

Sermon – October 8, 2023  
“The scattered proclaim the word”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 8:26-40

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint my sharing of these words. May they be a blessing for your people that ignites our continuing transformation into Christ’s image and leads us to fruitful labor as those sent into Jesus’ mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! We are continuing our journey through Acts. Let me share a few reminders of where we have been so far in our journey. We have seen Jesus ascend to heaven and the Church born when power from on high came at Pentecost. We have seen the Church, people with the spirit of God sent to the world, begin to grow explosively in Jerusalem. And we have now witnessed Stephen’s death for the faith.

As we move into the eighth chapter of Acts, we encounter first the beginning of severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem. It starts with Stephen’s stoning and continues with Saul dragging men and women to prison and even putting some to death. We should realize that behind every persecution of the church is the devil. In this case, the severe persecution of the church seems to be an attempt to put an end to the emerging church. In response to the

persecution, believers flee from Jerusalem and instead of ending the growth of the Church, as the devil may have intended, as those believers flee, they begin to spread the Good News of Jesus in all of the places they go.

Luke focuses on the journey out from Jerusalem of one believer named Philip. We might recall that Philip was one of the seven men selected by the church to distribute food to widows. Philip is described as filled with Holy Spirit and wisdom. He goes to a city in Samaria and witnesses for Jesus. Philip also works many signs and wonders, and many listen to the Good News, believe, and there follows great joy in Samaria. News of the growing numbers of Samaritans believing in Jesus reaches Jerusalem, and Peter and John are sent to Samaria to check out what is happening. When they arrive, they pray for the believers, lay their hands on them, and the believers receive Holy Spirit. Don't think of the actions of Peter and John as two super believers coming to Samaria in order for Holy Spirit to be given to new believers. Instead, think of their actions as reaching out across a great divide between Jews and Samaritans, and God blessing the church with unity in Jesus Christ sealed with Holy Spirit witness. The separation between the northern tribes and Jerusalem began after Solomon's reign and continued in some form into the first century. The Jews of Samaria had mixed with the people resettled in the area by those who took the northern tribes into exile. When the temple was being rebuilt after the exile of the southern kingdom, the Jews would not let Samaritans help rebuild. These neighbors have a long history of separation. They have different views on what makes up the Old Testament Scriptures. They had different temples until the Maccabees conquered the area, destroyed the Samaritan temple, and tried to unify Israel by might. The Samaritans were set free from Jewish rule when Rome conquered Israel and the two had been separate areas since. We might recall the words of the Samaritan woman to Jesus when she reminded him that Jews have nothing in common with Samaritans. With the Samaritan's acceptance of Jesus and their entry into the kingdom of God, for the first time in centuries these two peoples were unified, unified in Christ. Peter and John's prayer and laying on of hands welcome the Samaritan believers into the Church, and the gift of Holy Spirit is a witness to their unity. In Christ, Israel is one kingdom again.

In Samaria there was a man, a sorcerer named Simon, who practiced magic and is said to have long amazed the people of Samaria. They had even spoken of him as one with "the power of God that is called Great"<sup>i</sup> Simon also comes to belief in Jesus and is baptized. After his

baptism, he stays with Philip as he was amazed at the signs and wonders done through Philip in Jesus' name. When Peter and John arrive and Holy Spirit is poured out on the believers, Simon does not ask for Holy Spirit but asks Peter to sell him the ability to lay his hands on people and they receive Holy Spirit. Peter's reaction to Simon's request seems harsh, telling him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness."<sup>ii</sup> I like to think that if Peter told me to repent and pray or I would perish that the next sound heard would be my knees hitting the ground. That is not what Simon does. Instead, he asks Peter to pray for him. Simon does not repent, turn, humble himself, and follow Jesus. We will talk more about Simon shortly.

Before we leave Samaria, we should note that as Peter and John return to Jerusalem, they go through many of the towns of Samaria, proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. Peter and John have learned from their experience that the believers in Samaria are also to be part of the kingdom of God and they spend time being witnesses for Jesus in Samaria. The kingdom of God begins to move out from Jerusalem into Samaria.

Now we are going to move from Samaria toward what used to be the home of the Philistines. We don't know at what point our move occurs in scripture time but at some point, Philip is instructed by "an angel of the Lord" to get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."<sup>iii</sup> In response to this prompting from God through Holy Spirit, Philip gets up and goes. Let me stop here a moment and point out some of the means Holy Spirit speaks into our lives using examples found in this chapter. First, as we have just seen with Philip, Holy Spirit gives us promptings as inward desires to do something, in Philip's example, to leave where he is working and go to another place. Another means for hearing Holy Spirit is through the guidance of a mature Christian speaking into our lives as Peter has just spoken to Simon telling him to repent and pray. And a third means found in today's scripture is using the Scriptures to guide us into truth. We will see this means used shortly as Philip will grasp the truth of a scripture from Isaiah and use it to share Jesus. There are other means such as direct verbal communication, but these three are more frequently encountered means of hearing from God through Holy Spirit. So, if you want to hear from God, read the scriptures, seek out

and listen to other mature Christians, and seek to be aware of inward promptings. All of these means are activated by our obedience and will be consistent with scripture. When Philip receives the message to go to the road, he gets up and goes. When we encounter Holy Spirit's touch on scripture, we also need to obey the truth we find highlighted, and when mature Christians speak into our lives, we need to listen and seek to move to obey their words.

Philip goes to the road that he was told to go to and he encounters a chariot coming down the road from Jerusalem. A very important and rich man from Ethiopia is seated in the chariot. Ethiopia, by the way, was considered at this time to be at the end of the earth. Philip gets another prompt from Holy Spirit to run up to the chariot and again he obeys. I doubt that the chariot is moving along the road by itself but has guards, or Ethiopian warriors, with it to protect the court official who is sitting reading a scroll that he picked up when he was in Jerusalem. When Philip gets to the chariot, he hears the official reading the words of the scroll. In those days people read aloud as they needed to sound out the words of the scroll. At this point Philip gets the idea of why he was led to the chariot and asks the official if he understands what he is reading. Now I am sure that Philip asks that question in a nice manner but think of the boldness of what he has done. Philip, a servant of Jesus, has boldly spoken to an official from another country, asking him if he has any idea what he is reading. The official's response gives us insight into the state of his heart. He does not take offense but replies, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"<sup>iv</sup> Notice the official's response to Philip. He admits he does not understand. He admits he needs help and has a desire to receive help from someone who does have understanding. He is willing to have a person of lesser status join him and teach him. He invites Philip to join him in the chariot and Philip climbs in and sits down. Philip starts with the scripture the official was reading and shares Jesus with him. The official is reading a verse from Isaiah that Jesus used to describe himself as a suffering servant. This passage was not considered a reference to the coming Messiah until Jesus used it to describe himself, and the early church often used this scripture to describe Jesus and to connect scripture to him. Think for a moment about all of the coincidences that line up here for Philip to be in the right place to share the Gospel with the Ethiopian official. The official had to buy a scroll in Jerusalem, open that scroll on a bumpy road and try to read it, arriving at this scripture just as Philip arrived to hear it read. Philip had to be along the road and in place so he could run up to the chariot and hear what was being read and the official had to have an open heart that would invite a stranger to sit with him and teach him. The odds of all of

those events lining up are astronomical except in the kingdom of God where God is at work. I have learned to call these moments divine appointments, and I am seeking to be open to the prompting of Holy Spirit to be one who obeys promptings, even as strange as going to a wilderness road so that I might be part of keeping a divine appointment. Luke does not tell us what Philip shares with the official, but when they come to a place where there is water (another one of those coincidences) the official asks to be baptized, they stop, and Philip baptizes the official. Philip is taken away by the Spirit to another appointment but the official leaves that place rejoicing, which is joy, a fruit of the Spirit.

Let's look at these two hearts, the heart of Simon and the heart of the Ethiopian official. One of the two hearts believes but lacks understanding and a willingness to follow Jesus. One of the two seeks to buy the gifts of God, gifts that cannot be bought as they are freely given to those who will receive them. One has a heart that is not right with God, not aligned to God, and given the opportunity to repent and follow Jesus, does not but only fears God's punishment. One heart seeks to have the authority of God at his control to sell or distribute for his purposes. The other heart is very different. It seeks to worship God even if there are limitations or restrictions (eunuchs were not allowed into the assembly of God). The other heart reads God's word to learn, seeking a deeper understanding of God. The other heart willingly receives help from those of a lesser status in the world that he may learn of God. The other heart is humble, repents, believes, and follows Jesus. This heart is baptized, and leaves Philip's presence filled with joy. Can we catch the difference between these two hearts and how they are aligning or not aligning with God? Simon's actions give birth to the word "simony," the buying of a religious position. Simon may be the source of many heresies that we still encounter today, and he is thought to have been at odds with Peter throughout Peter's life. By contrast, the Ethiopian official returns to his home and is thought to have been a missionary there, becoming a witness for Jesus at the end of the world. Look at the contrast between these two men and where their hearts are with respect to God. Both believe in Jesus but one's heart is not right and he does not turn and follow Jesus. He does not obey the advice he receives from a mature Christ follower but clings all of his life to his own direction and understanding. This heart is not open to receive Holy Spirit and to be transformed in the image of Christ. And, as a result, Simon is filled with bitterness and seeks to lead others away from a right relationship with God.

The second heart is a heart open to God. The second heart reads that which it does not understand with the hope of being guided to understanding. The second is a humble heart, willing to be instructed and willing to learn about Jesus. The second heart is one that sets aside its desires and seeks to obey, and when it learns that baptism follows repentance, goes down into the water and is baptized. The second listens to the words of life and seeks to become a follower of Jesus Christ. The open heart turns to Jesus and allows Holy Spirit to begin to transform him into the image of Christ. The second heart understands he has one job, to be a witness for Jesus starting in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, and goes forth rejoicing in the fruit of the Spirit to be such a witness.

The question for us is, which heart do we have? Yes, we tend to move back and forth between those with an open heart and those with a closed heart. We may at times tend to set aside an openness to allow our hearts to be filled with Holy Spirit and be remade into the image of Christ. We may tend to seek Jesus on our terms, obeying our thoughts, disregarding instruction, letting our hearts be filled with bitterness, letting our hearts lead others from salvation and a life in Jesus Christ. Yet, we also have within ourselves a desire to more fully encounter Jesus' love and open our hearts to new depths of his infinite love. We may desire to humbly seek to learn about God, become readers of God's word, seek to join with others who can challenge our understanding in love and help us to grow, repent when we are wrong, obey God's word, and take appropriate actions when we are given instructions from another through Holy Spirit. We seek to become witnesses for Jesus even to the end of the earth. We need to be surrounded with those who love us and will speak into our lives so that we might open our hearts more fully to a new filling by Holy Spirit. Jesus' yoke is easy, and his burden is light. Have we taken up Jesus' yoke and burden or are we seeking to carry our own? Are we seeking to be Jesus' witnesses in this place? Are we committed to learning who Jesus is and sharing what we learn with others? These may be difficult questions, and we may struggle as we move between these two states of our hearts, but we need to ask ourselves where we are so that we might humbly open our hearts, turn to Jesus, and let him heal our brokenness and transform us into those with hearts open to filling with Holy Spirit.

This past week I was invited to a divine appointment; I was given a gift by God. I have been praying that Jesus would teach me to pray. On Wednesday, when the kids at Good News Club were asked if they wanted to know more about Jesus, several responded and I felt that

nudge or prompting to go along with them, even though I am not ready to counsel children. I sat and listened to their answers to questions Judy was asking to try to understand why they responded. We quickly worked down to two children who beautifully expressed a deeper acceptance of Jesus in their lives, and one of them, in response to being asked if she wanted to thank God for His love for her, bowed her head and prayed the most beautiful prayer from her young, totally open heart right to the heart of God. I have been blessed to pray in some moving times and places, but I have never come close to the loving prayer this child prayed to the creator of the universe and her savior from a heart of love and gratitude. Sometimes Holy Spirit uses little hearts totally filled with love to speak into our hearts through Holy Spirit as well. May I learn to pray with such an open, loving heart. May we all learn to pray with such open, loving hearts. Remember the words, a little child will lead them.

*Pray with me. Jesus, we confess we move between open and closed hearts, yet we desire to be those who are open to your transforming love. Jesus, lead us to hear your instruction through Holy Spirit and to open our hearts to you. Father, we give thanks that you love us and we thank you for your Son who reconciles us to you. Come, Holy Spirit, and fill our open hearts. Amen*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Linger before God in this place, wait for power from Jesus and then go out as one sent to walk the Long Road.

Go forth into Jesus' mission to all people. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Acts 8:10

<sup>ii</sup> Acts 8:20-22

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 8:26 NRSV

<sup>iv</sup> Acts 8:30