

Acts 8:4-25

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

⁹Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. ¹⁰All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." ¹¹And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. ¹²But 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.¹³ 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.

¹⁴Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit ¹⁶(for as yet the Spirit had not come^[c] upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). ¹⁷Then Peter and John^[d] laid their

hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹saying, "Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." ²⁰But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! ²¹You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. ²²Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness." ²⁴Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you^[e] have said may happen to me."

²⁵Now after Peter and John^[f] had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans.

Magic, Money and Mercy

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The second Sunday of January, the Sunday following Epiphany is designated on the church calendar as the “Baptism of the Lord” Sunday. So if one follows the lectionary, we read stories, like Melissa did, about how Jesus was baptized by his cousin John, the heavens were opened, the Spirit came upon him, and this signified the beginning of his ministry. But then, the other readings for the day are rounded out with mentions of passing through water, like in Isaiah 43 - our call to worship, or in picking and choosing other New Testament texts that mention baptism, like verses 14-17 of this passage I just read from Acts where Peter and John come to Samaria to confirm all these conversions that are happening thanks to Philip and his preaching and baptizing. The APOSTLES, the important guys from Jerusalem, are called in to come to lay hands on these new Christians and it is then that the Spirit comes upon them. Typically ONLY those few verses would be read, with no context to really let us know what ELSE was happening. So why did the Christian calendar makers cut out the rest of a perfectly good story?

Likely because parts of this story make us uncomfortable! It’s about conversion of the “wrong” kinds of people. It includes Simon, a magician who wants to buy spiritual powers with a bag of silver. And the apostles have harsh words for Simon about his wickedness when it seems like he was asking an innocent question. I think this story is a fascinating one, and I suspect it’s one you might not have heard or known unless you read your Bible often, really often, at least more than I do, because this story seemed new to me. The early church had already reached a time of persecution. This new group of Christians was particularly disruptive to the social order,

and both religious and political authorities were hoping to crush their enthusiasm, and squelch their cause. But as Acts reports, the early church kept on growing and growing in spite of men and women alleged to be Christians being hauled off to prison or worse. It was in this climate that people were being drawn toward this “Great God.” Philip, finding himself on the outskirts of town, in Samaria, a neighborhood not always so friendly to the Jews of Jerusalem, decided to preach the Messiah anyway. He told the good news. He cast out demons. He cured the sick and lame. His work inspired great joy in that city, and many were listening to him and wanting more of what he had to give.

One of those people fascinated by Philip’s repertoire was Simon, the local magician. He used to be the only show in town. Those who were now amazed by Philip were once amazed by his ability to pull rabbits out of hats. But now they wanted something more meaningful, more tangible in their own lives, something that didn’t require so much superstitious repetition and reliance on potions and incantations. Magic can only be as good as the magician, and once you know the tricks, it doesn’t really amaze so much anymore. Simon the magician was convinced that Philip had a deeper connection than he did to the great mystery of life, so he converted too, from magic to miracles.

Today, we wouldn’t think of that as a very far leap. What’s the difference between magic and miracles? Both are about believing in something that we cannot see or know or understand. We think of magic as a trick, a sleight of hand, literally being able to pull that disoriented rabbit out of a top hat. We now know that magicians are performers and magic is merely the illusion of stage and showmanship. And yet, the wizarding world of Harry Potter has drawn so many children and adults alike into a fantasy world torn between good and evil, where certain individuals possess supernatural powers that are readily available with a few years of school and

a trustworthy wand. Same goes true for Star Wars. The force awakens and movie-goers thrill to imagine the powers that are just beyond the grasp of our reason. We still love and are amazed by magic and magical interpretations of our world. The primitive impulse lies deep within us to believe that what we see isn't all that's really there.

Religion also fills this void for us, particularly the religion that identifies God as having agency to change real situations in our own world torn between the powers of good and evil, and vying between the light side and the dark. We want to believe in miracles. Some of us dare to believe in miracles. Miracles aren't assumed to be quite as *quid pro quo* as magic though. Miracles don't follow the same formula: "Do this spell – get this result." No, praying for a miracle doesn't necessarily mean that we're going to receive one. Even though Philip was amazing and healing many, many people, maybe there were those who still went home sick, or maybe in that crowd there were mentally disturbed individuals whose demons came back ten- or a hundred-fold. What did they think of Philip then?

We yearn to have faith, faith to trust in and know those things we cannot see. But we have an inherited legacy that makes such belief difficult. We are the children of the enlightenment. Our culture reminds us, often, that observable proof is the only trustworthy kind of knowledge. Ascribing power to magic is only imaginary, and we're not afraid to say that anymore, even though some of our best contemporary stories absolutely count on our love of what's magical. And miracles, we find them suspect, even if we believe they happened in another time and place. So to attribute any agency in the world to God's Spirit seems like something we wouldn't go around telling just anyone. I can tell you, without a doubt that I have experienced the very real presence of the living Spirit as both a comfort and a guide, but I'm going to be doubtful if someone tells me that God found them a great parking space last time

they went to the grocery store. It's hard to figure out how this Spirit-thing works. That's what makes that connection to the Spirit such a valuable commodity, one so precious that Simon in his awe and wonder offers to pay money, and lots of it, to be able to transfer such power and authority to new believers.

The fact that money plays a role in this story is what really makes me squirm. Who wouldn't pay for a cure for their loved one's cancer? Who wouldn't clear out their retirement account for an injured grandchild? There are those who would use such power to achieve fame or favor or to amass a huge audience of believers – with or without good intentions. Harnessing that elusive kind of power that we know exists but can't quite identify, that's gold. At least Simon thought it was worth a pretty substantial sum of silver. We understand Simon's desire fairly well. He wanted to be part of something special and important. And, rather than be the apostles' voice that shuts up that want fairly quickly, the church has often capitalized on the willingness of people to part with their money for spiritual gain. The accumulated wealth of certain churches throughout the ages is astonishing – from the gold and art of the Roman Catholic heyday, to today's super-pastors who can't live without their private jets.

The church has done its share of exactly what Simon was dismissed for wanting to do, collecting money for so called spiritual gifts or favors. So those lectionary elves who decide what's in or what's out for churchgoers to hear were probably told to leave that part out. But here in scripture, money gets talked about with some frequency and often with more passion and fervor than our typical hot-button issues today.

Does a bag of silver buy a closer connection to the Spirit? Of course we are inclined to say – no, of course not. But guess what the Session gets to do today? Work on the budget for

2016. Even for a church like this one where the budget is typically enough to cover the need, but not particularly extravagant in any way, how we choose to spend the church's money can be a source of disagreement. Fortunately here, the rules of engagement for dealing with such disagreements seem to be fair and enacted out of love. No power plays of "I'll take my money and go home if I don't get what I want." No stalling, no shouting, no sulking. Budget meetings are not terrifying – like they can be in other contexts.

Remember the recent story of the elderly lady who received a letter of dismissal from her congregation because she could no longer give? Imagine what it's like to be in a committee meeting that would choose to do that! Religion's relationship to money has never been pure. Seeing the Spirit as a commodity, as Simon did, is a concept that has not completely gone away. Many have wanted to buy their way to heaven, or finance a healing, or get that training that made one a perfect guru to thousands. We find this thinking apparent in so many sectors of our world. We want to buy things that aren't really for sale. Is our health truly a product that can be bought at the highest dollar? Most of the time it seems so, and it's the same with our spiritual well-being. It's packaged in the self-help section, sold to us through every fad imaginable so that we would have the "right" kind of life, the spiritually perfect kind of life.

As someone who receives a paycheck because of my knowledge and expertise about spiritual things, trust me, I'm at least as uncomfortable, probably more so than any of you when it comes to the harsh words the apostles Peter and John have for Simon following his request. They told him his heart wasn't right before God. They told him to take his silver and go perish with it. They said he was in the gall of bitterness and the chain of wickedness. But actually, I feel sorry for Simon. He already lost his career as a magician to follow Philip. He was amazed not only at Philip's ability to offer such a compassionate ministry to those in Samaria, he was blown

away by the spiritual energy surrounding Peter and John. He wanted what they had. Sadly, he thought that money could buy it.

When we get this wrong, and we probably will at some point in our lives, I hope that we will recognize it and pray for mercy just as Simon did. Jesus had more compassion, more power and authority than anyone before him or since, and he did not use it for his own personal gain. Remember that Satan promised him kingdoms, and power, and wealth, and fame, and he rejected them all. All those things we still value way too highly today. And yet, Jesus spoke for the poor and the outcast. The apostles preached wherever they were heard and the Spirit was received. And though they were not inclined to take bags of silver in exchange for spiritual favors, they did receive food, and shelter, and all the necessities of life to continue their work.

I'm not advocating that we choose to follow the monastic way and reject all connections to the money that we all use every day to survive. I don't think Peter and John were really doing that either. The apostles, Paul especially, thanked those donors who were generous in Spirit and compassionate toward those who had less. What is rejected by this story is the notion that Simon could get what the apostles had because he could pay for it. The Spirit cannot be bought. Spiritual gifts are not commodities. Anything that is a gift of the Spirit is free, it has to be. That means that healing, or hope, or generosity, or that knowledge of what is real beyond what we can see is not something that an individual can buy, it's not something the church can sell. The church is not in the business of selling tickets to heaven, or promising that we will know everything about God. At its best, the church is about connecting people with one another, and pointing toward the great mystery that is God, a mystery that is always free for us to discover. Amen.