

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text is from this morning's Second Lesson, from Acts 8:14-15. As I read it again, notice the name of the second apostle spoken of:

<sup>14</sup>Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and *John*, <sup>15</sup>who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit;

And so it is, that John, one of the sons of Zebedee, one of the "Sons of Thunder" as they were called, becomes still and prayerful on that day – the day he comes to understand that it is the will of God that the Gospel be preached to the Samaritans too.

Where did the man stand before? Where did this apostle John, who prays for the Samaritans in today's story, where did he stand before in relation to the Samaritans? Answer: He stood in righteous indignation before them, thundering against them, wanting to call down the fire of heaven upon them.

The occasion was a journey of Jesus through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem. The disciples sent messengers on ahead to arrange a resting place for Jesus and the disciples in a certain Samaritan village. But that village would not receive Jesus because "his face was set toward Jerusalem," (Luke 9:53) as the text says, and which I mean to explain a little farther on in this sermon.

At any rate, James and John were highly offended by this ungraciousness on the part of that village, and, in keeping with their thundering nature, they proposed to return kind for kind, or even more:

And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" (Luke 9:54)

The seed of this morning's story is planted in the reaction of Jesus to this thundering call for fire from heaven. Does Jesus consent to the call for fire? No. Just the reverse: he rebukes James and John. Just as Jesus rebuked the storm on the sea that threatened to destroy the disciples and their little boat, so he rebuked James and John who desired to destroy the Samaritan.

Now, in this morning's story from Acts 8, we find one of these Sons of Thunder quiet and humble before the Samaritans, praying that they might

receive the Holy Spirit, and praying through to victory, for they do indeed receive the Spirit.

Let me tell you more fully this stirring story of the preaching of the Gospel to the Samaritans.

The beginning of the story is conflict within the young church in Jerusalem. Not all was well in that first Christian congregation.<sup>1</sup> In fact, there was disunity along language lines. As sometimes happens here in America, when a congregation has been used to worshiping in one language but now must make space for another language and another group of worships, so there was ethnic tension within the early Jerusalem congregation.

That first congregation, naturally enough, was composed of Jews, for Pentecost had happened in Jerusalem, and St. Peter's sermon on that day had won the hearts of three thousand residents of that town. So, we can imagine that all the people in that first congregation were Jews, and yet, there was a fundamental difference among them. It had to do with the native language the people spoke and their cultural formation.

Part of the congregation – probably the larger part – spoke Aramaic and had been born and raised in Israel. The other group also consisted of Jews, but they were Jews from the Diaspora. That is, they were Jews from hither and yon throughout the Roman Empire. Their native language was Greek and their cultural formation reflected the diverse societies of the Roman Empire. We read of this cultural division within the Jerusalem congregation in the Sixth Chapter of Acts. The Greek-speaking Jewish Christians were called "the Hellenists."

A crisis developed in that congregation when the Hellenists complained to the apostles that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of the church's charity. This was a very important matter. The Hellenist widows were especially vulnerable because they did not have

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<sup>1</sup> See Gerhard Krodel's commentary on *Acts*, for example, Chapters Six and Eight.

the support of extended families in Jerusalem. They had left those families behind elsewhere in the Roman Empire when they came to Jerusalem. In now becoming Christian, they had placed themselves in stark jeopardy, for not only had they left their families behind, but also they were entering a very minority movement within the Jewish faith. So, these ladies were at risk. Some of them, no doubt, were in desperate trouble if the congregation did not support them. You can see, I bet, that discontent about the fairness of the charitable distributions was a large issue in that early congregation.

As it turns out, the Lord brought good from out of this trouble by way of forming a new ministry – the ministry of, what is called, The Seven. The apostles encouraged the Hellenists to set apart seven of their elders, seven respected leaders among them, and the apostles laid hands on them and appointed them leaders of the church's charity.

You probably know the names of two of The Seven. One was Stephen, who was stoned, while Paul looked on approvingly. He is considered the first Christian martyr. The other one is Philip. Philip is the hero in today's story.

In this past week's Bible story, one of the ladies used an interesting saying: She said that through God's grace "a stumbling stone can become a stepping stone." And so it was in that early congregation. It was threatened within, without. The internal threat was this matter of the charity for the widows. The external threat was the fierce persecution of the early church unleashed by the stoning of Stephen. When that happened, many of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem fled the city. But in accordance with the will of the Holy Spirit, wherever these Christians fled, they carried their faith with them. Thus, a stumbling block became a stepping stone. In fact, the persecution of the church helped spread the faith across the world.

Now we come to Philip. Philip fled Jerusalem and went to Samaria, where he successfully preached the Gospel to the Samaritans. It wasn't the apostles who did that. They remained in Jerusalem. No, it was Philip who went to Samaria and succeeded in a mission that Jesus had appointed to the apostles on Ascension Day. On that day when Jesus was lifted up into heaven, he spoke of Samaria:

...and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in *Samaria*, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.(Acts 1:8)

And so at last we come to this morning's story in Acts 8. The apostles back in Jerusalem hear that the Samaritans have "received the Word of God." So, they send Peter and John to them to pray with them.

And in coming to Samaria, Peter and John were coming among a people who made them uneasy. For those were the days, and had long been so, when the Jews and the Samaritans did not much like one another.

To the Jews, the Samaritans were a suspect people. They rather gave the Jews the willies. The Samaritans were a contrary folk who made outrageous claims about the ancient faith of Israel, at least from the Jewish point of view. For one thing, the Samaritans had a truncated Bible. They believed in the Pentateuch, but they rejected the Psalms and the Prophets. And that is a pretty fundamental disagreement, when you cannot even agree on the boundaries of the Bible. But even more frustrating and outrageous from the Jewish point of view was the Samaritans denied the validity of the Temple in Jerusalem. They claimed that the only valid temple was on Mt. Gerizim there in Samaria.<sup>2</sup> And that is a deep disagreement when there is a whole people somewhere who tell you that your church is false.

That is why the Samaritan village would not make space for Jesus: his face was "set toward Jerusalem," but the Samaritans did not believe in such pilgrimages.

The Jews claimed about the Samaritans that they were the descendents of the colonists imported to the Northern Kingdom by the conquering Assyrian empire back in the eighth century B.C.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Jews claimed that the Samaritans were a kind of mongrel people with only a superficial understanding of the faith of Israel.

As for the Samaritans themselves, they considered the Jewish view of their origins to be a doggone lie! They thought it slander and a

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<sup>2</sup> "And when the LORD your God brings you into the land which you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim..." (Deuteronomy 11:29)

<sup>3</sup> The Jewish view of their origins: This view identifies the Samaritans as the descendants of the colonists whom Shalmaneser, King of Assyria, is said to have brought from Cutha, Babylon, Hamath, and other foreign parts after he had conquered Samaria in 722 B.C. and deported the native population (2 Kings 17)... a grotesque syncretism; [the faith of Israel] served only as a thin veneer spread, for convenience, over an essential and deep-seated heathenism.... regarding them, at best, as one degree nearer than Gentiles, but still not as full-fledged members of the house of Israel. (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*)

misrepresentation of them. They claimed that they were not the colonists but the more ancient Israelites before the colonists and that their understanding of the faith was more pure than that of rabbinic Judaism.

These were substantial disagreements, with the natural result that the Jews shied away from the Samaritans and the Samaritans from the Jews.

Yet, Jesus seems to have liked the Samaritans. One of his most beautiful spiritual conversations was with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), and one of his most lovely parables is about a Samaritan – the parable of the Good Samaritan, along with Jesus concluding instruction, “Go, and do thou likewise” (Luke 10:37) – like the Samaritan.

To conclude the story, Peter and John go down to Samaria, pray with the Samaritans, and give the apostolic witness that indeed the Holy Spirit has come upon the Samaritans, of all people!

So, there we have it: an introduction to the story of the preaching of the Gospel to the Samaritans. Let me offer two lessons for us from this story. First, this is part of the continuing story of the large-heartedness of the Gospel. And second, the Holy Spirit spoken of in this story, is meant for you and me too, modern people that we are.

My first point: The preaching of the Gospel to the Samaritans is part of the Epiphany message of the large-heartedness of the Gospel. When the Lord says, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” (Lev. 19:18, 34) he means also the troublesome neighbor. That one, intractable as he or she is, falls under the protection of the divine command to love thy neighbor. And so it is that no one is to be excluded from the preaching of the Gospel. No one is to be considered unworthy of the good news of God’s steadfast love for humanity, for us, one by one.

In the eyes of someone in this world, each of us is somehow a Samaritan. We make other people uneasy. We have convictions, history, character, content, and these things might be out of step with the opinions of others. So, they might not want to make room for us in life.

But in the church, there is room for us. In the church, we can find a home. For the chief entrance requirement to be a Christian is simply that we are sinners. That’s the beginning point of life in Christ. As Saint Paul puts it:

This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. (I Timothy 1:15, KJV)

In the church, there should be no thundering rejection of others. There should be no calling forth of the fire of heaven to consume others.

So, if you and I are in church this morning, we *belong* here. Likewise, all the world is welcome in this place.

My second lesson concerns the Holy Spirit received by the Samaritans. This is the capstone of acceptance of the Samaritan mission. When the apostles Peter and John testified that the Holy Spirit had come upon the Samaritans, that sealed the deal: These Samaritan Christians were full-fledged Christians, for they had received the same Spirit that had come upon the apostles on that first Pentecost Sunday, and they had received the same Holy Spirit that had descended upon Jesus bodily in the form of a dove in this morning’s Gospel story.

And so it is: anyone who is baptized receives the Holy Spirit. Samaritan, Jew, or Gentile, saint or sinner, “red or yellow, black or white, they are precious in his sight,” and all receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And that in turn means that Christians are capable of some amazing things in this world.

A husband and a wife are in conflict, let us say. They know, their friends know it, and the children know it. They have separated and started divorce proceedings. But the amazing thing is that in Christ, they are free to call off this looming divorce. There are ways forward: There is Individual Confession and Forgiveness. There is even Corporate Confession and Forgiveness to signal to the world the turn toward reconciliation. There is the chance to practice courtesy again, to hold hands again, to rebuild a marriage that in the eyes of the world was lost. We are speaking of a miracle, but something Christians can do. If they failed to do it in the past, nonetheless this time, in Christ, they can do it.

Or a young man develops lung cancer. He and the doctors fight the good fight, but fail, and the young man is living out his final days in the hospice. In Christ, it is possible to live out those remaining days in hope. I am not speaking of that weariness with life that leads to surrender, but a more joyful yielding of life over to God, in whom there is resurrection and life everlasting. Confidence in Christ gives life a kind of spiritedness – indeed, the Holy Spirit.

Or a miserable sinner who has made a wreck of life draws closer to the Jesus who loves sinners and came to seek and to save those who are lost, with the rare sight on earth of a man changed for the good, a woman changed for the better.

Such are the things Peter and John might have seen among the Samaritan Christians: There are signs of Christ here. There is reconciliation, amendment of life, hope in otherwise hopeless situations.

Let the world, then, think of us as Samaritans. Let the high and mighty and virtuous ones of this

world think of us as sinners. It does not matter:  
Samaritans are welcome in the church. Sinners are  
welcome there too. In the church there is the daily  
garment of Baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In  
the Church there is hope, reconciliation,  
repentance, and amendment of life. And in the  
Church there is Jesus and his shepherding. To this  
Shepherd of the Samaritans and of all needy souls  
be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now  
and forever. Amen.