



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



The Not So Wal Mart Gospel

Text: Acts 8:4-25

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If you recall the story of Stephen becoming helper or a deacon in the church, one of the others was a man named Philip. If you recall the story, the early deacons were called to help provide food for the widows. Stephen never seemed to get around to that. Instead he ended up preaching and getting killed for it.

Philip did likewise, though he was not killed. Philip, however, has two stories in Acts of the Apostles that are pretty amazing. This is the first.

Luke tells us that Philip went to Samaria to preach. If you read the beginning of Acts you'll note that they had been commanded by Jesus to preach to the ends of the earth, with the ends of the other being Judea and Samaria. Samaria being the real end of the earth no one wanted to go.

Upon the death of Solomon, who was a wretchedly corrupt king noted for his excessive debauchery (I kid you not!), the Jewish Kingdom split into a northern Kingdom known as Israel and a Southern Kingdom known as Judea. The capital of Judea was Jerusalem, and the capital of Israel was Samaria. The southern Kingdom kept all the rituals and rules of Judaism whereas in the northern Kingdom the people intermarried and Judaism eventually just sort of evaporated into the landscape.

The people of the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom despised each other. The people of Israel saw the people of Judea as self-righteous fools, and the people of Judea saw the people of Israel pretty much as filthy dogs.

Jesus had ventured into Samaria and made a Samaritan a hero in a story, but most others wanted nothing to do with venturing into Samaria. But Philip decided to venture there.

And Philip was a big hit. His preaching inspired people, he did signs and wonders and was turning the region to Christ. All was well.

There was a man named Simon who was a magician who dazzled the crowds. He too saw Philip, he too was impressed, and he too was Baptized.

Peter and John, upon finding out what a big hit Philip was in Samaria decided to go there as well. They began to lay their hands upon people and empowered them with the Holy Spirit to do great signs and wonders. Like Philip.

Simon, upon seeing the great power of Peter and John decided that it looked good to him. So he decided to try and purchase it from them. After all, having the power to pass on power would make him a fortune.

And, of course, he is roundly rebuked. He obviously missed the point.

People sometimes miss the point.

A young man, a blacksmith in the town, wasn't very good at his job and finally, one day, was asked how he had become the blacksmith, especially a such a young age.

He said, "Well, I came here to learn the craft of being a blacksmith. On my first day of work he told me to hold a large hammer. He put on a large glove and he then held a large piece of metal in the fire for 5 minutes. He said that when he took the metal out, he would nod his head and I was to hit it as hard as I could with the hammer. So, I did just that and I've been the blacksmith ever since."

He obviously missed the point.

Ever go to the store and everyone is working, doing something and everyone is too busy to wait on you? They missed the point.

I recently went into a restaurant. Employees were hustling around doing all sorts of stuff, washing tables, talking to each other, etc. I was waiting for a table. They washed more tables, swept the floor, etc. I was waiting for a table. They did some other stuff and I left. They missed the point of being in business.

Simon did as well. He missed the point that the Gospel was not about power, was not about profit, was not about being an ancient day Wal Mart with wares to sell, but the living, breathing Word of God.

Secondly, Simon did not understand the difference between illusion and the Gospel.

There are magicians but there is no such thing as magic. Magic is an illusion, a slight of hand. It is getting us to look to the right while they do something to the left. It is getting us to miss what is really happening.

Really good magicians are highly skilled and highly entertaining. But there is no such thing as magic. Even though the magician seemed to turn the baseball into a rabbit, the baseball is still

around there, someplace. Magic is not real, it's an illusion.

But sometimes people put their faith in illusions.

Most people crave love, attention, feeling good, or whatever. So often we end up putting our faith in illusion.

Some people long to feel good so they become addicted to alcohol, or drugs, or sex, or food thinking that if they keep doing it they will feel good. And they don't.

Some people long for security so they put their faith in ideologies of or world views that match their perspectives and long for security in that and it doesn't come.

I've known of many people who were disillusioned by so-called faith-healers only to find out they were dealing with illusionists.

People put their hope in money and believe that if they have enough money they will be happy. Sadly, the majority of people who win big in the lotteries end up losing their marriages and losing so many things in life that they live with regret that they had ever played the lottery to begin with. I often wonder how many people who put their money on the table down the road and win, find greater happiness.

The list of illusions is endless.

Peter and John condemn the magician for his goals. Peter says to the man:

Pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness."

The gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness sounds bad to me.

But the story ends with hope. Simon does seem to acknowledge his sin and his failure when he says: *"Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me."*

We never hear of Simon the Magician again so we don't know what became of him. But there's something to the way this story ends that is both hopeful and yet it's a cautious kind of hope.

Simon says to Peter and John to pray for him that dreadful condemnation does not come his way. It's a 'pray for me so that I do not get punished for my wickedness.'

Which is good. But there's an element that may be missing here. We don't know if Simon is asking for prayer in the hopes that their prayer will be enough or with the intent on turning his life around.

In the second chapter of the Letter of James, James speaks of faith and deeds, faith and works. His claim is that faith all by itself doesn't cut it. Works, the deeds we do, the life we lead is a reflection of faith.

As a result if we want to change our lives around we can pray all we want, but if we take no action the prayer is hollow. We can have great faith, but if we don't live that faith out, our faith is hollow. Luke does not tell us the future of Simon the Magician because we do not know.

He seems to get it. He seems to understand. He seems to want to go on the right path. But we don't know for sure because he still has to live his life.

The story begins with Philip going where no one else wanted to go. The story begins with Philip preaching to people no one wanted to preach to. Philip is effective and good; but his preaching brings about a downside. He preaches and converts an illusionist by trade and the gospel is, at its heart, challenged by illusion. We ultimately don't know how the story will turn out. We are left dangling.

And maybe that uncertainty at the end, perhaps the place where no one else would go, is a story which reminds us that the gospel is there in the world, but there are also illusions, and it is up to us to determine the difference.