

Power Struggles
Acts 8:14-24
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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This morning we're being introduced to one of the lesser known but still more interesting characters in the Bible, Simon the Magician, or as he liked to call himself, Simon the Great. Simon practiced magic in Samaria. It isn't clear whether he was either a clever illusionist, like David Copperfield or he actually dabbled in black magic and witchcraft, but we do know Simon was a powerful local celebrity.

Life for Simon was fine and dandy, until one day Phillip, a Christian missionary unexpectedly showed up preaching the gospel, healing the sick and kicking out demons. The people believed Phillip and were baptized, and so was Simon the Magician.

The text reads, "Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized he stayed constantly with Phillip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place." (Acts 8:13)

Now, this is why I called Simon one of the more interesting and complex characters in the Bible: he seems like a sincere convert with the best of intentions but he's also clearly a scamp, sort of like the man behind the curtain" in the Wizard of Oz. Luke writes, "After being baptized, Simon stayed constantly with Phillip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place." (Acts 8:13)

Again, it's never clear whether or not Simon was either sincere or self-serving. Instead, he seems to lie somewhere in between, which is really quite helpful because his ambivalence makes Simon more accessible and real. He isn't a one dimensional villain, instead he comes across as a mixed bag of good intentions and blatant self interests, and yet by the time the story ends he finally sees the error of his ways and repents...or does he?

That's the great debate between Bible scholars. Was Simon the Magician an honest seeker or a cunning opportunist?

Simon seems to expose himself as the latter when he tried to buy the power to lay hands on people to pass on the Holy Spirit. Peter was blunt, "May your silver perish with you," the more honest translation being, "You and your money can go to hell!"

Simon got the message. “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said happens to me.” (Acts 8:24) But you still have to wonder, was Simon sincerely convicted, or was he just afraid of God?

I’m prone to give Simon the benefit of the doubt and would like to believe even though his conversion was seriously flawed, he was still worth saving.

Let’s be honest, we’re all flawed and thankfully, in God’s eyes, still worth saving. And like it or not we all need to consider the possibility Simon is pretty much like us. True we’re not powerful magicians, but sometimes we play the same game Simon played so well, maybe without even realizing it.

So, what can we learn from Simon to help us avoid the same pitfalls that keep us from growing into Christ?

First we can learn you can’t buy off or bargain with God. Maybe we’re not blatant enough to think God can be paid off with money, but we do try to make bargains. “God, if you’ll do this for me, I’ll do this for you. I promise!” In our own subtle way we want to control people and events for our personal advantage. The only problem is we have this amazing capacity to screw things up. What’s more, just thinking you can control your life is an illusion, something Simon was an expert at, creating illusions. But truth be told, illusions never last and very quickly give way to reality.

So, the obvious lesson we can take from this story is God can’t be bought or bargained for. Instead God can only be obeyed and trusted and when we submit to God’s authority, discern and then carry out his will, only then can the awesome power of God be experienced.

It’s both sad and ironic, Simon couldn’t have the power he craved until he accepted one of the Kingdom’s deepest secrets: real power only comes to those who willingly surrender power and that power can only be experienced at the foot of the cross.

I’d like to think, after hearing the Gospel proclaimed, Simon wanted God’s power not to keep for himself, but to share with others so he could bring love and healing to the same people he earlier thrilled and amazed. At the same time I have to conclude Simon’s perception of the Gospel was dangerously skewed by his past life experiences. He had learned power is something to be taken and now had to relearn power is something to be given away. However, like all of us, Simon would face the ever growing temptation to revert to his old ways by empowering himself at the expense of others instead of empowering others at the expense of himself.

The second lesson we can learn from watching Simon is not confusing “believing in God” with “being amazed by signs and wonders.”

Are we called to place our faith in God or miraculous signs and wonders? That's the question.

One of the reasons Jesus often told the people he healed not to tell anyone about him was because he didn't want the people to confuse faith with magic. That's also why he refused the scribes and Pharisees demands for signs and wonders. He wasn't out to amaze people with fantastic displays of power, he wanted to call people to faith in the unseen.

Simon was all about amazing people. That's how he made his fortune, but Simon himself was absolutely amazed by Phillip's "signs and great miracles" because Simon knew this power was not only real but stronger than his own. What's more, it must have agitated Simon he wasn't the one on center stage, but only a faceless member of the audience. All he could do was watch on the sidelines and with everyone else, be amazed.

That word amaze appears three times in four verses of this passage. Apparently the people in Samaria were conditioned to be amazed by Simon's magic tricks. But aren't we all? People pay good money to be amazed by Hollywood's newest and most spectacular computer enhanced images. People give good money to Televangelists and faith healers who amaze viewers with their slickly packaged programs. If we're not thrilled and amazed, we quickly lose interest.

In the Gospels we read the people were amazed with Jesus. But note why they were amazed. The people realized, "he has authority, not like the scribes and Pharisees."

The people were more amazed with who Jesus was than what he could do. What was unseen and unspoken about Jesus amazed them the most. They sensed Jesus was unique, one of a kind, simple, not splashy, approachable, not exclusive. What's more, Jesus made God real and the scriptures come alive.

Signs and wonders don't save our souls and love us unconditionally. Only God through Christ can do these things. Signs and wonders don't inspire people to deny themselves and pick up their crosses, only God through Christ can do these things. Signs and wonders can't inspire us to love and serve. Only the One who dwells in the unseen who makes the impossible possible.

What then was the difference between Simon's amazing signs and wonders and Phillip's, James' and John's signs and wonders? There's a huge difference. Simon's signs and wonders were illusions designed to draw attention to himself and amaze his audience. The Apostles' signs and wonders were performed to draw attention to God and bring new life to dying people.

One more thing. Every time you do something unexpected and out of the ordinary for someone else, you are in a sense performing a sign and a wonder. And whenever anyone compliments you for being good and wise, but you gently correct him by saying, "It isn't me, it's Jesus," you are drawing attention away from yourself and towards God.

That was the hard lesson Simon had to learn, but we don't know whether or not he ever did. As I said, I'd like to give him the benefit of the doubt, but for now, at least, there's no way of knowing.

Simon certainly isn't an outstanding Christian role model, but we can still learn something from him, even if it's only the warning, "Don't let this happen to you."

Again, hopefully Simon finally experienced God's power as it's meant to be, at the foot of the cross, where he could look up to the face of Jesus, the most powerful man who ever lived because he loved and forgave so much he surrendered his power even unto death.

May that same power love you and keep you in God's Kingdom now and forever.