

Sermons from Park Hill: January 13, 2008

Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado

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Acts 8: 4-17
“Living Baptized”

What gets you excited? What changes you?

I thought of that contrast when comparing the experience of the people in Samaria with Simon the magician and Philip the Evangelist. What were their goals? Simon was there to provide some good entertainment and Philip was there to offer great news. Simon wants them to open their pockets to *get* their change and Philip wants to open their hearts so they could *be* changed. Simon wants to get you excited so you can *forget* your problems and Philip wants you to be changed to *revolutionize* your problems. It's the difference between being amazed and being baptized.

Let's first look at Simon, starting with verse 9:
"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." Simon was an entertainer and he thought well of himself, and tried to get others to think he was great too. And it seemed to work.

Verse 10 reads, *"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.'" The people listened eagerly. Who doesn't want to be entertained? They were excited by his talents and skills – and seriously misguided about God.*

In verse 11 it repeats, *"And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic."* In three verses about Simon we are told twice how the people were amazed by him and how eager they were to be entertained.

Movies and musicals – like the Music Man – are full of characters who ride the train into a small town and dazzle the people into giving them money and fame and then rob the unsuspecting crowd of their trust. It doesn't say explicitly that Simon tried to get their money, but we do know money *was* important to him. In the verses that follow today's reading, Simon even tries to buy some Spirit power.

Look at verses 18 and 19. Even though Simon had just been baptized, he knew a good show when he saw it. It reads, *"Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, 'Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.'" He still wanted to be the center of attention. He saw a new way to get people to be amazed by him. Instead of just being an entertainer with magical powers, however, he*

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saw way to be an entertainer, but with spiritual powers.

Ultimately, Simon could amaze people for a while; Philip baptized them for life. It's the difference between a temporary *fixation* and a permanent *relation*.

Who is Philip? Remember the people were *amazed* by Simon, but according to verse 12, they actually *believed* Philip. It reads, "*And 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. Even Simon himself believed.*" But as the later verses make us question, was it just so he could buy the power? Was he amazed by it because it was *exciting* or because he saw the power of God *changing* lives?

What excites you? What changes you?

The text here doesn't tell us anything about Philip because it's not about him. He points beyond himself to the good news. But we do know that he was one of the 7 commissioned by Jerusalem to care for the needs of the growing church. He is not the apostle Philip who followed Jesus; he is Philip the evangelist. He's also the one that famously baptized the Ethiopian eunuch who was riding by in a chariot.

Philip was a key figure in the church who made it clear that the good news of Jesus Christ was inclusive – not just for the Jewish Christians but their despised Samaritan neighbors, too. Not

surprisingly, this wasn't welcomed by everyone. Let's not gloss over that point. In fact, the purpose for the verses at the end our passage for today about baptism by water and by the Holy Spirit is to make it clear that it was the *same* baptism for Jews and Samaritans. At that point in the development of the early church, this was an important, and controversial, distinction that we might not fully appreciate.

Further, to also rectify the social injustice of inequality, by their baptism, it's clear that the good news was not just for men but also for women, who also served as leaders in the church. Later, by his actions with the Ethiopian eunuch, it's clear that the good news was not just for those whose bodies were pure and perfect – a requirement in the Holiness codes – but also the eunuch whose "manliness" had been removed, a man of an alternative sexuality – someone outside the clear-cut purity codes established in Leviticus – *and* of African descent. Clearly, inclusiveness was to be a hallmark of the early church. It's the kind of good news that the Samaritans not only eagerly listened to but also believed. They were through with being just entertained; they were ready to be changed.

Now, what *is* that change? Change not for change's sake but the kind of change that transformed the *Samaritans* and transforms *us* into faithful, life-long, stick-to-it disciples. What does the good news mean for how we live? I have 7 ideas taken from a prayer for the reaffirmation of our baptism. The change means, in all things, *this* is how we live a transformed life. This is how we *live* baptized. For some, this is a *new* change; for others this is a change to *renew* our commitment to our baptism. It's all quite exciting, but a different kind – exciting not

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for its amazing entertainment value, but its power to truly change us.

Here are goals for living baptized:

Love for others;

Joy in serving God;

Peace in disagreement;

Patience in suffering;

Kindness toward all people;

Goodness in the face of opposition;

Self-control in all things

1- Love for others

Love is exciting, life-changing. But it can also be the wrong kind of exciting. Some people are addicted to the high of *falling* in love but can't stick around when it requires *living* with love. God's love is exciting, that is, until for some people it grows old. When we don't *do* anything with God's love, it becomes boring. But we have to realize that love without any expectations grows stale and boring. If God's love is boring to you, for example, it means you heard a bunch of people asking for prayers earlier but didn't listen to God answering. Are we seeking amazing entertainment value from God's love or its exciting power to change us?

2- Joy in serving God

Joy is exciting. Who doesn't enjoy joy? Many of us are eager for joy in our lives and yet we'll look for recipes for the joy of cooking, the joy of sex, the joy of anything someone can sell to us

promising some illusive benefit before examining the recipe for joy found in the gospels: blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who give, blessed are the humble... Are we seeking to be entertained or a power that will change us?

3- Peace in disagreement

Peace is exciting. Well, maybe not exciting, but peace is great, especially the peace that comes when we have agreed to disagree agreeably, or when we have resolved a conflict without destroying the other party. It says a lot about love for others when we not only survive our disagreements but actually discover new levels of respect for one another. Conflict is often more entertaining – just watch a little reality TV – but what a waste of energy when something else could bring positive light while people suffer in darkness. Entertainment from never-ending conflict? Power from growing respect?

4- Patience in suffering

Patience is exciting. Maybe my line about "exciting" isn't working anymore... However, if there was ever an amazing spiritual value that changes us, it is patience. It is one of the most counter-cultural things the spiritual people of America can do. There is nothing we don't want fixed immediately. Think of it: We want an immediate fix to our relationships, our health, our finances, our children... And if we can't fix it, we'd like a way to cover it up. A good magic show will help us forget our problems. The deeper spiritual truth however – the thing which will most definitely change us – is that when we live with patience through our suffering, we discover a totally different strength. It's revolutionary. Strength we didn't think we were capable of. Are you ready for a life-changing,

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mind-blowing, heart-racing, problem-fixing radical change! It comes most powerfully with patience. Entertainment is instant gratification; baptism is for life.

5- Kindness toward all people

Kindness is exciting. Should I just give up on this "exciting" thing? But, is being "punk'd" on MTV more exciting? Could Ashton Kutcher achieve the same fame by treating his celebrity friends with kindness? It doesn't matter. We're not seeking to be entertained, right? Let me just say it and move on: kindness toward all people is the expectation of baptism. Not kindness to your friends and family. Kindness toward the person who annoys you, who pushes your buttons, who makes you want to scream at them...kindness toward *all* people. Try that and you will definitely be amazed – and changed.

6- Goodness in the face of opposition

Now, goodness is exciting. Yes. Think of the little underdog small-town high school basketball team that wins the state championship in the last few seconds of the game, when goodness has triumphed over the evil big city team with all their money and tall players. Well, it's a good movie anyway. But this one reminds us that it's a spiritual value to treat an enemy better than you treat a friend. Think about that for our country.

7- Self-control in all things

Self-control is exciting. (I got exciting into my whole list!) Yes, it is exciting when you overcome your own oppressions, the simple reality that – for people in recovery programs –

every day without a drink, or a pill, or a smoke, or a Krispy Kreme – whatever the addiction (a carmel Macchiato) – is a wonderful day. Every day without an argument, or a word of gossip, or a complaint about the unfairness of it all is a day of great achievement. A day like that changes you. Self-control one day at a time, when you look back, is exciting; when you realize you *have* changed.

So if you'd prefer a life where nothing is expected of you but that you have a good time, where you can spend your money on anything you want, where the feelings of others are of no concern to you, where consequences don't matter ...if you'd prefer a life where you are the center of attention, go ahead.

But if, and frankly when, you get tired of those shallow promises, then seek the transformation of *living* baptized. Embrace this commitment again. Let the tough choices change you. The fast and easy ones won't. It's the difference between amazing entertainment that excites you to help you *forget* your problems vs. living baptized every day to *revolutionize* your problems. For me, it's not even so much that it's important to *be* baptized. Who would like to *live* baptized? We can all do that.

The Samaritans were finally through with being just entertained; they were ready to be changed. Are you? After all these years, are you still committed?