

Sermon for January 10, 2016 (Epiphany 1, Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Acts 8:9-24; Psalm 29; Luke 3:15-17,21-22

Title:

My friends: What does it mean to be “sanctified by the Holy Spirit”?
And how do we know when the Holy Spirit is present and active in our community
and in our lives?

In a few minutes (OR at our 10 AM gathering) when we join together in the Great
Thanksgiving, we will pray that this very thing happens once again:
that we may be “sanctified by the Holy Spirit”.

How do we know when this happens?

Today we are given this fascinating story from the Acts of the Apostles.
Samaria is about 30 miles north of Jerusalem, in the present-day West Bank.

Philip, one of the first deacons appointed by the apostles, goes there because of the
persecution of the believers in Jerusalem.

In Samaria, he shares “the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of
Jesus Christ”. And he also meets Simon the Great.

Simon Magus is the Latin name that the early Church gave to him.
It is fascinating to note that we do not know precisely what he was.
He is called “mageus” and the plural of that title is “magoi” from which we get
“Magi” – the mysterious visitors who came from the East in search of the newborn
King, and which we just celebrated at the Epiphany.

Who are these “magoi”? Are they astrologers, intellectuals, magicians, wizards
even? We don’t really know, but they were certainly men of power and wealth and
influence.

Despite having all of these things, Simon heard the good news from Philip and put
his trust in the name of Jesus and was baptized. So far, so good, right?

Things went downhill for Simon when he encountered the Holy Spirit.

Peter and John came from Jerusalem to check up on this shocking news that Samaria had received the good news. And they came bearing the apostolic authority.

It was the task of the apostles to distribute the gifts of God for the good of the beloved community. Earlier in Acts, we hear of how the apostles distributed food and money to all as needed, so that everyone's needs were met.

Now, in this story, the apostles distribute the power of the Holy Spirit to all as needed, so that everyone has a share in the Spirit.

But how, exactly, does that work? Don't you wonder?

How, precisely, does the uncontainable, unmeasurable God in whom the entire universe exists become tame, we might say, and responsive to the movement of human hands?

You should know that this story is one of the primary justifications for the ancient practice of Confirmation.

When Peter and John came from Jerusalem to confer the gift of the Holy Spirit, Simon noticed "that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands."

Why did it work that way? There is no explanation given in the text, only the story. And the story is that the apostles were given authority to distribute the gift of the Holy Spirit to the believers.

And they passed this authority on to their successors – how? – through the laying on of apostolic hands. And those successors laid hands on the next generation and gave this authority, and so it has continued – more or less continually – through the Bishops of the Church until our own day.

To come to the Bishop for the laying on of hands in Confirmation – or to be Received – is to come to the apostles and to ask for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Simon the Magi, the wizard - he wanted this gift so that he too could confer the Spirit on others, so that he too could do the signs and great miracles done by Philip and the apostles – not by magic trick – but by true divine power!

Simon had power and money already, and he was ready to use his money to gain even more power for himself!

Foolish man. Peter lays into him with a stinging rebuke. It is a curse, actually. And with prophetic insight, he diagnoses the true problem with this man: “Your heart is not right before God.”

Eutheia is the word in Greek. Simon’s heart was not “eutheia” before God. It means straight, direct. It is also used when referring to time to say immediately, straightaway.

What Simon wanted was not God, not the Holy Spirit, but power. If you have ever heard of simony – the buying and selling of ecclesiastical offices and privileges, this is exactly where it comes from.

Of course, in our world, money equals power, and if you have money, then you will be powerful. And you are likely then to get even more money.

This is not how things work in the realm of the Spirit. Simon himself believed the good news about the kingdom of God, and he was baptized, but his heart was not changed.

And in the spiritual realm, in the eyes of God, it is always the state of the heart which matters.

This story is not about money. It’s about the Holy Spirit. It’s about how some people are changed by the Holy Spirit, while others – like Simon – are not. They remain blind and cannot receive the Spirit.

So how do we know? How do we know when the Holy Spirit is present and active in our community and in our lives? How do we know whether or not the Holy Spirit has come upon us?

You should know that there are MANY different answers to that question!
The classic answer from the Church is the one that's found in the Catechism of the Prayer Book. Let's take a look at it quickly together. Please pick up a red Prayer Book and turn to Page 852 toward the back.

I'll ask the questions and would you please provide the answers together as printed.

The Holy Spirit: The first question in this section is:

Q. Who is the Holy Spirit?

A. The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity, God at work in the world and in the Church even now.

And at the bottom of Page 852, there is this question:

Q. How do we recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives?

A. We recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit when we confess Jesus Christ as Lord and are brought into love and harmony with God, with ourselves, with our neighbors, and with all creation.

We recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit when we confess Jesus as Lord and are brought into love and harmony with God, ourselves, our neighbors and all creation.

I admit that I like this answer. I like this explanation. It works for me.

But I don't think that this describes what is going on here in this story from Acts. And I am very, very aware that there are many other Christian groups who answer this question of how to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in a very different way.

Just consider the language used in today's texts. The Gospel speaks of the Holy Spirit descending upon the Lord in bodily form like a dove. Acts states with matter-of-factness that the Holy Spirit had not come upon the believers in Samaria. In fact, the original text is more direct, as it says that the Spirit had not "fallen" on them.

Well, how did they know that?

Surely, there must have been some kind of visible, measurable change that occurred when the apostles came and laid their hands on the Samaritan believers.

The New Testament is full of examples of amazing things that happened when the Holy Spirit showed up. Radical changes, surprising healings, signs and great miracles.

And there are many Christians around the world today who will tell you that you MUST experience these things in order to KNOW that the Holy Spirit has fallen on you.

These are the 300 million Pentecostal Christians, and their numbers continue to grow rapidly around the world as people hunger for a direct and immediate experience of God in their lives.

Are they wrong? Or do they have it right?

I confess that I do not know how to answer this.

But what the Spirit tells me is that Simon's story can show us the way.

Simon was cursed because the intent of his heart was for selfish gain.

How do we know when the Holy Spirit has fallen upon us, when we are sanctified by the Holy Spirit?

With or without signs of divine power, we know it when our hearts are right.

When there is no greed among us, no love of money.

When there is no desire for power or control.

We know it when we love the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus more than the things of this world.

When the desires of our hearts are consistent with the desires of God.

What is it that you really, truly desire?

Let us pray.

Come, Holy Spirit, descend upon us, and breath into us the full power of God, and make our hearts straight and pure in your sight. Amen.

