

A Sermon for DaySpring

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“Missing Something”

The second in a series entitled, A Compelling Faith

Acts 8: 14-17

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The Book of Acts, tells the story of the first years of the church.

A Pentecostal event becomes a movement...

an organic movement becomes an entity...

an entity for better or worse,

eventually became an institution.

The writer on several occasions... usually after telling some story will conclude the story not by saying, **“And verily, they all didst live happily ever after.”** But rather **“The Lord added to their number daily.”** There was something compelling about this movement... this new faith. In spite of the real downsides, like being disowned and stoned and later thrown... to the lions (never a good pr thing), this new form of faith grew.

Historians would later write that people were drawn to Christianity because of the goodness of Christians and because of their sense of justice and fairness... and because of the way they took care of each other.

In the early days of the church... it was that... and... it was this startling message the followers of Jesus were proclaiming that he was killed, but he didn't stay dead, and that now he was Lord. So, in addition to being drawn to the messengers, folks were being drawn to the message.

I'm preaching a series during these days entitled, **“A Compelling Faith.”** My contention is that there is a faith we can experience and a faith we can express that is compelling for our time.

I'm not suggesting by these sermons that we become marketable... where we stick a finger in the cultural breeze to see which way the winds blowing and then become that. What I believe is that there exists a reality and an understanding of reality... a Christian vision of reality that people need and that people will be drawn to... especially now.

It assumes of course that we can see that vision and say it... and even more importantly that we as followers of the way of Christ can embody it. It takes a message and some authentic messengers.

In the early church, there were both. There was a gospel being proclaimed and there were folks who were radically committed to living it out. **“And daily the Lord was adding to their number...”** It's a very compelling combination.

They grew fast and the powers that be got nervous. Acts 8 tells us that a persecution broke out and when that happen, the gospel broke out into all sorts of places. Christians were on the run and subsequently, Christianity was on the move.

Philip, who was one of the first deacons, headed due North from Jerusalem... which was an odd thing because it took him straight into Samaria. Jews didn't go there. They had a long history of not setting a single foot, not even a toe, in Samaria.

In large part for theological reasons, a good way of being contaminated for sure... Which was a dreaded spiritual thing. Like the "Mad Cow" disease of Jewish religious life. So this "Samariphobia" was also visceral... and emotional. When chapter eight begins by telling us that Philip went to a city in Samaria, everyone reading it got the heebie-jeebies. **"Philip went to Samaria." (Uuuoooo...)**

It's a not-so-subtle way of saying that the gospel message was impacting folks at a deep level and changing them. Philip was able to move beyond his heebie-jeebies into the dreaded land of Samaria to proclaim Christ...

And when they heard him, proclaiming **"the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus... who was the anointed one they were all waiting for, they were baptized, the men and the women."** Luke noted that... **"the men and the women"** Already the gospel was having social implications. It wasn't a **"men only religion or redemption."**

So, you get the picture... Philip preaching and healing and casting out the demonic... doing what Jesus had done basically.

And the folks were believing his message about Jesus.

They were confessing that faith in Christian baptism...

Kind of a revival thing happening.

And word spread back home to Jerusalem to headquarters...

So... Peter and John... who were the apostles' apostles... heard this...

"Samaritans... following Jesus? What'll God think of next. We better look into this right away." They gulped, ignored their heebie-jeebies, set foot on Samaritan soil, in order to check this out.

We read what they found when they arrived at the tent revival... They saw a tent full of believers...

Folks who'd heard the message,

believed it, been immersed...

but they were missing something.

They hadn't yet been filled with the Spirit.

A quick explanation... In the book of Acts, when people come to Christ, three things are usually a part of it: confession, baptism, and receiving the Spirit. This compelling early faith was confessional, liturgical, and spiritual. There was doctrine involved, ritual involved, and experience.

But there was no pattern... Sometimes, like a Pentecost... the Spirit just shows up. Sometimes it happens first so folks get Baptized. Sometimes it happens because of preaching.

There's no real pattern... The Spirit is blowing like Jesus said it would... wherever and whenever. Which in large measure is the point Acts is trying to make.

This isn't something under our control. And the Christian movement wasn't being facilitated by sharp people doing great strategic planning. It was a God thing.

In Samaria... the folks had heard Philip preach, I suspect a fairly typical early church sermon. **“Jesus was here. We knew him, heard him, saw him dead and saw him alive and he is Lord.”** And they believed what they heard and were Baptized as a sign of it.

Later, Peter and John said, **“You're missing something.”** They'd been through enough already to know doctrine wasn't enough. Getting your head straight was good but it wasn't enough. This journey required an internal reality.

Even for Jesus, it did.

Remember at his Baptism before his ministry...
the Spirit descended on him.

In that day... in Samaria... folks needed something that was beyond them to be within them. And it's true today as well. Faith, that is only in the head, won't be a very compelling faith. Compelling faith will attend to the life of the spirit. It will indwell us at a deep level and we will become bearers of and reflectors of the Eternal Spirit.

Most of us, weren't raised on that.

We heard mostly, in our rationalistic... modern... Protestant world... that it was all about what we believed with our minds. The whole point was to get our belief right and keep it right... and if we did that, at the end of the day, everything would be alright once we got to heaven.

As Baptists especially, we nodded occasionally to the Spirit, but generally we were more nervous than interested. We stayed in control. **“Stay in the pew and in your head and you'll stay in control...”** Sort of a Baptist manifesto.

And to be sure we didn't like, and I think rightly so, the idea that the work of God's Spirit would look and sound and feel a certain way... **“enthusiastic, happy, ecstatic... emotional.”** This is the Wind of God we're talking about and it can't be manipulated. You can conjure up a feeling and even an experience... but the Spirit's work in the center of your being can't be conjured.

All you can really do is be open. Saint Gregory said, **“The Holy Spirit is contained in the soul to the limit of its openness.”** The Spirit fills up the vessel. So we don't, as a church, try to conjure up experiences... rather we try to create openness. ... Souls that are deep and wide and uncluttered.

Souls with openings... vulnerable... soft.

Souls cracked open by life... wounded... touched enough by reality...

Souls that are made receptive by silence... by humble disciplines... reverence before what is... Souls made ready by worship.

Or maybe by the touch of someone's "hand" upon your life. A person who loves you, a presence who is with you.

We can't conjure up spirituality. We cooperate. We quit our clinging. We let an opening happen. And the Eternal, whom we have confessed is "up there" and who we believe walked among us "down here," finds the opening and is known "in here."

As one theologian said, **“The Spirit is the hidden God, the inward God, deeper than our greatest depth.”** (Clement)

This is where God must be known if our faith is to be compelling. And if our faith is to make any difference.

Having your theology in tact might help you do the right thing but it isn't going to heal you. Confessing your "faith" in this or that "truth" may be a place to begin a journey but it won't enable you to be a pilgrim. One reason so many people punt on the faith is that it hasn't changed anything for them.

They do church and do church...

And believe this and believe that...

Hear sermons Sunday after Sunday...

But wake up Monday after Monday no different.

We are to be bearers of... reflectors of Spirit. It will be manifested in us and through us. Who knows how?

In the first days of the church it looked a certain way... sort of wild and phenomenal, wasn't it. Extraordinary... visions and healings and all that.

It's big mistake, though, to assume the way it looked in Acts, in Samaria, in the first century in the lives of people needs to be duplicated in our day. The life of God, in you, can take on all sorts of looks.

You may be empowered to do something you'd never thought possible. Gifted for it. Maybe you find yourself seeing and knowing like you've not seen and known. You may be passionate for a change... really care about something. Maybe something you touch and lay your hands on will be healed.

You may just finally be real... an honest to God and to yourself human being.

I suspect... I believe... that as we bear and reflect this Spirit that is life, we will be free. Free to love... free to move beyond ourselves into all sorts of Samarias. Free to move beyond the boundaries and be creative with the lives we've been given. Freed up... from endless guilt... pointless worry... small fears. Free from what has driven us to hear what calls us.

Free to speak the truth.

Free to listen for it anywhere.

Free to live in this wonderful world as who you are.

Is there something missing in your faith? Still afraid? Still bored? Still worried?

If Peter and John walked into this place and looked at you... would they say, **"Look, we've been given something you need."** On that day in Samaria... they laid hands on the folks and it happened in an instant. For most of us, it won't be so dramatic. But little by little, as long as we're open, God will be born in us and we will bear that loving and eternal Spirit in our lives. This will happen, if we can be open.

That's why we do what we do. Together... as a church... we are doing work that prepares hearts to receive and to know God within. That's what we're up to. That's why we're trying to know one another. That's why we study... worship.

And not that we're counting, but I suspect if we keep it up, we'll find "the Lord adding to our number day by day."

