

January 13, 2019– Baptism of Our Lord
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Acts 8:14-17

Fully Baptized

They got it in part, but not fully. That seems to be the implication of today's reading from the book of Acts. The Samaritan believers were baptized in the name of Jesus, they were recipients of grace—but only in part, not in full, not at first. Peter and John needed to stop by and lay hands on them, and then they received the Holy Spirit, so says today's reading from Acts.

This is odd. It's not in keeping with the book of Acts as a whole. Acts is the book of the New Testament that tells how Christianity spread after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Acts is something of a travelogue, it describes the movement of the gospel in the early church and some of the stops along the way. Today's reading tells of one such stop, a short stop, at only four verses long it's barely a story, but still it manages to make you scratch your head, to say, well, that's odd: some people in Samaria had been baptized, but there was something partial, or blocked, in their reception of grace. This is at odds with the overarching message of Acts, which is all about Christianity's ever widening scope. Acts shows how the reach of grace keeps being extended. The book begins in Jerusalem with Jesus' disciples gathering in the days after Easter, and then there's the day of Pentecost, with the Holy Spirit descending on Jews from all different places, and then there are stories of Roman centurions, and Ethiopian eunuchs, of various Gentiles who become believers, men and woman and entire households being baptized, in and around Jerusalem, and beyond. In Acts the movement of grace keeps expanding, reaching farther flung locations and more kinds of people. So it's odd that was some sort of stoppage with these Samaritan believers.

Not only is this an odd story for Acts, it's a particularly odd story to read today, on a Sunday on which we give thanks for baptism and celebrate what it does. This story from Acts is at odds with how we understand baptism. Baptism is the sacrament that is one and done. There's nothing partial about it. In baptism God says, "I love you, completely. You are my beloved. Here is power to live a new life." It doesn't matter who you are or where or when, or, for that matter, how it's done, the grace and benefits of baptism, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, are fully yours, then and there and regardless of who does the baptizing.

So why this story, today? What is going on with Peter and John going to see some believers in Samaria who seem to only have received what baptism is in part, at first?

Perhaps, some have wondered, perhaps the Samaritans lacked glossolalia, speaking in tongues. Worship in some of the early Christian churches did include speaking in tongues, it's mentioned in various places in the New Testament. It could be that the Samaritan believers hadn't been doing that, they were on the quieter side. Maybe this story today indicates that after the visit of Peter and John, something changed in their gatherings, the Holy Spirit started being expressed in a new way, a super lingual way. The Holy Spirit is expressed in that way in some churches, and still today, in worship that occurs in exuberant, charismatic ways. Some clergy colleagues and I were talking about this, about this story from Acts and what it was about, if it was about speaking in tongues, and a Lutheran pastor, an older gentlemen, shared a story about how he and his wife were once introduced to someone who, upon learning that he was a pastor, asked about his church. They asked whether it was a "Spirit-filled church," "Oh yes," his wife

replied, at which point he interjected, quickly, “but not that Spirit-filled.” He chuckled, as he recounted that story, as he heard what he said, “not that Spirit-filled...” He laughed, but ruefully, he sounded almost wistful.

Perhaps this curious little story from the book of Acts is about a group of believers who didn’t speak in tongues. Perhaps these Samaritans were the first Lutherans. Or perhaps it’s about something else. While glossolalia is mentioned in the New Testament, it’s hardly consistent in nor constitutive of the early church. It’s not required that you speak in tongues to show that you are filled with the Holy Spirit. The New Testament names it as a spiritual gift, but also often gives it less significance than other gifts.

But there is gift, a mark of Christian community, that is mentioned, much more often, that comes up again and again, throughout the New Testament. There is a spiritual gift that is given much higher priority than speaking in tongues, or, for that matter, any other gift of the Spirit. This gift takes precedence over, is more important than, gifts like eloquence, or knowledge, foresight, or generosity—even generosity of the most selfless kind. This gift is even more important than the gift of faith itself, if you can believe that: a spiritual gift of Christians, that is even more important than faith. You would think that faith is the most important thing for a Christian to have, but it’s not. This other gift is more significant even than that, is the greatest of all of these. It is so significant that without it, one misses out on the fullness of grace, one will have it only in part, if at all. Without this gift, one may be a Christian, one may be baptized, but only in name.

This is what the Bible says about this gift, in a letter to one of the early churches: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Without love, no matter what language or tongue we speak, no matter what words we use, whatever we will say is nothing but noise. Without love, we will not be understood—even when what we have to say is true. Perhaps you have experienced this. I know that I have, in personal relationships and in professional ones. To be heard, the truth must be spoken with love. This is in another letter to the first Christians, “speak the truth in love.” Without love, the truth makes a loud, often unwelcome noise, soon silenced, to the relief of many, like a cymbal from a drum set that is dropped on the floor. That’s truth without love. With love, though, words become music. With love, new ways of being become possible, reconciliation becomes possible, change becomes possible.

What would happen in our relationships, personal and professional, if we spoke the truth in love? What would happen in our political relationships? Can you imagine Democrats and Republicans speaking to one another? That would be a start, speaking together... Can you imagine them speaking to one another with love? Can Democrats and Republicans love one another?

Jews and Samaritans did, Acts tells us. Jews and Samaritans had a history of bitterness and division far beyond today’s right and left. But they came together, Jews and Samaritans did, in the early church, in baptism. It’s almost as if the Holy Spirit conspired to get them together in person, made sure they were physically together, even touched one another with the laying on of hands. “See how they love one another,” they said of the first Christians. And it became clear then, to all, that was a Spirit filled church.