

1-12-25 Sermon: “What Happened to the Holy Spirit?” Acts 8:4-8, 14-17

Today we celebrate Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Baptism is one of our two sacraments, one of the two sacred signs Jesus gave us to share the grace of God.

Our other sacrament is communion, and we’re more familiar with that one; we celebrate it once a month. But baptism is occasional; it’s not as regularly part of our weekly worship.

And this is why, every week, the kids and I come up and dip our hands in the font. We need to hear the waters, see the waters, remember the waters. And what is it we say when we come to the font? That’s right: “You are forgiven; we are forgiven.”

Forgiveness. That’s one aspect of Baptism – but it’s not all of it. Baptism is a multivalent sacrament, and there are other things the kids could say. They could dip their hands in the font and say, “You have died and risen with Jesus Christ.”

They could say, “These are the waters of new creation.”

Or: “This is the sign and seal of God’s covenant with humanity.”

They could say, “These are the waters of God’s womb, of rebirth.”

Or: “In these waters, we are bound together in one Christian family.”

They could say, “Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Which brings us to today’s reading from Acts. It’s a strange little story, one that I bet most of us haven’t heard before. A story where something, apparently, goes wonky in the process of baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit gets a little...delayed.

But to understand this story, we need to back up and get some context for what is going on.

The Book of Acts is actually part 2 of Luke’s gospel. Luke wrote the story of Jesus, and then the sequel – the story of the church.

Acts begins with Jesus ascending into heaven and commissioning his disciples to spread the good news. Then on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descends upon those disciples, and they begin to speak in many languages. The people of Jerusalem are amazed, the first converts are baptized, and they also receive the Holy Spirit.

The disciples continue, for a while, to preach, teach, heal, and baptize in Jerusalem. But a problem arises, because apparently, they are also running a daily distribution of food for orphans and widows – the original Shared Table. And, as the movement grows, some of those widows are being overlooked and neglected. So the disciples create a new position to oversee food distribution; they call them *deacons*. And they elect seven people to serve in this role.

Philip, the main character in today’s story, is one of those deacons. If you’ve heard of Philip before, it’s probably from the story where Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch. Y’all remember *that* sermon, right? The one where I had to apologize to all the men present for saying the word “eunuch” approximately 72 times.

This morning’s reading takes place right *before* that story. The religious authorities in Jerusalem have begun to persecute the early church. They arrest a man named Stephen, another one of the seven deacons, and stone him to death. So the early Christians scatter to the countryside of Judea and Samaria. And this is how we get to today’s story, with Deacon Philip preaching to and baptizing Samaritans.

The story of Philip and the Samaritans starts off much the same as all the other stories. Philip teaches them about Jesus, casts out demons and heals the sick. The people believe, and Philip baptizes them.

But then, as we heard, something strange happens. Peter and John get word of what's going on in Samaria, so they come from Jerusalem, lay hands upon these new believers, and *then* the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit.

Now. This is weird. Baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit go together. So...why the lag? Why did we have to bring in upper management? Did Philip get something wrong? Was the Holy Spirit on vacation? What *happened* to the Holy Spirit?

Biblical scholars have spilled a lot of ink over this question; they love to debate it! Does this text indicate that baptism and the gift of the Spirit are two separate dispensations of grace? Maybe baptism's the baseline, and the Holy Spirit is a special, second blessing, like the charismatics believe. Or maybe this is about the authority to baptize – Philip is a deacon, not an apostle – so maybe he didn't have the power to convey the Holy Spirit.

And I'm sure these are fascinating questions for *someone*, but I'm inclined to say, “Yippety-do, who cares?” Because I am convinced that the real crux of this story is that the people getting baptized are...Samaritans.

Samaritans. Today, when we hear that word, we think of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. But the reason that parable was so powerful in Jesus' time is that, according to the Jews, there's *no such thing* as a good Samaritan!

See, Jews and Samaritans were descended from the same people, but they lived on different sides of a racial and religious divide. Back in ancient Israel, when the Assyrian Empire conquered the Northern Kingdom, they deported many citizens and transported in people from foreign nations. Eventually all the various ethnic groups living in this occupied territory began to intermarry, and their descendants become the Samaritans.

The Jews of Israel considered they racially and religiously impure; they were mixed. They worshiped Israel's God, but they had some...foreign practices. And as the generations went on, an enmity developed between these two peoples.

Jews and Samaritans said nasty things about each other! In Second Kings, the Jews accuse the Samaritans of sacrificing children to their gods and claim that God sends lions to destroy them. First-century Jewish scholar Josephus describes Samaritans as double-crossers; he says they “alter their attitude according to their circumstances. When they see Jews prospering, they call them kinsmen. But when they see Jews in trouble, they say they have nothing whatsoever in common. They declare them to be aliens of another race.”¹ *[Pause]*

Aliens of another race. Hmm. This sounds familiar...doesn't it? Truly, this human practice of “othering” is a tale as old as time. And – spoiler alert – any time we start referring to other people as “aliens,” “enemies,” or “sub-human” we make ourselves into the bad guys, right? As Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber so aptly puts it, “Every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it.”²

Friends, I can't help but wonder, when I hear this story from Scripture, if *this* is why Peter and John had to come from Jerusalem to Samaria.

I wonder if the Holy Spirit had something to teach to *both* these groups of people – Samaritans *and* Jews – something important about the sacrament of baptism. I wonder if she refused to come down and bestow her blessing until Jews and Samaritans were meeting face-to-face. Until they were looking into each other's eyes and breaking bread together.

I wonder if, even more than the Samaritans, it was Peter and John who needed to be converted by the Holy Spirit. So that they could go home to Jerusalem and tell the other apostles, “Listen, these Samaritans that we have called enemies – they are our brothers and sisters and siblings. They have believed the same gospel that we have, confessed the same faith, received

the same baptism; they are united to us in the same Holy Spirit. We are *one* church. One people. Children of one God. So we best start living like it.”

Which brings us back to our children, dipping their hands in the waters of baptism. What do we say when we come to the font?

They could say, “You are forgiven...and so are your enemies.”

They could say, “In these waters we are bound as one family, with people we know and people we don’t know. People we like...and people we don’t.”

They could say, with the Apostle Paul, “There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. Black nor white, gay nor straight, citizen nor immigrant, Republican nor Democrat. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Friends, dipping our hands in the waters of baptism is a *radical*, world-changing thing to do. *Especially* at this time in the life of our nation. In these waters, the Holy Spirit unites us all and says, “Love your neighbors. No exceptions.”

May we, like that Good Samaritan in the parable, go and do likewise.

¹ William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, James L. Mays, Patrick D. Miller, and Paul J. Achtemeier, eds., (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988) p. 68.

² Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*, (New York: Jericho Books, 2013).