

**“The Kingdom and the Power”**

for Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

Acts 8:9-24

15 June 2025, Trinity Sunday

*We continue our sermon series in Acts as the Pentecostal Spirit of God, animated on the tongues of the Apostles’ makes its way past Jerusalem and into foreign territory. Philip has been working signs and wonders in Samaria, exorcising demons and healing members of the community. Verse eight of chapter eight tells us that “there was great joy” in Samaria.*

*Continue to listen for the word in chapter eight, verses nine-24.*

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

<sup>14</sup> Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. <sup>15</sup> The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit <sup>16</sup> (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). <sup>17</sup> Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup> Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, <sup>19</sup> saying, “Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” <sup>20</sup> But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God’s gift with money! <sup>21</sup> You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. <sup>22</sup> Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. <sup>23</sup> For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness.” <sup>24</sup> Simon answered, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me.”

*This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.***

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Anyone who has been in the South long enough knows the particular way we project niceties with a cutting edge. The most famous is, of course, “Bless your heart,” that old mark of sympathy that, on the right lips, drips with condescension. I heard it quite a lot

my first semester in college when my grades and an accompanying letter from the dean finally made their way to my family's mailbox. *Bless your heart* was a harbinger of what was to come.

*Bless your heart* sounds wrong on my lips. I prefer a simple, honey-filled threat that, surprisingly, pops up in our text: *get your heart right*. That's the one I repeat most frequently these days, whether watching Carolina football, driving down Augusta Rd., or requesting that the trash get taken out...*get your heart right*.

I assumed that "get your heart right" originated with Lud Weaver, who I've heard use it more than anyone else, so you will understand my delight when, while rereading Acts 8, the story of the Christian magician Simon, I heard it again, this time on the lips of the Apostle Peter.

Peter confronts Simon, a man possessed of great earthly power — perhaps the first celebrity convert in the church — with a blistering indictment after Simon asks to buy a share of God's power:

*get your heart right*, he tells the magician.

"Repent," Peter continues, claiming that Simon is experiencing the "the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness."

The rebuke is surprising. Simon's question, though uncouth, is not unexpected. Simon had cash and the apostles had something he wanted, surely we can relate to that?!

Because of Peter's swift rebuke, Simon has, for much of history, been characterized as a villain. But when I read his story I feel a swell of sympathy. Simon's story is familiar, which makes it deeply relevant when we consider what the conflicts in Acts can teach us about our own warring church today.

Acts 8 underscores two truths: first: *being a Christian does not mean we control God*, and second: *more often than not we are so caught up in our own narratives that we forget how the Spirit is asking us to use the particular power God has granted us*.

Simon the magician has wooed a community, and his fame has spread throughout Samaria. In verse 10 those gathered go as far as to name him *the great god*. In Simon the Samaritans see *power*. And they equate that force with the divine.

Right up until Philip, fleeing persecution in Jerusalem and freshly filled with the Pentecostal Spirit of God, shows up.

Phillip gets up to the work of the Holy Spirit, and the magician, *amazed*, affixes himself to the apostle. Whatever it was that caught Simon's eye was life-giving, unlike any magic he knew. A community was being made through the apostle and his co-laborers. There was something different about Phillip's power.

Now I just told y'all that Simon's story reminds me two things, two things that I think we will do well to keep in mind. The first may seem unrelated to the story, but I promise there is a connection: *being a Christian does not mean we can control God*,

Another way to think about that is that God is free. We cannot purchase God, as if divinity is an object at our disposal or a symbol wielded to gain acclaim. We can't command God to do *our* will. That's what we learn in Exodus 33, when, before showing Moses his hind, God tells the prophet that he will be gracious unto those he will be gracious, and show his face to those he chooses. Neither Moses nor Simon can force God's hand. Simon fundamentally misreads the Spirit when he sees the wonders being wrought through the apostle and assumes that Phillip is controlling divine power when in truth God is using Phillip to transform Samaria.

God is free. But God's freedom is unlike any we know. We are not talking about a far-removed deity who is disinterested in the affairs of humanity, a rugged individual huddled away in heaven...our God is a meddling, judging, creating God. Our God is a God who chose for strength to be revealed in the weakness of flesh: the birth of a child and death by a cross. Our God is the God of the road who freely heals, who interprets Scripture to ensure that all are welcome at the table, who, having been resurrected from the darkest tomb, rises to life breathing forgiveness. Our God supplies Moses' need in the wilderness, even as he calls him deeper into the desert. Our God is free and mighty, but that freedom is peculiar.

God's freedom, God's power is not sheer will or strength, whatever it was that the Samaritans equated with Simon's shows. God's power is defined by God, and God's freedom is *always* in service to those whom God created, God's power in service to life. Time and again God turns toward the world to redeem, to create, to judge, to console. God, who has no need of humanity, nonetheless chooses in love to form a people. *That* is divine power and divine freedom.

And that power is the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, which means that it's not only God's or Phillip's. It's ours too. The God whose freedom we mimic calls us to exercise our power in service to the other: the poor, the imprisoned, the refugee, the stranger in our land, the grieving, the infirm.

Simon deeply misunderstands the type of power the apostles wield. Consider the contrast between the magician and the apostle. Simon can't quite shake his past. His life before Christ depended on wonderworking, on bringing in money in trade for his service. For Simon, freedom and power are equated with his capacity to earn what he wants, when he wants, where he wants. His power serves his ends. Simon wants the Spirit at his disposal. It is a profoundly human instinct.

But Phillip is not following his own desires, a point lost on self-serving Simon, he is chasing the Spirit. Because he serves the God who serves creation, Phillip is attuned to the needs of the world. He does not collect power so that *he* can thrive, Phillip allows himself to be used by the Spirit so that God's reconciling work can be done.

The fact that Phillip is even *in* Samaria is a testament to his sacrifice. Jews in Jerusalem and Jews in Samaria were ancient enemies. Their shared traditions only deepened their disdain. Before Jesus ascended he told the disciples that the Spirit would take them as far as Samaria and the ends of the world. Jesus' final earthly word was a commissioning to enemy territory, and I can guarantee you that Phillip had no interest in being the one to go.

But he went. *Despite himself.*  
And the Spirit used him.

Phillip did not go to the seat of power,  
or jockey for favor at the local courts,  
he journeyed to places of deep grief,  
to strangers who needed healing,  
to the isolated and afraid.

The very same Spirit who hovered over the waters at creation,  
and formed a people at Pentecost  
used Phillip and built something new in Samaria,  
a people, freely serving God and one another.  
A community connected across nations, boundaries, ethnicities, and languages.

Of course Simon wanted some of *that* power. But Simon forgot that he couldn't purchase God. Simon forgot that God is not an object for self-advancement.

Simon heard the story but his heart wasn't right.

He wanted power,

but not the power of the God who dined with sinners and worked in tombs.

He wanted freedom,

but not the freedom of God who poured himself out,  
emptying himself for the sake of the other.

He wanted the Spirit,

but not the Spirit of new community,

the *hoi polloi*, the foreigners, and the myriad others,

who since the beginning have marked the presence of God.

He knew the Story. He believed. But his heart was a beat behind.

The Church in our culture is at a critical juncture. We spin tales of persecution and oppression while we store up power and spend our time arguing about what belongs in schools and libraries and on courthouse steps. The early Church in Jerusalem similarly found herself at a turning point. Pursued by Rome and the religious elite, the church made its way forward not by projecting strength but by building community.

The first church got to work, spent all its resources gathering folks together and ensuring that concrete needs were being met. Believers were appointed to go out into the streets and bring people in, to serve the marginalized and the wealthy alike — not in order to line their own pockets, but to advance God's Kingdom. The church on the run was *doing the work*,  
which is what I mean by the second thing: *more often than not we are so caught up in our own narratives that we forget how the Spirit is asking us to use our power in service to the Kingdom.*

Simon's heart wasn't right. He may have had the right knowledge but he didn't yet understand the truth. For him God was a means of self-actualization.

We do our work in Simon's world, a world suffused with Christian rhetoric, a culture rich with debates about the order of divine and earthly love, and the extent of our capacity for mercy, but one that rarely *follows* God.

Bonhoeffer called it cheap grace. Kierkegaard called it Christendom without Christ. Acts gives us supplemental language: a church that knows, but hasn't yet gotten its heart right. The word without Spirit-infused discipleship.

It doesn't take much digging to see folks who follow Christ exploiting the Story for their gain, promising spiritual renewal in exchange for a few dollars, claiming that the only way to save Christianity is to throw your life into a political cause.

Or perhaps more familiar to us is the equally devastating intellectualization of faith at the cost of lived discipleship, the capacity to believe all the right things while still pursuing individual ends. Asking for mercy without demanding justice, praying for forgiveness without truly examining our failures. Praising God for mercy with fists clinched tightly in judgment.

Simon's story is a warning to we who want the benefits without the work, those of us who want the Spirit without the sacrifice.

If we believe that the living Spirit is at work in our lives, then our lives ought to look different, marked by a freedom that prioritizes the other, and power that pours itself out in service to enemies, friends, neighbors, and the earth God so lovingly spoke into being.

Now I'm aware that this may sound abstract,  
like a bit of theological mundanity, but I will tell you:  
time and again I have seen the power of the Spirit in this congregation.

This week our community faced unimaginable tragedy,  
the sudden loss of a child.  
And though the hands of the doctors, nurses,  
and indeed this congregation, could not return life from the tomb,  
you could, and did, *even amidst your own mourning*,  
tend to a family in unimaginable darkness,  
feed them, bear witness to their grief, pray for them, and sit with them.

That is the power of the Spirit that Simon so misread,  
a power that casts aside ideological divides and personal advancement  
to accompany,  
creating a community where, if left alone,

there would be only isolation and bottomless darkness.  
Bearing witness to a way forward, believing for one another,  
when belief cannot be found.

I've seen the Spirit of freedom and self-giving power  
at work in the last two weeks,  
when adults have taken a week off of work, a week of foregone earnings,  
to accompany youth on life-transforming trips,  
and at VBS,  
to pray with them, work with them, and hear their stories,  
living into the baptismal vows promised long ago.

The Pentecostal Spirit of newness blazes among us,  
a flaming light in darkness, something no magic can replicate,  
But it is not in might and wonder, or a parroting parade of strength,  
it is acts of mercy and love,  
done on behalf one one another,  
that chart a path, led by the Spirit,  
for whatever comes next.

That is the power, the freedom of divine.  
And it is ours — when we allow ourselves to be swept up in the story of God.

Wherever we turn toward one another,  
ensure that the Story is proclaimed *and lived*,  
when we point to the flickering light,  
that is where we join the Spirit,  
that is where we are truly the Pentecostal church,  
and in that space God works through us,  
despite and in celebration of our differences,  
to create newness,  
and bring about the Kingdom.

We don't know how Simon's story ends.  
But we do know that the God who called him to get his heart right,  
will not cease to work in our communities and our lives,  
until finally,  
with and for one another,

each of us lives into divine freedom,  
and works with divine power,  
to welcome, heal, and bear witness,  
to the searing,  
comforting,  
challenge  
of the heart-ordering Gospel of God.

The question of Pentecost rings: are you willing to go to places and people you would otherwise never know, to care for strangers and foreigners and enemies, to proclaim the good news, to do the good work, and to participate in the healing Spirit of God? Or is this all for naught and personal gain? The power of Simon and the power of Phillip beckon. Which will you choose?