

Acts 8: 14-17 "The Spirit Connection" Rev. Janet Chapman 1/13/19

This year, one of the things our congregation will be exploring is what may be involved in having a baptistry placed here within our sanctuary. Baptism within the Disciples of Christ tradition has been a sacrament within which the Spirit of God is made real, like whenever we gather at the Lord's Table. For thousands of years, disciples of Jesus have followed in his footsteps deciding to be baptized as an expression of God's activity in their lives. Making baptism available to those who would prefer to do it within this worship space and time with the larger Body of Christ present has been a topic of discussion for awhile now. Seeking to learn more about the process, I read about a church who added a new baptistry in connection with a larger remodeling project they were doing. However, the local county building inspector wouldn't okay its installation. "I can't," he said, "without a separate septic tank." The trustees couldn't understand why a septic tank would be needed for a baptistry. The building inspector saw their puzzled faces and explained, "It's to avoid pollution in the ground."

I doubt the inspector was making any grand statement on the workings of baptism, the washing away and cleansing of sin or anything, but it does give one cause to ponder. What do we expect from baptism? Scriptures like today can cause more confusion than clarity. In ancient times, ritual baths were used in various religions as a cleansing in order to prepare to meet a god. A septic tank to receive all that gunk might have been appropriate if we still practiced such things. The baptism practiced by John was for sin rather than a ritual cleansing. Baptism in Acts 8 seems to be a two-fold, two-step process. The Samaritans were baptized with water by Philip in the name of the Lord Jesus and then Peter and John come along and lay their hands on them and they receive the Holy Spirit. The problem is that the church's stance for centuries has been that within the act of baptism the Holy Spirit is present and simultaneously

blessees the individual as a beloved child of God's. There is no step one and then step two when it comes to baptism – it happens all at once. Yet in Acts, there are 2 places that isn't the case - here today and later on in the story of Cornelius and Paul. So it begs the question – did the baptism of the Samaritans not take the first time? Was something missing? Did there need to be some “official” church officer present to make their baptism legit? And what was the Holy Spirit doing at the time, anyway? Busy with other things? If you can't rely on the Holy Spirit to be where you need it to be, especially at critical “Holy Spirit” kinds of things, then in what can you put your faith? Ultimately, when it comes to baptisms, how do we know the Holy Spirit is truly present and making baptism a real thing? What kind of guarantees are there? Do the resulting contents found deep in that septic tank reflect authenticity, and if that is the case, I think I am in the wrong business? In our story today, it is like Peter and John have gone to Samaria to check out the results of the Samaritans' baptism of the Samaritans and have found it lacking.

To understand better, we have to look at the context in which Luke writes to his audience whether it be his gospel or his sequel, the book of Acts. First, Luke and other New Testament authors make it clear that God is the one doing the baptisms, not Philip, Peter or John. Therefore, the so-called lacking in the Samaritans' baptism would not have anything to do with who did the baptizing. They are just the vessels through which the act is done. Secondly, Luke-Acts is heavily focused on welcoming non-Jews into the community of Christ's followers. The author wants readers to see clearly the workings of God not just in the Jewish people but also in the Gentiles, such as the Samaritans. With believers now being found in Samaria, the gospel is reaching beyond the expected boundaries of Jerusalem and Judea and

the original disciples are having to accept foreigners into the flock, something difficult to do. Life always gets a bit messy when we have to welcome the outsiders. It is far easier to keep things clean and simple by maintaining the borders and boundaries so as to prevent others from taking away what is ours.

Rev. Sadie Mazisin-Cullumber, pastor of Harbor Christian Church in the LA area, relates it has certainly gotten messy in the migrant camp outside of Tijuana in Baja California. She found it hard to put into words her recent visit there. She felt useless and speechless wandering aimlessly and pondering how she would handle being in the same situation with her two young daughters. She remembers the sound of a loud cheer that spread quickly thru the camp once a group of migrants succeeded in constructing a large tent that would cover many smaller tents to keep some of the impending rains out. She witnessed the broken plumbing in the bathrooms, a pop-up kitchen with a single burner trying to prepare food for the entire camp, the worry over shrinking food resources, tents being set up wherever there was space, children and babies in every direction, but above it all, she witnessed the indomitable human spirit. Recognizing that the migrants had made their desperation secondary, she saw a hopeful spirit rise as a young man began to play music and sing into an old microphone that someone had wrestled up. It was hard to make out the words with all the noise and activity but she could feel the strength of his spirit and of those around him who sang along. In this moment of tragic desperation as a massive storm loomed on the horizon, this young man chose to sing and others joined in. There she saw the Spirit of God, that strong Spirit that sings even in the face of injustice, even in the face of walls and divisions which will prevent us from ever experiencing such irrefutable hope and courage. It is our loss if we miss their harrowing stories of escape, if

we fail to welcome them into our country. It will be our grave mistake if we think their perseverance, their audacious hope, and their deep compassion will not enrich our very existence. But we wouldn't be the first – the Jews felt the same way about the Gentiles so Peter and John are sent on a fact-finding mission to discover if it is really true that those criminal Samaritans could and did truly accept what Philip had to say and chose a new life. They find that the Samaritans are different, so they lay hands on them and bless them. It is at that moment apparently that they recognize the presence of the Spirit. Some scholars have noted that the Spirit was already present but simply not visible to Peter and John. They speculate that the so-called delay of the Holy Spirit was simply a literary device to grab the attention of folks like us who tend to compartmentalize people according to nations and who fail to see the Spirit at work building bridges with all people.

When we read Acts 8 in the context of all of Luke-Acts, we discover it doesn't match the descriptions of the Holy Spirit elsewhere. The Samaritans and any other group of people, nations, tribes, ethnicities, male and female could surely be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit at the same time. Therefore, it appears that the story is more about Peter, John, and others who fail to see the Spirit already at work in foreigners, in migrant camps, in different religions, and nations. In this instance, Peter and John must have recognized or received again the Holy Spirit along with the Samaritans, as their eyes were opened to the inclusive work of the Spirit. The Spirit helps clarify their misunderstanding of baptism by revealing to them that God has already been at work here. The Spirit removes all monopolies in the Church and builds new fellowship with others beyond our little corner of the world. God has made it clear where the Holy Spirit has acted, believers are transformed to a life which values diversity and inclusivity.

Karoline Lewis remembers preaching on the role of baptism and the Holy Spirit to her congregation. Afterwards, a 90 year old long-time member of the church came up to her and asked, "Is it really true? That God is the one who baptizes you? That the Holy Spirit works wherever the name of Jesus is invoked?" Karoline soon learned that her older sister was born extremely ill. There was neither hope for her survival nor for her to be able to leave the house. As a result, the grandmother baptized her. When the baby died, and her parents approached the pastor about the funeral, the pastor refused to perform the funeral in the sanctuary because he had not baptized the baby. The funeral for this member's 3-month-old sister was held in the church basement. Ninety years later, this member was relieved and grateful to finally discover the truth that her little sister had been surrounded with God's love and the Holy Spirit's presence in her dying breath. It is, after all, dear friends not about us, what we do, it is about what God does within and around us. That being said, we can assure the city building inspector there will be no septic tank necessary for this church's baptistry. Thanks be to God.