

6th Sunday Easter Year “A”

May 24-25, 2014

Readings: Acts 8:5-8, 14-17; 1 Pt. 3:15-18; John 14:15-21

The Acts of the Apostles is so much more than a first century travelogue. It is a unique glimpse into the early Church and a wonderful lesson for us two thousand years later. It is easy to miss the theological point amidst all the names and places, many of which are quite inconsequential to the modern mind.

What is not to be missed, however, is the motivation of the central figures involved and the movement of the Church beyond Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria contained in chapters 8 and 9 of Acts. Two key points are contained in today’s passage—and they are connected.

First, we have the case of the Gospel being taught in a city of Samaria. Samaria was of course the capital of the 10 northern tribes during the longest period of their history. From the very beginning Samaria had been a city notorious for its idolatry. King Ahab had led the way in false worship, erecting an altar to Baal.

In a nutshell, the Jews did not trust the Samaritans, regarding their views as heretical, even though they shared with them a belief in the coming of a Messiah. At some point in the past there had been a rift between the two groups. Even today, about 500-600 Samaritans remain, living in the West Bank town of Nablus, near Mt. Gerizim, ancient holy site of the Samaritans. That Philip would undertake a mission to evangelize Samaria is quite remarkable in itself.

The second point worth mentioning is that this mission needed to be seen as part of the larger mission of the Church. This Philip, (not to be confused with Philip the Apostle in Acts 1) undertakes a successful ministry to the Samaritans all on his own.

He did not wait for approval or permission. This was the primary reason why the early Church sent Peter and John to offer the laying on of hands. They went after him because it was crucial that a missionary endeavor receive the blessing of the Church. St. Luke makes it clear that the Spirit is given only in conjunction with the authorized college of the Twelve. This happened, despite the fact that the mission was apparently going quite well. Unfortunately, our passage today is cut at the point of the laying on of hands, a gesture that will be carried out here at next Saturday's ordinations.

Immediately following this passage, a man named Simon (later referred to as Simon Magus in Christian tradition) asks the apostles for some of their power. "Give me that power too, so that if I place my hands on anyone he will receive the Holy Spirit." Peter rightly rebukes the man for trying to purchase spiritual power. It is not for sale! Thus, the word *simony* comes from this passage of Scripture.

Some might see Peter's actions as stifling the working of the Holy Spirit. Another view, one that I believe has more validity, is that Peter's action confirms the Holy Spirit- it witnesses to the action of the Spirit within the Church. We have our own examples of this 'confirmation' by the Holy Spirit, here within this Archdiocese.

Two examples come to mind- NET Ministries (1981) and Saint Paul's Outreach (1985)- two incredibly successful initiatives begun by the laity, and given the blessing and the support of the Church. People were inspired to share the Good News of Jesus Christ into areas that seemed to lack some focus, and needed new energy- God blessed them and we have been the beneficiaries of their vision. Jesus told his disciples that he would not leave them orphaned, but he will come to them. He says those words to us and they are words of great hope. We do not have to do it alone; in fact, we are weakened whenever we attempt to do this.

The Body of Christ suffers if we separate ourselves from the context of the local Church, despite our seeming best intentions. This is at the very heart of what it means to be in communion. St. Francis of Assisi was a more famous example of one who waited for the proper approval, even when his radical message put some on edge. He was patient and trusted that if his movement was of the Spirit, it would gain the necessary approval.

Even though Philip was filled with zeal, sincere and successful- still, St. Luke did not regard his missionary effort as a fully authorized endeavor. It took the imposition of the hands of the apostles and the conferral of the Spirit upon the members of the community to incorporate the immature Christian community of Samaria into the larger fold. This preserves the fold; it does not hinder the fold.

When we obey the commandments of the Lord, we remain united with him. And flowing from that, when we observe the decrees and precepts of the Church, we are showing our love for Jesus himself. Jesus was never separated from the community of the Church that he founded; sadly, too often, we have done this. Remaining rooted in a larger community can be painful and perhaps inconvenient. We call it obedience; ultimately it is for our own good and the good of all God's people.