

Our text today takes place in the midst of both an exciting and a scary time for the new church. After the passage Ruth preached on last week from Acts 4 about testifying, the followers of Jesus do some amazing things. The authorities are not happy. These upstarts come in, working miracles and preaching of the power of Jesus. Jesus, the guy these authorities had killed.

**They try to stop them.
They ask them politely to stop.
They flog them.
They put them in jail.**

But none of it works. The apostles rejoice in prayer as they are being flogged. God breaks them out of jail. More and more and more people follow them.

But not everyone understands their message. And, as people are wont to do when they don't understand someone, they assume they are wrong—it couldn't be a problem with us?!—and they start giving negative reports about Stephen. He was full of grace and power. And he gives a fairly succinct history of the Hebrew people to the authorities when they bring him in for questioning. He probably would have been okay with that, but then he gives them one, last, paragraph. It is in Acts, chapter 7:51, if you want to follow along.

“You stiff necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors NOT persecute? You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it!”

He literally puts them in a frenzy—they were enraged and ground their teeth at him—and they stone him. To death. And then Saul enters the text, approving of Stephen's death. The apostles are scattered. And Saul begins ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off men and women, committing them to prison for being followers of Christ.

So, this is the context for the passage we heard this morning. But before we get to today's text, let's pause for a moment in prayer for

those who still, to this day, are persecuted for their faith, for speaking out in testimony for what God has shown to them.

Let us pray:

God, we pray for the courage to testify, but the reality is that speaking out for you, for justice, for inclusion, for peace, for human rights, and for the other issues for your gospel compels us to advocate—the reality is that it can be dangerous. For the Christians around the globe who, even today, are at risk if bibles are found in their homes, we pray for safety and for courage to prevail. For the prophets who tirelessly call your church to remember its' calling and face critique from within the church for their troubles, we pray for courage to prevail. Give us ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church through the voices of your prophets. We give you thanks that we can come to worship you in freedom and peace. We are comfortable, but we seek to be alive. Give us the confidence to take your message of love, of welcome, of grace, to a hurting world in need of something only you can provide.

Amen.

So, Phillip has left Jerusalem and headed to Samaria. The crowds listened to him with great eagerness—perhaps the woman at the well had already told them about Jesus—and he healed the paralyzed and the lame and cast out unclean spirits.

And then we meet a man named Simon. He is not the same person who is Simon Peter. This Simon was a magician. He had quite a following in Samaria. They liked his magic and figured that his magic was a sign that his power came from God. And it appears that Simon did nothing to disabuse them of their mistake.

This text, at the least, should be a reminder to us to be careful of a crowd's tendency to follow a charismatic leader. Because not all leaders are the same. Simon seemed to be gathering crowds to bring himself more power. Phillip was drawing people to Jesus. He wasn't preaching the gospel for personal power and fame. He was preaching the gospel despite the personal risk he was facing from Saul and the authorities.

But even Simon leaves his magic show and follows Phillip. Simon knew fake signs and wonders. That was his job. When he encountered real signs and wonders, however, he left his 3 card monty on the street, was baptized, and followed Phillip to learn more about Jesus.

Gospel According to the Beatles: (Money Can't Buy Me (God's) Love) Acts 8:9-25

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Phillip was so successful in Samaria that reinforcements come in to help bring the Spirit to these new converts with the laying on of hands.

Simon wanted to get some of that and he offered them money and said, "give me this power so that everyone on whom I lay my hands can have the Holy Spirit".

Now, Simon doesn't fare well here. Phillip says, (PLAY Beatles clip here "Can't buy me love...can't buy me love...can't buy me love" CUT)

No, Phillip actually says,

"may your silver perish with you because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money!" And commentators through the ages don't seem to like him either. Do you know what the word is for the buying or selling of church favors or offices? Simony. We even named it after our Simon of Samaria.

And maybe Simon was a bad guy. He'd been a huckster magician before Phillip showed up, after all. Perhaps he wanted to buy this power so he could use it for himself.

But I wonder if he just thought that was how the world worked. If you want something, you buy it. I mean, he has a point. There isn't much out there that in the world that is free. I wonder if Phillip was too quick to presume Simon's motives. Perhaps he could have said, "Simon, I know that *your* experience of the world is that nothing is free, that you have to buy and earn your honor, your prestige, your standing, everything. But that is yet another illustration of the power of God in Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God functions under different rules. God's Spirit is not something we earn. It is a gift, given freely out of the deep and unknowable mystery of God. So put away your money. Better yet, give it away, lest you think it is something on which you can rely. Money can't buy you God's love."

I am sure the Stewardship and Finance Committee is shaking their heads and wondering if I remember that it is Stewardship season. And I do. I know that this may seem an odd text to preach during Stewardship season. But maybe not.

Perhaps it is good to be reminded that we aren't pledging money so that we can have God's power. Perhaps it is good to be reminded that we aren't pledging money so that we can buy God's love or God's favor.

Perhaps we need to be reminded, like Simon needed to be taught, that money can get in our way. That it can make us rely on our own skills and resources and keep us from relying on God.

Stewardship, while it is about building a budget, is not only about that. It is our response to this gift we've been given from God in Jesus the Christ.

Stewardship is what we do with what we've been given. We could be like Simon, pre-conversion, using our money, charisma, and talents to attract great crowds of followers and great TV ratings. Or, we could be like Phillip and the apostles of the early church, who gave all they had—including their good standing in the community and their physical safety—to follow Jesus.

Stewardship is how we say thank you to God. That is why we have the offering in the service after the sermon—because our offering of ourselves and our resources is a response to God's word in our lives. We don't give money in order to hear God's Word to us. It is our response.

How different would Simon's experience have been if he had received the power of the Holy Spirit and *then* offered his money in gratitude and thanks?

Maybe all the commentators are right and Simon was only following Phillip to learn his magic tricks, wanting to harness the power of God for his own ambition. If so, Phillip was surely correct to call him on his wickedness.

**But I hope that he just was too new to this crazy world of grace and didn't know any better. I hope that his prayer was sincere at the end of Phillip's speech,
"Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me."**

I pray that Simon was able to get his mind around this new paradigm of grace, where the real power for change in the world is not for sale.

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I pray that we can get our minds around that paradigm too. Because the lobbyists are out there buying political favor left and right. Because Hollywood and the advertising world often sell us lies about beauty, success, and power. Because we often live as if money will buy us love.

But here is the good news. God's love does not need to be purchased or earned. It has been given to each of us, and to all creation, in the unfathomable generosity of the God who created us. How will you respond to the gift you've been given?