

“Isn’t it Ironic”
Acts 8:4-25

“Rain on your wedding day.” “A free ride when you've already paid.” “Good advice that you just didn't take” isn't so ironic, no matter what Alanis Morissette might sing to you. What is ironic is the plan of the Romans to quash this new Christian movement by scattering Jesus followers throughout the region. It's ironic because what was supposed to kill the movement actually made it grow and emboldened disciples like Phillip, for example, to “proclaim the word of God” all the more and even take the gospel beyond its “intended recipients” – even to places like Samaria (Source: William Willimon) What you may, or may not know, is that there is a long and tumultuous history between Jews and Samaritans. Most Jews considered Samaritans only “half Jewish” and therefore racially impure and religiously inferior. But Samaritans worshiped Israel's God, observed Moses' law, and looked forward to a messianic figure yet Christian mission to these “peoples” was nonexistent. In fact, Matthew's Jesus tells his disciples, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter *no town of Samaritans.*” (Matt 10:5) Yet here is Phillip “proclaiming the Messiah to them” (8:5) and go figure, they “listened eagerly.” (8:6) It seems, in no time, the Samaritans “believed” what they “heard and saw.” But chances are so would you.

Now what I am about to tell you may surprise some of you especially if you grew up in a church like I did or looked on skeptically as you stumbled upon a late night or early morning tele-evangelist doing some Steve-Martin-like actions in his movie, “Leap of Faith.” But yet, such things happened in our lesson this morning and I believe it. Yes, unclean spirits were being driven out with loud shrieks because what else could they do after coming face to face with our Holy God. How small a task would it be for the God who made the world in six days to bring healing to the lame or mobility to the paralyzed? If these kinds of things were happening then “great joy in the city” would be expected, don't you think? And if these kinds of things were happening what would it be a sign for? If suddenly the vacant lot beside where you live was busy with machinery and men, If a backhoe and truck were removing dirt and then forms were brought in followed by concrete you would rightly suppose that you were going to soon have neighbours. It might just be an assumption but it would be an assumption made on what you see and hear happening about you and you would name it “construction”. So come back to our narrative, for just a moment, and see if we can do a little deducing together.

There is Joe over there whose life has been a mess since he was a child. No one knew why he did those things he did and I'm not just speaking about the “typical” things kids do or even the “typical” things “bad kids” do. No, I'm speaking about things done that are pure evil. People in town

simply said he was “possessed,” not even understanding the full ramifications of such a statement. But the “naming” stuck, until the day he met Philip. Joe was not only cursing Philip that day but the God whom Philip served as well. And without warning Philip put his hand on Joe’s forehead and said a few words that no one really heard. Someone said they heard the name “Jesus” and immediately Joe’s entire demeanor changed – I mean even his facial expression was transformed. If you knew the “old” Joe you would not recognize the “new” Joe. And then there is Ruth. She was now older but the aches and pains of age seemed to come upon her much sooner than most. Her problem was very visible, especially when she walked. Her right leg did not work like her left. In fact her right leg dragged behind her, like a scarf around one’s neck. Without a cane she would not be able to get around because she was, as people called her, “lame” and with no hope of ever being well again – that is until she met Philip and her life was forever changed. She now walks miles a day and she even attends a dance class. No one notices her anymore, which is just fine with Ruth. And then there’s Mary. She had a terrible accident when she was only 5. Till the age of 5 she was like every other kid and then a dive off a bank into water that was too shallow for even someone her size, broke her neck. It was her older sister who pulled her out of the water. She was breathing and her eyes were wide open but the first thing Mary said to her sister was, “I can’t move my legs.” And she never did again, that is until the day she met Philip. She was now 29 and lived her entire existence on a mat in the centre of Town where she begged for money. Like Joe and Ruth, Philip simply put his hand upon her, upon both her feet and immediately her legs began to tingle. Remember she had not had any feeling in her legs for 24 years and now blood rushed to her legs and she began to move her legs. No one would believe her. Like Joe she was overjoyed as was everyone in the city at the things that were done, in “Jesus’ name”. Again, what do you call something like this? A lucky break? A coincidence? A miracle? Around here we call it a “convincing proof” but even more it’s a “sign” that something is happening – that maybe what the ancient Hebrews longed for, what Jesus talked about and later what the disciples preached on was actually happening in their midst – the Kingdom of God had come near.

What else would attract someone like Simon? We don’t know much about Simon who is first introduced to us in verse 9 of our lesson. Luke tells us about his past with one simple word, “previously.” Just like Joe had “previously” been possessed, or Mary had “previously” been paralyzed, Simon had “previously practiced magic.” Now what you need to understand is “magic” then was different than today or at least what you think of when you think of magic. When “magic” is mentioned in Scripture it always has evil connotations. This is no slight of hand, card trick, illusions sort of thing that Simon was doing on a street corner. No, these were acts that required one to seek the power,

wisdom and insight from someone other than God. And apparently Simon was very good at it. Don't believe me? Just ask Simon? I find it amusing of how Luke says of Simon how he (Simon) told others he "was someone great." (8:9) Not that others thought he was great but he told others he was someone great. (Sounds like a politician I know.) But then again Simon appears to be no slouch. He had quite a following – even convincing some that his "power" was from God but God, remember is not into magic. So... in one corner, wearing blue trunks weighing in at 160 pounds and all the way from Jerusalem with a record of 10-0 we have "Fantastic Philip!" And the crowd goes wild! And in the corner, wearing the red trunks weighing in at 140 pounds, local and home town favourite right here from Samaria with a record of 6-0 we have Simon the Great! And the crowd is not so loud. Luke gives us a little insight to what has happened. We have two men doing some pretty amazing things, maybe even similar things. But Philip has something going for him that apparently Simon apparently doesn't. I mean, they both seem to have a following but Philip seems to have more, not more followers necessarily but a "different type of follower." Philip, unlike Simon proclaims "good news" even more "good news about the Kingdom of God." Another word for good news is "gospel" so we are not incorrect to say, "Phillip was sharing the gospel" with the people of Samaria. Luke tells us all those convinced that Philip's message was "good news" were baptized – appeared to become followers rather than just fickle hanger-oners. In fact Philip had such a convincing message that even Simon believed. What a coup! I mean to get Simon following Jesus meant Simon's followers would soon follow Jesus as well. Here was Simon, maybe the biggest celebrity in all of Samaria now coming to the local church in Samaria. Could you see how Sunday attendance would increase? What about the weekly offering or the sign up for the new ministry planner? And with that alone it would be confirmation that God's Kingdom was in fact present in Samaria. Or so we think...

Word soon got all the way back to Jerusalem that something was happening in Samaria and I'm sure Simon's "life change" had something to do with it. What could possibly be bad about that? So Peter and John, two of Jesus' inner circle and two of the most respected men within the church came all the way to ungodly Samaria to see if all this talk was justified. Philip and those in the local church had seemingly done everything right but Peter and John noticed something missing, what they noticed missing was The Spirit. People had been baptized. (check) Simon had been baptized. (check) and all had even baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (check) But they had not yet received the Spirit. It seems "out of order" or what we are used to. And maybe Jesus' own baptism confuses the matter all the more. When Jesus was baptized by his cousin John, we are told that the Spirit "descended upon him" as an affirmation that He was "God's Son." Now maybe you were baptized as an infant and your parents made vows on your behalf or you were baptized as an adult and you made

your own profession of faith but either baptism is not normative to Jesus' baptism. Baptism and receiving God's Spirit are not one in the same. Scripture tells us the Spirit of God enters a person when true repentance is offered and a confession of faith to Jesus is made. "Repent" and be baptized" Scripture tells us elsewhere. But apparently Simon did not get the memo. So Peter and John came to Samaria to meet with these "new followers" and upon laying hands upon them they received the Spirit of God. Again, this is not seen to be normative because the original 12 are long since gone but what this lesson does remind us is that baptism does not confirm anything but is but an outward sign of an inward act, which apparently Simon had not yet experienced. We say this because of the question Simon asked Peter and John. Simon is amazed at what he has just seen so he asks to buy the Spirit from them. I could come out of retirement, Simon might have thought, and go back out on the road again as Simon the Great. Peter and John hear then not the words of an ardent disciple wishing to bless others but a magician who want to practice "simony." (Simony is the buying of ecclesiastical privileges, pardons or benefices.) Peter and John are outraged. The Gospel is not magic and it's not for sale.

Isn't it ironic then that the Kingdom of God isn't what we first think? In the midst of countless stories about the Acts of the Apostles as well as the Acts of the Spirit that produce incredible numerical growth there is this hidden gem in the midst that reminds us that baptisms and growth are not necessarily signs that the Kingdom has come. William Willimon writes, "The truth of the gospel is more than success in winning converts and martyrs. The gospel is truth demanding, so strange, that it is possible to get it wrong. Therefore we step back for a moment from the drama of the spread of the good news to ponder the tragedy of the misunderstanding of it. The gospel that is worth dying for (Stephen) is surely more than some sort of magic or some powerful commodity to be bought and sold." Instead Jesus' gospel is for all, a grace filled gospel that does care how "great" you are or even how "great you think you are" or even if you have baptized or not. The only requirement is a repentant heart and a life lived to testify to Jesus. Now isn't that ironic. Let us pray...