

# Jesus First

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Acts 8

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In chapter 8 of Acts we meet two men in the land of Samaria, that place where people live with intermixed marriages: where a Jew no longer comes from pure blood. Long before this scripture was written, when those in Samaria were conquered and sent out of their land, the Samaritans chose to intermarry into the culture into which they had been sent. They made vows with those who worshipped gods foreign to them. When they returned to the land, they returned with the “unclean”. So the Jews of Jerusalem who didn’t, for the most part, intermarry, looked down upon those of Samaria--which is precisely why Jesus spoke of the Good Samaritan in his teachings. You might recall that the Good Samaritan is the one who stopped for the man who had been hurt on the side of road while the Jewish leaders walked by, crossing the street to avoid any unpleasant encounter. The story of the Good Samaritan is found in Luke. Acts is Luke’s sequel. So take note of Luke’s style. In the story of the Good Samaritan, there are two types: the Pharisee and the Samaritan. And the parable makes very clear who is the goat and who is the hero. So, too, with Simon the Great and the Ethiopian Eunuch.

First, Simon the Great: Read Acts 8: 9 9 – 24

We first encounter Simon the Great as a magician who can capture everyone’s attention. Take a moment to imagine him. Perhaps you see a man with a booming voice and a slight of hand, a real crowd pleaser. Perhaps you see someone with great confidence, one who easily convinces others of his gifts. Perhaps you see someone who could sell you anything. Perhaps you see someone you know.

Eugene Petersen in the Message interprets the Greek in this way: “Previous to Philip’s arrival, a certain Simon had practiced magic in the city, posing as a famous man and dazzling all the Samaritans with his wizardry. He had them all, from little children to old men, eating out of his hand. They all thought he had supernatural powers, and called him “the Great Wizard.” He had been around a long time and everyone was more or less in awe of him.” Clearly this is a man with gifts.

However, his gifts are no match for the Holy Spirit. For Philip arrives on the scene speaking about Jesus, curing the sick, and bringing into the city great joy. And the Samaritans believed. And the Samaritans were baptized. And even Simon believed. And Simon was baptized.

And Simon “stayed constantly with Philip” and he was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place. In Petersen’s version, Simon was like Philip’s shadow, so fascinated with all the God-signs and miracles that he wouldn’t leave Philip’s side.

Petersen marks for us what will be Simon’s downfall. Simon attends to signs and miracles as if wonders, and not Jesus, were the true goal of belief. When Peter and John come into the city, they pray for the Holy Spirit to enter in. They lay hands on the people and the people are filled with the Holy Spirit. And, Simon, asks...for the power to confer the Holy Spirit upon others.

“Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

Give me this power.

As a little girl I’d pray with my fingers crossed behind my back for God to make it possible for a friend to stay the night. As a young adult at my first teaching job, I’d pray that the junior highers in the classroom would calm down and make it possible for me to teach. Even today, I catch myself praying for results...how great it would be for You O God, I argue, if you’d make this or that happen.

Oh, there have been miracles along the way, but often they are not what I initially think I should be praying for. Many of you know how God changes your prayers once you begin. If your prayers are unchanging, it means you aren’t listening.

And the most consistent miracle for me is how real, how close, is Jesus when I open myself or another to his tender care. While, sometimes my will cries out for a better resolution, most often I find that with Jesus, prayer is enough; doors unseen open; and there is peace.

There are people in our land who, like Simon, can perform great feats. There are people in our land who claim to have power. There are people in our land, in our church, who have great gifts, tremendous gifts. You are able to call people to attend to your words. You are amazing.

But let us all be warned: our hearts are not so different from Simon the Great. It is easy to attach ourselves, even our faith, to the result we most desire, to the power to make real what another most desires.

Peter and John refuse Simon for they know well they are

not in the power broker business. Their message begins and ends with Jesus. When the day of Pentecost came, their hearts had been opened by their love of Jesus, so they were able to receive the Holy Spirit. On that day, those who were not yet open to Jesus were confused. They thought Peter and John and the disciples were filled with new wine. Then Peter began to speak about Jesus. To those gathered, he said "be baptized," receive the good news, receive Jesus.

It is Jesus, our love of Jesus, which opens the door to the Holy Spirit. Jesus comes first.

In a moment of synchronicity--or perhaps it is God wanting us pastors to speak loudly the same message this Fall--Pastor Chip found an apt quotation for my sermon this week in his evotional. Myron Augsburg, former president of Eastern Mennonite Seminary, writes:

"I believe in justice. But I am not a preacher of the gospel of justice, but the Gospel of Christ who calls us to justice. I believe in love. But I am not a preacher of the gospel of love, but the Gospel of Christ which calls us to love. I am committed to peace. But I am not a preacher of the gospel of peace, but the Gospel of Christ which calls us to peace. .... Let us beware of the ultimate plagiarism of borrowing some great concepts from Jesus, then running off proclaiming these concepts and not sharing the Christ [who] empowers these concepts." (attributed to Myron Augsburg, former President of Eastern Mennonite Seminary, 1983)

Even as his words ring true, I feel the arguments bubbling up --can't we plug into the Holy Spirit, or into justice, love, and peace through other means than Jesus? Part of me has been trained to say "yes," to allow you your way. Many in the world choose another way. But I'm not preaching to them. Here, in Christ's church, we know from experience, prayer, and our holy Bible, that we lose our first love if we seek these goals without Jesus. If we seek first the results--justice, peace, even love rather than Christ--we lose the one who loves us, who walks with us, who heals us, who brings us joy. Without Jesus, as it was for Simon, our lives can easily become centered on power. Without Jesus, our lives can become centered on results. Without Jesus, we can beat ourselves up for not attaining financial goals, not being as fit as we'd like, not giving enough to our community, our work, or our family.

My friends, Jesus is the greatest loser ever. He didn't become a millionaire when he went in to speak to Pilate. He wasn't popular the day he faced the enraged crowd. He sure wasn't a family man. It is his wounds we recall rather than his beauty, his loss rather than his success.

Simon got it wrong. Sometimes we get it wrong. As the Pharisees avoided the bloodied man on the street, we seek to avoid the one on the cross.

When Peter and John confront Simon, they say your heart is not right before God. They even go so far as to curse saying, "may your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money!." They command him to repent, to turn, to seek forgiveness.

When Peter and John confront Simon, they also confront us.

Their reaction to Simon is strong. Simon answers with a request for prayer. I like to believe that not all is lost for him, because I'm so much like him. Peter and John--perhaps they honored his final request and prayed for him, and there was still more to come. Yet, Simon's prayer request underscores his lack of his relationship with our Lord. "Pray for me," he says to Peter and John, "Pray for me to the Lord that nothing of what you have said may happen to me."

Hear this--without Jesus, God is often twisted into a God of vengeance, one who is cause for fear. Simon is a boy hiding from his punishing father, hoping to not get into trouble.

We've had the goat and now we get the example: here is the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch [Kimberly comes and reads part 2]

Certainly the Ethiopian comes from the furthest reaches of Judaism. He is a man of position. He is a man of a different sexuality than most. He is an educated man, an intelligent man, and one serious enough about his search for God that he is reading the Hebrew text on his own. He sits in a chariot, on his way home, reading the book of Isaiah aloud.

He reads,

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,

And like a lamb silent before its shearer,

So he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.

This is a hard scripture. It comes from a set of scriptures found in Isaiah that refer to the suffering servant, the one who suffers beyond what is just for the sake of the people to come. Jewish interpretation connects the suffering servant to the people of Israel--those who were defeated in battle and sent away from their homeland. But that

interpretation is not even considered as the Ethiopian asks Philip "is [the scripture] about the prophet himself, or another?"

Linger a moment on that question and what it tells us of the unnamed Ethiopian Eunuch. Is the scripture about the prophet himself, or another? In the question is a note of concern, the beginning of empathy. Who is this one who, like a sheep, was led to slaughter? Who is this one who did not open his mouth? Who is this one for whom justice was denied, this one whose life has been taken away from the earth?

Compare his question to Simon's demand for the Holy Spirit.

Simon is determined, the Ethiopian is curious; Simon assumes he has a right to lead, the Ethiopian assumes he has a lot to learn; Simon issues a demand, the Eunuch invites Philip to sit with him.

It has been said that the Ethiopian Eunuch understood this particular scripture more deeply than most as it may have reflected his experience of humiliation...of being kept apart from the Jewish community due to his castration, due to his appearance, due to his position. The text may have been deeply resonate with him.

Was he living in the knowledge that position and chariots were not enough?

Did he come to Jerusalem seeking what only God can provide and leave still wondering what that was?

Did he linger in that text looking for one who understood his own pain?

We know he had free will. He could have turned the page, turned away from the suffering, and instead asked Philip to explain another scripture. He could have pretended all was well. He could have said to Philip, "oh, yea, I understand what I'm reading." He could have acted, like we often do, like he required no help, no guide, no new breakthrough...that he had all he needed. He could have smiled politely to the man trying to get him to sample his wares as he went his own way.

Instead, he invites Philip to sit with him. As he feels the other man come close, he asks with curious compassion, who is it that went through this ordeal? Is it Isaiah? Or is it another?

Philip tells him the story of Jesus and before we know it the Eunuch is jumping joyfully into the water to be baptized. While the text doesn't ascribe to the Ethiopian Eunuch Holy Spirit power, somehow it is enough. Philip, having done his job, disappears.

The Ethiopian dares to play the student, to enter into

scripture with his own questions that resonate with his life.

How open he is!

Oh, I know you've heard the gospel. You've heard about Jesus. You have heard that he went to the cross because of human sinfulness. You have heard that he died because sin is deadly. You heard that, after 3 days, Jesus was resurrected. He revealed himself to his disciples, his body a living proclamation that sin and death are not the end. God has the last word; God always has the last word, and it is good.

And so the Ethiopian Eunuch jumps into the water...to be with Jesus. What was lost, was found.

Jesus first!

With Jesus, justice;

with Jesus, peace;

with Jesus, love;

with Jesus, joy,

with Jesus, you are found.