

## **“Some Things Cannot Be Bought”**

By Dorothy Churn LaPenta, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

June 20, 2021, 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Based upon Psalm 9:1-10; Acts 8:9-24

“It’s a HOLY SPIRIT thing.” she said.

We waited to hear more. She taught languages in the public schools for 37 years, opening a new chapter for middle schoolers whose only language was English. She taught the basics: “My name is \_\_\_\_\_? How are you? I am fine. How are you? Today is Sunday, June 20, 2021,” and so many more conversational sentences and phrases. There was the parsing of verbs and learning whether nouns were masculine, feminine or neuter, sentence structure, reading and comprehension, thinking in a different language and cultural aspects of the people for whom this language was native. It was 37 years of hard work and dedication to her students and her subject.

After a few years in retirement, she was surprised when she was asked to be part of a group where bilingual Spanish-English skills would be necessary. She would be the one in this group with those skills only she wasn’t confident about having them. It would be different than teaching seventh graders a curriculum which had become so second nature.

The listening would need to be very concentrated and at the same she was listening, she would need to be thinking in her mind how to translate either from English to Spanish or Spanish to English. What are nuances being communicated? What is the best English or the Spanish word that conveys what someone is trying to say? And it’s not as if the group spoke slowly or distinctly or even in complete sentences at times. Sometimes two or more people would talk at once and she’d be expected to translate.

She made it look easy. We thought she could just do it without much effort. Until the day, she talked about it being a “Holy Spirit thing;” a power that brought her into a chapter that she had no intention of writing herself.

She agreed to become part of this group because she felt a nudge, placed in circumstances by something that seemed beyond her own will or decision. She didn’t feel as confident or as competent as she wished, but she knew she was to be in this group, in this role. She said the whole experience was spiritual for her. “It’s actually astounding to me,” she said, “that I am here doing what I never considered myself capable of and somehow at the same time growing closer to God and these people while doing it. Like, I said, “it’s a Holy Spirit thing.”

Maybe you have had similar experiences or maybe you’re too methodical too analytical, too practical, or too intelligent to think that something could be “a HOLY SPIRIT thing.”

I spoke in last week’s sermon that some scholars have suggested that The Acts of the Apostles should be called The Acts of the Holy Spirit. Beginning in the very first chapters with the Pentecost story, the theme in the Book of Acts is how the Holy Spirit is at work in forming these

early communities which will come to be known as Christ's church and how the Holy Spirit is the power behind all that the apostles are doing in the name of Jesus Christ.

It hasn't been a cake walk. The apostles have run into interesting characters and challenging situations. Today's story is no different.... Enter Simon, the magician.

Just prior to meeting Simon, we learn that Philip has left Jerusalem and is preaching in the city of Samaria, proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, and when the people heard the word and saw the signs and wonders there was great joy among them, and many were baptized.

Now, Samaria is Simon's territory. He has amazed the people with his magic to the point that, until Philip came along, their claim about Simon was "This man is the power of God called GREAT." Simon, the one who had amazed the people, became quite amazed with Philip and the power and influence Philip seemed to have over the people. Simon stayed close to Philip watching... and was even baptized.

When Peter and John got word about all that was happening in Samaria, they came to help Philip. They gathered the baptized, prayed with them, laid their hands upon them and a "Holy Spirit thing happened." We are not given language around exactly what took place.

But Simon saw this power and wanted it for himself. When you want something, one way of getting it is to buy it, right? How many times have you been on Amazon this week? Simon offers to pay for this power that he thinks Peter and John can give him. Peter's response is harsh! "What you are doing, Simon, is wicked!"

It's at this point in the story where we get some echoes of what the tempter wanted from Jesus in the wilderness right after Jesus' baptism. The tempter thought he could buy Jesus. Simon thought he could buy the Holy Spirit.

The text does say that Simon was baptized, and our reading ends with Simon asking for prayer. Having just meant the rabbi Gamaliel last week, we might place Simon in the same category, considering the possibility that Simon is sincere in his request for prayer. I guess he could be.

But the writer of this story is not asking us to consider Simon's sincerity. As far as this writer is concerned, Simon only wants the power of the Holy Spirit to add to his bag of tricks so that he can be powerful. Simon is not fixed on Jesus Christ, only the wonders and signs that are possible. Simon was not longing for a deeper relationship with Jesus. He was coveting what he thought the apostles could give him.

**This is a story about a conflict of powers.**

What rules over our hearts? What determines our actions and choices? To whom or to what do we give the power and the glory? Simon longed for the capacity to continue to amaze people for his own personal gain and recognition. There is a lot to consider in this story even beyond the motives of Simon the magician and I want to delve into these other themes.

**The first is the theme of the Holy Spirit's unpredictability.** We are in Samaria? Really? If we think back, we might remember hearing stories from the Gospels where the Jews of Jerusalem and the Samaritans were not exactly each other's favorite people. They shared a common heritage through Abraham, specifically Jacob. But the Samaritans did not have the same regard for the Jerusalem temple. The Samaritans claimed that they held strictly to the Torah, but the Jews of Jerusalem accused them of worshipping other gods and especially becoming involved in magical practices that Deuteronomy, one of the books of the Torah, specifically prohibits. Throughout all of Israel's history, it seemed impossible that any kind of fraternal relationship could happen between the Jerusalem Jews and the Samaritans.

Now, Jesus opened up this possibility with the story of the Good Samaritan and meeting the Samaritan woman by the well. But for the Jerusalem Jews who were the earliest apostles, the fact that they were now in Samaria connecting with these estranged siblings was in and of itself amazing, something they would have not predicted.

**The second theme is the apostles' relationship to the Holy Spirit.** Peter tells Simon that the power that owns Simon is the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness. He could hardly believe what Simon was assuming. "Do you think for a moment, Simon, that WE own the Holy Spirit, that we can snap our fingers and summon the Spirit on our command? Do you think that WE are the ones who can give it to you?" Was Simon comparing the Spirit to a genie in a bottle?

Our Book of Common worship in the Presbyterian Church has a liturgy for healing. Elizabeth has used this service, as have I. It's a beautiful and needed liturgy. It's a prayer service for healing and wholeness and it was a long time coming into our Reformed tradition because "healing service" connoted images of televangelists on our TV screens doing miraculous healings often followed by a phone number you could call to give money.

I am not discounting the possibility that God has given some the gift of healing as was given to the apostles. What I am discounting is that the power to do that comes from the person who has the power to guarantee a cure.

What we do in our healing liturgies are gestures of prayer, not gestures of our own power. We lay hands on people, we anoint with oil, not because our hands contain a magical power for healing, not because the oil itself has the power to take away a tumor or convert a heart rhythm. In faith, we pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to be at work in God's way, in God's time as we name the specific need and pray.

We call upon the Holy Spirit. It's not what we hold in our bags of tricks to pull out at our convenience. Simon had concluded that Peter and John had the Holy Spirit at their disposal.

That's what Simon wanted, not the relationship with God, but to reduce the Gospel as a commodity for his personal gain.

**You can't purchase what only God can give.**

Friends, you can't buy the Holy Spirit or summon it only as it's convenient for you. You can pray for the Holy Spirit to come. You know this! "We enter into the mystery of God, not to hold God in our pocket, but to allow God to hold us."

Friends, you can't buy hope. You know this. Soren Kierkegaard said that "Hope is a passion for what is possible." Not what is absolutely evident before our very eyes.

Friends, you can't buy love. You know this. Love comes as a grace. The best way to destroy love is to demand that someone prove it.

And Friends, you can't buy faith! You know this too. And because you can't buy faith, you can't buy certainty.... **and this might be a little harder for you to know and accept because we like certainty.**

The President of Princeton Seminary wrote an article entitled, "Having faith in God is better than being certain about God." He received backlash. "You are wrong, Dr. Barnes. I am CERTAIN of my faith." Craig Barnes said that he made the mistake of arguing his point and getting nowhere. But Dr. Barnes points to the truth that our confessions always begin with "We believe," not "We are absolutely certain...."

We yearn for certainty. We want guarantees. There's a security in it. When Thomas saw the resurrected Jesus, he said, "I am going to have to place my hands on your wounds before I can be certain that it's you." And out of the Enlightenment in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries came religious leaders whose theologies suddenly conscripted the Bible to be inerrant and infallible and exactly literal as written. There had to have certainty, but this is not the way it had always been. The scriptures were a living word surviving years of rabbinic midrash, exegesis, interpretation, re-interpretation and prayer for the Holy Spirit to continue to reveal what God wants us to hear in the scriptures.

We use the language of certainty such as "We are certain that neither life nor death can separate us from the love of God," or "We are certain that God holds the future." or "We are certain that Jesus rose from the dead." We yearn for certainty. When what we are actually saying is our statements of faith is "We believe...."

Dr. Barnes argues that we need to understand the difference between certainty and faith.

There are indeed times when certainty is called for. Barnes writes: "When I drive across a bridge, I want certainty that the engineer knew what she was doing and that she was an A plus student in physics and math. But I don't want an engineer in the pulpit on Sunday mornings, getting all mired in interpretive pretzels, trying beyond a doubt to prove God as if God were just a geometry problem and depended on me for proof. I need living water, the assurance that God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit is at work and often in the most surprising, astounding, and unpredictable ways. I need to hear a faith that can take me into holy realms and possibilities that certainty can never reach."

We enter the mystery of God, not to hold God in our pocket, but to allow God to hold us. I believe with all my heart that I will wake up tomorrow morning and God will love me. Am I certain of it? Well, you know what. With humility, I need to understand that it remains always heaven's choice. I can't buy it. I can't own it. I can't control it.

I can respond, not by bringing out my wallet or flaunting my importance or my status or my fame, but by bringing out my faithfulness and saying, "I love you too God. Come into my heart. Come into this world and bring on the Holy Spirit things." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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"We enter into the mystery of God, not to hold God in our pocket, but to allow God to hold us."  
Quote, Anonymous