

Cindy Voth
Waterford Mennonite Church
May 14, 2017
Acts 8:1b-25: Simon the Sorcerer

Here in the post Easter season we are spending the month of May looking at different characters in the book of Acts who proclaim the resurrection. In the season of Lent we looked once again at the life and teachings of Jesus that led up to the crucifixion. On Easter we had a glorious celebration as we worshiped the one that was raised from the dead! We resurrected our alleluias and proclaimed God's victory over Satan and death. Now during May we wade once again into the book of Acts as we encounter the early church. This book is filled with stories of the followers of Jesus as they strive to make sense of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. They have heard these words of commissioning to be witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts tells the ways they live into that calling.

Last week Pastor Katie shared the story of Eutychus, one I bet you have probably never heard a sermon about before. Eutychus, the dear brother who fell asleep by an open window while Paul preached on and on and on and on. In her sermon Katie pointed out the ways the early church cared for each other, and the dangers of others finding themselves on the fringes. This danger persists even today here at Waterford. How do we care for those we notice are in danger falling asleep by the open window, and how may we reach out if we find that we are the ones who are falling asleep?

Now this morning we could look at some of the well-known, well-loved characters in the book of Acts. Perhaps stories like Lydia, Timothy, Silas, Priscilla. Instead as we discerning which characters to highlight this month, I simply sat down with my Bible and began reading in chapter one. I was looking for something that grabbed my attention and captured my imagination

as I asked the Spirit to bring to mind what it is that we needed to hear at this time and in this place. Enter then this text from chapter eight. Have any of you ever heard a sermon on Simon the Sorcerer? Or perhaps as you heard Julie read the text you were assuming we might focus on Philip who preached to change lives or Peter who prayed for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Nope. Instead we want to look at Simon who amazed people with his magic and offered money to buy the Holy Spirit. If Simon had a theme song it might be this... “You’re so vain... you probably think this song is about you! You’re so vain...” It is fair to say that Simon did not lack in the self-esteem department. We are told that he boasted that he was someone great.

As we sit with this text today we desire to get to know Simon and to be challenged to consider the ways that we might resonate with him and his choices. Simon heard the message of the Good News and accepted the parts that fit easily into his life but didn’t grasp the difficult steps needed for costly discipleship. Turn with me to Acts chapter 8.

Our text begins with this simple and yet complex statement that a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. **Preaching and living the resurrection is dangerous business.** Those in the early church knew that they were part of something that was not what the popular crowd was doing. Instead they were actively and faithfully going against the status quo. Joining the early church could in fact result in your death. In verse two we are told that godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. You remember Stephen, right? Chapter seven tells his story. He boldly stands before the Sanhedrin and retells the story of Jesus beginning clear back with Abraham and going clear through to his accusations that they murdered Jesus. Well things do not end well for Stephen. His testimony evokes anger that leads to him being stoned. This following Jesus stuff, this proclaiming and living the resurrection story is risky business. It is not something that one should enter in lightly or without great time of thought.

As I have read and reread the book of Acts what continues to strike me as amazing is that in the face of persecution, and the reality that this faith and these testimonies might get yourself killed, the church continued to grow. The church continued to give witness to the amazing truth that God sent God's son. That Jesus lived, and breathed, and walked among us. That Jesus died, was buried, and rose again... for me, for you, and for you. I would hope that if I were part of the early church that I too would have such boldness and such confidence and such deep commitment to being part of propelling the gospel message of Good News. But friends, if I'm honest, I'm afraid that there would have been days when I would have shied away from this responsibility and opportunity. I could see myself, for example, in the market and a guard demands if there are any Jesus followers there. And knowing that by raising my hand I would be at risk, I wonder if I would have just raised my hand a little hoping that I wouldn't be seen.

The early church is not hiding or just slightly raising their hands. Instead they are boldly and wildly and joyously waving their hands and proclaiming the resurrection story. How do we know this? We are told that godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. We might think, so they had a funeral, what's the big deal? Well the "The oral law prohibit(ed) public mourning for executed persons. Thus it is evidence of both true courage and much caring on the part of believers that such a loud lamentation and burial be made for Stephen."ⁱ Furthermore we are told of this great persecution and they do not stop telling the story. Instead they are now scattered throughout the land, with some even arriving in Samaria.

Now remember that in Acts chapter 1 the disciples are instructed by Jesus to tell this story, his story in Samaria. But also remember the longstanding hostility between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus even highlights these volatile relationships in the story of the Good Samaritan, and yet here are members of the early church taking the resurrection message to the Samaritans.

It is a poignant reminder that the resurrection story is for all, no matter race, ethnicity, or complex political relationships for it is not our story it is only a story that we are invited, by God's grace, to enter and to help proclaim to others.

In verse nine we meet this man named Simon. We are told that he practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people while they gave him their attention as they followed him around. Now, let's be honest. I would have liked to meet Simon and see some of his tricks! Magic is something that is intriguing to most people. We wonder how do they do it and if you were like me at different times in my life I have daydreamed about having a genie in a bottle to grant me three wishes. There is a lure, temptation, and sense of excitement to think of possessing such amazing abilities. For example, just think how popular you could be with your friends! Well dear Simon didn't lack in self-esteem. He thought he was quite stellar and didn't mind broadcasting that assessment to anyone who would listen to his proclamation. This is one of the clear distinctions between Simon and Philip and Peter. In verse five we are told that Philip proclaimed the Messiah. In verse twelve we read that Philip proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. What did Simon proclaim? He proclaimed, well Simon.

We are told in verse thirteen that Simon joined others in the crowd in believing Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and he too was baptized with other men and women. Simon then continued to follow Philip everywhere as he was astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw. As he continued to follow around the apostles Simon observed that there is power when the Holy Spirit comes upon someone. We see this happening clear back in Acts chapter two as we read of Pentecost and the arrival of the promised Holy Spirit. We see this throughout the book of Acts as we read the stories of the early church and the movement, presence, and power of the Holy Spirit. And here, in chapter eight Simon observes that there is

something mysterious with receiving the Holy Spirit. He incorrectly thinks that perhaps it is something magical. And so in verse nineteen we read Simon's request to Peter and John: "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

When I sat with this text this week I paused here after verse nineteen and thought Simon must have understood. This seems like a genuine request out of his desire to help propel this message of the resurrection. I kind of want to cheer for good ol' Simon. Great job asking for such a gift! Now here is where this statistic matters. A common statistic is that communication is only 7% verbal and 93% made up of nonverbal cues as well as characteristics of the speech such as tone of voice, inflections, and rate of speaking. Taking only his words at face value communicates that he grasped, accepted, and welcomed the full story and commitment of the resurrection narrative. However, Peter's response sheds light on the other 93% of Simon's communication.

In verse twenty we read Peter's stunning and intense rebuke. His response is swift and emphatic. He says "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." May "your money perish with you" is a slightly kinder way of saying may you and your money go to Hell. Eternal damnation. The end.

Peter saw and heard something beyond what we grasped just from the written text. Peter saw Simon's heart motivation and his offering to purchase the Holy Spirit with money. Peter's assessment is also confirmed as we read Simon's response. If Peter's assessment was incorrect

than Simon would have refuted it or offered an explanation. Instead we read that Simon responds with “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.”

How are we like Simon? Now granted I doubt that any of us, at least not most of us, would consider ourselves to be a sorcerer. So, how do we relate to this story of Simon? As I sat with this story I found myself quite sympathetic to dear Simon and wished that perhaps his downside was more pronounced and something I could not relate to at all. But not having his priorities straight in his heart? Failing to keep his eyes on the one who alone has the saving power? Missing the mark? Not grasping the complete picture? Wishing that somehow the Good News was not always so painful to digest? Or not welcoming the changes the Good News would require in every aspect of our life? Ouch. For you see I think we too are like Simon. **While we might not be engaging in sorcery or magic, we too wish that we could accept Jesus, be flooded by the grace of God AND continue as business as usual.** It is like believing in Jesus is just adding sprinkles on the cake of your life... when really the Good News of Jesus is the Holy Spirit transforming our chocolate cake into a chocolate fondue that is poured out for others.

Simon thought that what his cake, his life needed, was just a little more pizzazz and somehow Jesus became the magical added sparkle of sprinkles on top. So imagine that you make a cake and icing it. And you stand and look at it and think, especially if you are one of my kids, “I know just what it needs! It needs sprinkles!” Suddenly with the added sprinkles the cake is now festive and draws attention to itself. Sprinkles do not really change the flavor or even the consistency of the cake, just makes it look prettier. Is this what the message of the resurrection is all about it? Does this speak of transformation? “Wow, look at your sprinkles!”

No, instead I believe that as we accept, believe, and live into the resurrection story we are transformed into a vessel to be used by God. A piece of cake can be placed on a plate and stand

alone... fondue on the other hand is messy and fills in the holes and gaps on the plate. Fondue doesn't stop and ask if it should touch the other items around it... it just does whether it be a vanilla wafer, a strawberry, or a piece of celery also on our plate. Fondue, is chocolate that has experienced a transformation from one state of being into another. Fondue is meant to be a vehicle to transform the flavor of items dipped within its sweetness. But fondue is an interesting consistency of food. What happens to fondue when it is removed from the heating source? It hardens. It seems to forget its mission, what it is supposed to be about, what its calling is. Are you warm and luscious chocolate fondue that eagerly and joyfully transforms the flavors around you, sharing and celebrating the resurrection? Or are you lukewarm, lumpy, chocolate fondue or a piece of cake that exists only for itself?... Or are you the type of fondue that doesn't coat anything, stick to anything, and a piece of cake that is not in the business of transformation, either for itself or anything else?

Thankfully this is where we celebrate the reminder of God's grace. There is hope for those of us who have never been transformed into fondue. And there is hope for those of us who have moved away from the heating source. God, through the resurrected Jesus, invites us to check our motives, our hearts desires, to invite us to repent and to change the direction our fingers are pointing... from us or others to Jesus. The image is that of chocolate because it is a sweet story of God's goodness, forgiveness, grace, and power.

The text does not tell us how Simon's story ended. I wonder how my story will end? I wonder how your story will end? Today may we hear the calling to proclaim the resurrection, the Gospel Story, the Good News. May we love the Lord our God with ALL our hearts, ALL our souls, and ALL our minds. Not halfheartedly, or by compartmentalizing, but ALL, completely, whole, keeping connected to the heating element by the amazing gift of the Holy Spirit. It's my

prayer that we are not just amazed, but that we might be transformed so that our lives reflect God's glory, our love reflects God's grace as we continue to grow in wisdom.

No, not just sprinkles but fondue. May it be so.

¹ Chalmer E. Faw, Acts: Believers Church Bible Commentary (Herald Press: Scottdale, Pennsylvania), 102.