



## **“Freedom of the Spirit”**

Pastor Jan Shannon

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### **Scripture:**

#### **Acts 8:14-17 (NRSV)**

“14 Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 15 The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit 16 (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). 17 Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.”

### **The Sermon:**

How many of you ever played an instrument in an orchestra or band? First chair or further down the row? How many of you ever played sports in school? Were you Varsity or JV? First team or second string?

Well, today you are getting the second string preacher. Now, I don't mean to demean myself, but in the hierarchical structure here at Westminster, if such a hierarchy exists, Pastor Andy would be Varsity and I would be JV. Andy generously gives me plenty of 'playing time' and occasionally I stand in for her when she is on Injured Reserve. Today is an example of a little bit of both.

In a happy accident, or by the plan of God, if you will, I was on the schedule to preach today, but since Andy has been out sick with a really bad cold all week, she might have called me off the bench to pinch hit for her anyway. You might call it an act of Providence.

Being second string isn't necessarily a bad thing. In my case, while I am still in school and still discovering what it means to be UCC, serving Westminster as Andy's assistant gives me plenty of practice and space to learn in, and the opportunity to take my time in

the learning. But in the case of the Samaritans, they weren't just second string; they were the scrubs.

The term 'scrubs' is often used to refer to the players who barely made the team and would be extremely unlikely ever to appear in an actual game that wasn't already a blow-out win or loss. I use that term to describe the Samaritans because they are like second cousins to the Jews. Descendants from the northern tribe of Israel, the Samaritans are Hebrew and Israelite, but not Jewish. Because they were convinced that the proper place to worship God is Mount Gerazim rather than on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, the Samaritans were rejected by their Jewish cousins are far back as the Early Fourth Century BCE. Nothing seems to separate family like religion. Can I get an amen?

So in our story today, we see that that Philip has been preaching the gospel to the Samaritans and some of them have believed and been baptized. Philip... who started his ministry career serving tables, so the original 11 disciples could focus on more important tasks. Second string, that's Philip – my kind of guy. Now he is preaching the gospel and changing lives. That's the Spirit at work there.

A second string preacher and a seemingly second string group of believers. What does that say to you? It reminds me of the verse just a couple of chapters further on in Acts where Peter is told, "Never consider unclean what God has made pure." You see, we don't get to decide what is unclean or second string. If God calls it good, then it IS good.

You can't contain the Spirit. "God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit." John 3:8 The Spirit of God is free to act, free to choose, and free to all. Who are we to decide how God will act, or put a limit on God's choices about who gets to receive the Spirit?

Acts is the story of the "Expanding geographical progression of God's providential work." And this work is not done. God is not done expanding God's kingdom. But, are we ok with a God we can't control?

Our Call To Worship this morning used some strong language about the nature of God. Are we OK with a God who thunders? The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic. Are we OK with majestic? How about powerful? The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And all in his temple cry, "Glory!" The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord is enthroned as King forever. IF God is 'enthroned' over the water, does that mean He is in control of the water? In control of the 'flood?' Are we OK with a God who floods?

Fire and water, both ancient symbols of the Holy Spirit, are hard to contain. Impossible even. Does a fire do damage, or does it cleanse? Does water cleanse, or does it damage? It may look like damage to us, but is it actually the cleansing necessary for some new growth?

You know, when I read this passage about the work of Philip, I had to be reminded how he got to Samaria in the first place. You see, after the stoning of Stephen, the persecution of the new sect called Christians got progressively worse, so bad in fact, that many of them fled, and Church was scattered far and wide. That sounds like a bad thing to me...refugees escaping religious persecution, but was it? Or was it God's way of getting the message of the saving work of Jesus Christ out to a wider audience? I'm not answering that question; I'm just asking...

I know that's not a message we want to hear, that God has the authority to cleanse and to renew. This is not easy theology; this is graduate-level thinking here. Some would reduce God, and the thinking about God that we call theology, to a set of memorized verses and programmed responses, neat and tidy and complete.

Would we keep God in this kind of a box? Some people do keep their God locked in a box. If you think you have it all figured out, have God all figured out, and you know all the rules and exactly what it's gonna take to be loved by God or accepted by God or get into heaven or whatever your endgame is, then you have God in a box. But that's God in a prison. The Spirit, often symbolized by fire and water, is free to do as she pleases. The Spirit cannot be contained any more than fire or water can be contained.

How many of you have ever had water damage in your home? We WISH we could contain water, don't we? We wish we could keep it where it belongs, but we can't and it's foolish to think we can. If we want to be effective change agents for God, if we want to be of any help in bringing the 'kindom of God to earth' as it says in the Lord's Prayer, then we need to be ready for anything!

You see, one primary characteristic of the Holy Spirit is its power to create unity. Unity in the midst of cultural, ethnic, and ideological differences and tension. Hmm, "ideological differences and tension" that sounds like an election year. Are we ready for the tension to rise and the ideological canyon between Americans to get even wider? Are we ready if the Spirit moves us to forge unity?

Unity across party lines? Unity across ideological differences? Unity that says, "Regardless of how our beliefs differ, or how wide the gap between our political views, I'm willing to work with you to bring healing and wholeness to the world." Are we willing to work with the Spirit to build unity?

The answer to that may lie in our ability to admit that we have a second string mindset about some people. Who those people are might be different for each one of us, but we have them. Each of us holds some group of people in disregard. Maybe it's a racial group, or nation. Maybe it's another religion or philosophical school. Maybe it's political. As welcome and accepting and tolerant as we think we may be, we need to constantly be on the lookout for those people we regard as second string. We need to be on the lookout for them, because God may be calling for us to go to them, reach out to them, pray for them, and receive them into us. Amen.

Please pray with me: Forgive us, God, when we forget how powerful You are, when we approach life as if we are alone. When we set ourselves up as judge and jury, and forget that You alone are God, forgive us. Remind us that You are God and we are not. Remind us that we are not alone. Amen.

Our Hymn of Response, "Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness," speaks of the gentleness of God...and the power of God. #286