

“Use the Gift, Please!”
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
John Knox Presbyterian Church – January 13, 2013

Acts 8:14-17: “Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). The Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.”

Preacher Fred Craddock tells this story about a baptism he experienced while serving a small mission church in a small town in Tennessee. He said it was the custom in the church at Easter to have a baptismal service, and it was held at the lake on Easter evening at sundown. After all the candidates had been baptized in the lake, everyone changed into dry clothes and gathered around a fire. Once we were all around the fire, one parishioner always introduced the new people. Then the rest of the church members gathered around them in a circle. The next part of the ritual was that each person around the circle gave her or his name and said,

“My name is _____, if you ever need anybody to chop wood, call on me.”

“My name is _____, if you ever need anybody to babysit, call on me.”

“My name is _____, if you ever need anybody to repair your house, call on me.”

“My name is _____, if you ever need anybody to sit with the sick, call on me.”

“My name is _____, if you ever need a car to go to town, call on me.”

We cooked dinner and ate together. We sang. Then we had a square dance. Finally, a parishioner named Percy Miller, with thumbs in his bibbed overalls, would stand up and say, ‘It’s time to go,’ and everybody got up and left. He lingered behind, and with his big shoe kicked sand over the dying fire. He looked at me and said, “You know, folks don’t get any closer than this.”

In that community, their name for that kind of togetherness is “church.” They call that “church”.

(Taken from a sermon by Amy Richter at St. Anne’s Episcopal Church – website address: http://www.stannesannapolis.org/library/resources/amyssermons/allsaints2009_2_.pdf)

The church was what the apostles were beginning back in the book of Acts. It was their job to go out and share the good news of Jesus Christ and baptize the new believers. This is exactly what Philip did when he went to Samaria. He went to this community and began to preach, heal and perform miracles. As Philip baptized them they became the Body of Christ, the church.

But for some reason, the Holy Spirit was not present. It is unclear why this happened. Was baptizing them in the name of the Lord Jesus any different than laying on of hands? Was the receiving of the Spirit at Pentecost by wind and flames any different than when Jesus received the Spirit when John dipped him in the River Jordan? Many theologians for centuries have questioned and debated about the nature of the Spirit. The commentator Lee Barrett says, “Throughout the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit comes in different ways and it appears that the Spirit is free to act before, during or after baptism. The operation of the Spirit cannot be neatly comprehended or controlled.” (*Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1*; Lee Barrett; Westminster John Knox Press; 2009; p. 232)

I think the important thing is to focus on its presence and to use this precious gift that is of God. For the church (any church) to survive, Lee Barrett says, “It must have the enlivening power of the Holy Spirit.” .” (*Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1*; Lee Barrett; Westminster John Knox Press; 2009; p. 232) The life giving, moving, breathing Spirit was crucial for the new believers to succeed in becoming strong in their faith journey. Peter and John knew this, which is why they joined Philip in making sure the Spirit was present.

In children in worship, we have stories that come in gold boxes. The children are told that these stories, God's scripture, God's Word are a gift. They cannot be purchased, stolen or borrowed. They are a gift from God. In our scripture today if you read on, Philip has found a rather peculiar follower named Simon, who is a magician. He realizes that his magical powers are nothing compared to the powers of God. When he sees the people receiving the Holy Spirit, he wants to buy it. He finds out real quick from Peter that it is not for sale. He finds out very quickly that baptism and the Spirit are gifts from God.

It was about a year ago, I heard a very interesting sermon at a national gathering for Presbyterian Educators. The pastor got up to preach wearing a long gold robe and his face and hair were covered with gold paint. He began his sermon telling us about an art project in Paris, France which took place in 1985. It was created by the artists Cristo and Jeanne Claude. They wrapped the entire Pont Neuf Bridge in gold fabric. It took over nine years to negotiate and plan for this project. Three hundred workers were put to the task of using 40,876 square meters of polyamide fabric to cover the bridge, street lamps and sidewalks. It took 10,076 meters of rope and 12.1 metric tons of steel chain to secure everything. The task was completed in 28 days. This art exhibit called the "Pont Neuf Wrapped" lasted 2 weeks!

This amazing project, which took so long to create, lasted such a short time. Does this sound like some of the projects you have served on in the church? But it was reported that this gift to the city was enjoyed by 3 million people! It was reported that the people, who walked across the bridge during this time period were transformed. It was if they had been awakened from a deep sleep. Their eyes were opened and there was a feeling of excitement in the air! The people were reaching out to each other and there was an electrifying buzz going through that city. People are still talking about it. *(Information taken from a sermon by Claudio Carvalhaes, Assistant Professor of Worship and Preaching at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary)*

Today in our scripture the apostles go to Samaria. You remember Samaritans did not like Jewish people! It was Jesus, who first approached a Samaritan Woman at the well and broke down those barriers. As Philip, Peter and John reached out to these Non-Jewish people, God's Spirit was able to create a bridge to connect them despite their differences. Can you imagine them all gathering together and being baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? The power of that Spirit's presence had to be electrifying! It was a short, memorable event but the gift of the baptism and the gift of the Spirit formed a church out of those new believers.

Later in our service, we will reaffirm our baptisms. You will be invited to come to the font and pull a stone out of the water. The stone today is a little different! It is gold! We remember what our baptisms mean to us and that it is truly a gift to be used.

May we remember that through baptism we are the Body of Christ, the church! Thanks be to God, who claims us, names us, calls us, transforms us, connects us despite our differences, frees us from our sins and loves us beyond measure. Amen.