

What a joy to bring good news!

Message for Sunday, May 17, 2015
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Acts 8:1-25

Children's Message: Acts 8:9-24, Simon the magician tries to buy the Holy Spirit!

I start by doing a simple card trick with the children. I ask one of them to pull a card out of the deck, and show it to the others. Without looking at it, I put it back in the deck. I shuffle the cards, and the child tells me when to stop shuffling. That card will be the top one in the deck.

Wow, pretty cool, eh? Maybe I could have a new career, doing magic tricks. By the way, I got the idea for that from this book of magic tricks. I can buy this book, and with the knowledge I gain from this book, I can do all sorts of amazing tricks. I can become famous.

In the passage we just read in the Bible, a magician named Simon sees some people who are followers of Jesus do a new trick he's never seen before: they pray for people, and Jesus gives them the Holy Spirit. It doesn't say what happened—maybe they were filled with joy; I don't know. But Simon thinks, "Wow, that's amazing! If I had that power, I could do amazing things. How much money do you want for it?" Simon is trying to buy the Holy Spirit!!

The people who follow Jesus tell Simon that you can't buy Jesus or the Holy Spirit.

QUESTION: How much do I have to pay to get Jesus to come into my life?

Answer: Nothing! All I have to do is ask him to come in. Jesus lives in us by the Holy Spirit. He does this for free; it's a gift to us.

Message "What a joy to bring good news!"

1) People need joy — Jesus brings joy

I heard about a happy man named John Wheeler. "How happy?" you ask. This is how he put it: "Now that I know Christ, I'm happier when I'm sad than I was before when I was glad."

When Jesus comes into someone's life, joy is the result. Somehow many people have the idea that being a Christian means being sour and serious. Nothing could be further from the truth! Jesus brought joy with him wherever he went. He still does today.

The Bible often uses the word "gospel" to describe the message of Jesus Christ. The word "gospel" literally means "good news." The message that God loves us, even in spite of the wrong we've done; that our sins can be forgiven; that we can know God personally; that we

can have power to reach out to others with this love... this message is good news! The gospel of Jesus Christ brings joy!

This is exactly what happened when the people in Samaria heard about Jesus, and they asked him to come into their lives:

Acts 8:5-8, New Living Translation:

Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria and told the people there about the Messiah. Crowds listened intently to what he had to say because of the miracles he did. Many evil spirits were cast out, screaming as they left their victims. And many who had been paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city."

Christians have the enormous privilege of introducing joy into other people's lives. How? Simply by introducing them to Jesus. You're with a friend or a relative, and you happen to meet someone you know; what do you do? You introduce them: "Janet, I'd like you to meet my friend Peter. He's a terrific guy, and I think you'd like him." After all, if Jesus has brought joy into your life, wouldn't you naturally want to share that with others?

That's a privilege and also a responsibility. Jesus repeated it several times, using different words, to make sure that we wouldn't miss it.

Matthew 28:19-20, New Living Translation:

"Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Mark 16:15, New Living Translation:

"Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone, everywhere."

Acts 1:8, New Living Translation:

"But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

That's the theme of this message: **Bringing others to meet Jesus is one of our greatest priorities.** In fact, it surpasses many other things that often try to dominate church life. I'll come back to that later.

2) The story of the Jews and the Samaritans

OK, it's time for a history lesson. The verse I started with above,

Acts 8:5 "Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria and told the people there about the Messiah"

is actually a miracle! It doesn't look that way on the surface, but let's dig down a bit to see what I mean.

There was a quarrel between the Jews and the Samaritans which was centuries old. It began with a family fight. Of the 12 tribes of Israel, Judah in the south was the strongest (they actually absorbed the smaller and weaker tribe of Simeon). The other tribes to the north didn't have much to do with them. In fact, after the reigns of the two great kings, David and Solomon, Israel divided into two separate nations, each with their own king and their own capital city.

The word "Jew" is derived from "Judah" — another example of how the northern kingdom were not considered people of the true faith.

In 722 B.C. the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom. As was the custom in those days, the conqueror took most of the people away as slaves, leaving only the poorest people behind. The captives taken to Assyria quickly assimilated into the population, and were never heard from again. Assyrians moved in to fill the vacant land. The Jews who remained behind mixed with these foreigners, their sons and daughters intermarried, and even their religion got mixed with a dose of foreign religions. The capital of this northern part of Israel was Samaria, and so the people came to be known as Samaritans.

125 years later (597 B.C.), the next superpower of the region, the Babylonians, conquered the southern half of Israel. Again, they took most of the people away to Babylon. But this time the captives refused to lose their identity. They stubbornly retained their religion and their traditions—everything that made them Jewish. Of course, they refused to allow their sons and daughters to marry foreigners. 50 years later, a new Babylonian king replaced the old one, and the new king allowed the Jews to return to Israel and rebuild their country.

When they returned home and set to work, their Samaritan cousins to the north offered to help. The Jews refused, because they considered the Samaritans to be no longer pure Jews. They had only contempt for the Samaritans, because they had forsaken their faith. From that day onwards there was a bitter hatred between Jews and Samaritans.

600 years later, the bitterness was still there when Jesus arrived. The parable of the Good Samaritan [Luke 10:30-35] is so famous because the hero of the story is one of those despised Samaritans.

One time Jesus is travelling to Jerusalem by way of a shortcut through Samaria.

Luke 9:51-54, Contemporary English Version:

Not long before it was time for Jesus to be taken up to heaven, he made up his mind to go to Jerusalem. He sent some messengers on ahead to a Samaritan village to get things ready for him. But he was on his way to Jerusalem, so the people there refused to welcome him. When the disciples James and John saw what was happening, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy these people?"

The Samaritans reject Jesus because he is travelling to that hated southern capital. James and John despise the Samaritans just as much as the Samaritans despise them.

3) The miracle of the gospel

Jesus was a Jew, and all his disciples were Jews. All the thousands of people who became Christians on the day of Pentecost, and in the weeks that followed were Jews. Jesus may have said, "Go and make disciples of all the nations," [Matthew 28:19] but surely that didn't mean nations like the Samaritans!

So these Christians were content to stay in Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish religion, and talk with people in the Temple and in their homes. Maybe a few side trips to Jericho and Bethlehem, and even back home to Galilee. But they didn't venture beyond that safe, comfortable territory.

Until the day Stephen was killed, and they were *forced* to flee for their lives! That's how Philip ended up in Samaria. It certainly wasn't voluntary!

Now some people you have to hit them over the head with a two-by-four to make them sit up and pay attention. Some catch on a bit quicker. Anyway, Philip got the point. So he started telling Samaritan people about Jesus. The response was stunning:

Acts 8:12, New Living Translation:

The people believed Philip's message of Good News concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, many men and women were baptized.

The apostles back in Jerusalem were also stunned. So much so that the Peter and John, the main leaders of the church in Jerusalem, immediately travelled north to find out what was going on. When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers, and God filled them with the Holy Spirit, the same as they had been filled.

So it was true! Jesus really wants people everywhere to know the good news. There was much celebrating that day. There's more:

Acts 8:25, New Living Translation:

After testifying and preaching the word of the Lord in Samaria, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem. And they stopped in many Samaritan villages along the way to preach the Good News to them, too.

Remember: this is the same John who wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy these people because they had been rude. And now he's welcoming them into the Christian family, as sisters and brothers in Christ!

That's what I call the miracle of the gospel. That's why we say that everyone is welcome here at St. Paul's Church. *Everyone*. No matter who you are or where you come from or what you've done. The gospel is bigger than anything in our past.

4) How far are you willing to go?

Once they got over their initial prejudice against the Samaritans, the Christians were willing to go to any length to introduce them to Jesus. How does that compare with us?

How far are we willing to go to reach out to someone with good news? Mind you, that good news doesn't have to be *only* spiritual. Jesus ministered to people's bodies, spirits, emotions—to the whole person.

Here's an example of what I mean. A valuable strategy is to do a survey of people who live in the area, asking what are the greatest needs of the community. Then the church follows up with a plan of how to help meet those needs. One church found that the number one need felt by people in their community was potty training for pre-schoolers! Rather than ignore this as "unspiritual," the church used it as an opportunity to reach out. They held a conference called "Parenting Pre-schoolers," which, among other things, taught this vital skill. The pastor joked that their biblical basis for this was Proverbs 22:6: "Train your children in the way they should go!" The idea was funny, but the results were serious. Through that initial contact, many families became Christians and joined that church.

I believe the gospel is the best news in the world. Because of this, I want to give you two things to do this week:

Next Steps:

- Introduce someone to your friend, Jesus. It doesn't have to be a hard sell, like some of those people who call you on the phone about your insurance. Just simply say, "I'd like you to meet my friend Jesus. He's a terrific guy, and I think you'd like him."
- Invite that person to come with you to church next Sunday. Come as your guest. They'll have a chance to hear more about your friend, without pressure or obligation. And they'll have a chance to meet other people whose lives have also been touched by this friend.

I know this may be stretching you. Some of you are shy about this. But that's the whole point of today's message: How far are you willing to go to reach out to others? Are you willing to go beyond your prejudices, your comfort zone, and really reach out? It's a joy to bring good news to people!