "All people are welcome here. Seriously, all people. Even you." It doesn't say that first you have to have Peter and John lay hands on you, or even Tom and Dudley." That's just the way it should be. Everyone is welcome here.

But there's something about this passage that keeps nagging at me. Should I listen to what others think about me? I had a therapist who once said, "Well, maybe if you hear more than one or two people saying the same thing about you, you may want to pay attention." She had a point. And I do have to admit that it's pretty unsettling when people say, "I don't care what anybody says. I can believe anything I want." It is incredible to me that politicians can tell bald-faced lies, and they and their followers can just say, "I'll believe whatever I want." Or they can say the most outrageously racist or sexist things and say, "That's my opinion. Everyone has a right to their opinion." They can say that more guns would reduce gun violence, and they can wave away any evidence to the contrary saying, "Well, that's your opinion." Peter and John were able to authoritatively say to Simon Magus, "Look, it is wrong to try to buy spiritual power. We will not let you do that." I find myself yearning for some similar mechanism to bring sense to the current discourse, some authority, or even ground rules to cut against the fact-denying, self-serving radical anarchy of self-rule. Surely there is more to it than my opinion.

Maybe I don't want to be too fast after all to jettison the power that Peter and John demonstrated when they laid hands on the converted Samaritans. To be sure, I'm often skeptical of giving someone the power to say, "I'll decide if you're in or out." When I first read this passage it seemed awfully officious to me. But there is a point.

There's another problem, though, that's not exactly the same. Philip goes to the difficult region of Samaria. He does incredible works. He brings people to the kingdom of God. He baptizes them. And then Peter and John show up and say, "Well, that's all well and good, Philip, old boy, but you don't have what it takes to finish the job. Step aside while we take over."

That seems officious, too, and maybe that's what happened. But there is a much more generous reading, and one that actually rings more in line with the facts. As the Christian church began to form, it saw itself as the church of the Jewish Messiah. That is, they saw themselves as Jews who recognized the true Messiah in Jesus. It was not an obvious step that the Christian church would expand beyond Judea to the rest of the world, to the the gentiles. Philip was thinking way outside the box when he started preaching the Gospel and baptizing Samaritans. There would have been plenty of people who would have said that what he did was offensive and illegitimate. They might well have argued that the disciples appointed him a deputy, and then he went off half-cocked doing something completely unlawful. In this light Peter and John, trusted disciples and companions of Jesus himself, bring a much-needed stamp of approval. Rather than taking over from Philip, they can be seen to ratify the bold move he has made.

Again, I yearn for some such mechanism in our world today. When the President weeps for the children at Sandyhook, I wish for an irrefutable authority to step in and affirm him. When people reach out to immigrants and refugees, I long for an indisputable authority to lay hands on the project. When someone stands up for the poor and hungry and homeless I ache for strong and unassailable voices to support them. I wish for a way to ratify the good works that cut against the grain of accepted divisions and hostilities. In the end I wish for trustworthy voices who can have a say in who I am, in whether I've got it right or not. For we who live in this world live in world no less complicated than the one Philip, Peter and John faced. And we are no less divided than Samaria was from Judea. Amen.