

Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. ¹⁰All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." ¹¹And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. ¹²But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.

¹⁴Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵The 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). ¹⁷Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹saying, "Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." ²⁰But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! ²¹You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. ²²Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness." ²⁴Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me."

I love the Bible. I love it and I love preaching from it. I especially love reading portions, out loud, in church that aren't normally read. Today's story is one of those stories. It's kind of from the lectionary, but not really. As a reminder, the lectionary is the set of assigned scriptures that churches around the globe use to tell the stories of the church year. There are A, B, and C years, so every three years, the scriptures repeat, but even after three years, you don't hear every word of the Bible; and if you depend on your church to hear the scripture read, and don't read any at home, you may never hear the portions of the Bible that aren't covered by the lectionary, and there are many.

Today's assigned reading was just three verses in the middle of the text that we read - the verses about Peter and John laying hands on the new believers and the Holy Spirit coming upon them. There was no mention of Simon the magician in those verses. So, it wouldn't surprise me if some of you had never heard about the magician who was baptized and then tried to buy the Holy Spirit.

But when you hired me on, you hired someone who loves to give you the whole story. The before, during, and after of the lectionary, and Simon deserves some attention.

Simon is an interesting character. He's a showman. He knows how to garner attention and captivate a crowd. When we met him in our scripture, he had been amazing the people of Samaria for a while. He'd gotten a wonderful reputation. I mean, they were saying, "He is the power of God, which is called Great." (with a capital G) They listened to him. They thought he was just awesome.

Magicians have that way about them. David Copperfield. David Blaine. Harry Houdini. Even Penn and Teller. They're fun to watch. You concentrate when you see them perform. You hang on their words. Well, not Teller. Teller, from Penn and Teller, doesn't speak, but you watch him intensely.

Simon was no different. He had the people's attention. He probably had a stunning outfit. And when Philip showed up, it would have been easy to see Philip as a rival. In the verses that precede ours for today, Philip had arrived in Samaria after

persecution in Jerusalem caused the believers there to scatter, and he was casting out unclean spirits, healing the paralyzed and curing the lame. He was preaching about Jesus Christ, too, and it was working, because many were being baptized. It says that even Simon believed and was baptized and then he did something even more amazing. He stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed at what he saw.

I know that signs and wonders are really exciting. Whether it's magic or miracles, wonder workers have captivated audiences since the first Neanderthal pulled a rabbit out of a hole in the ground. Has anyone here ever paid to see a magic show? Maybe at Foxwoods or Mohegan Sun or Vegas? It's exciting, isn't it, to see something you can't explain?

Well, I want to capture that excitement for you, so I will demonstrate for you today a bit of magic.

First, I need a pen. Just an ordinary pen . . . ah. Here's one. It's blue. That's ok. I don't discriminate against blue pens.

I'm going to hold this pen with my left hand. There's nothing in right hand. I'm going to see if I can ask Holy Spirit to pull the pen out of my hand. Ok, Spirit. Take this pen.

Want to see that again? Ok. Again. Nothing around the pen. Just holding it gently. And . . . go ahead, Spirit. It's all yours.

Now. You may be skeptical. So let's try a different bit of magic. I wonder if anyone in the pews today has some change in their pocket or purse. Not many people carry change anymore. Does anyone have some change?

Great! Thank you! But wait. Don't take it out yet. I can't see that far away, but I don't want you to take it out yet. Let me just ask, "Almighty God, You are Omnipotent and Omniscient. You know the number of hairs on my head and the amount of change in _____'s hand. Tell me, God, how much money _____ has" . . . Ok. Let me just write that down real quick and hand that to Andy.

All right. Would you please count up how much change you have in your hand now? Those of you sitting nearby, feel free to help out or double check.

How much do you have?

Andy, what do I have written on the paper there?

Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Spirit of God! It's the power of God, folks! Not me, just the Spirit of God communicating to your humble servant!

It's exciting, isn't it? To think that there's invisible, magical powers afoot that can be summoned to do crowd-pleasing party tricks?

Well . . . they were just crowd-pleasing party tricks. Not spirit-filled signs of God's power. I like to believe God and I are tight, but not like that.

God's Spirit is not to be used as an attention-seeking display of sorcery. Simon's attempt today to buy the Holy Spirit so that he could use it for his magic act was ill-conceived, but as Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The problem with miracles is that it is hard to witness them without wanting one of your own."

Simon wanted access to the invisible power that he could only feign with slight of hand and illusion, and Peter was very offended when Simon offered to pay for the right to control the Spirit of God.

Peter wasn't having it. His reaction was swift and pretty judgmental. "May your silver perish with you!" Now some people think that Simon was condemned at this point, and that his plea that the apostles pray for his forgiveness went unanswered, but I remember this story in Mark in which Peter wants Jesus to have use his spiritual power to gain earthly power and then make Peter powerful, too, and Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

It gives me hope that if Peter can be come back from having been called Satan by Jesus, himself, that Simon can be forgiven for his error of judgment and can keep observing Philip and Peter and John and become a true believer himself.

But here's where the story gets personal. Just as Simon Peter once wanted Jesus to use his miraculous, mystical powers for personal gain, and just as Simon the Magician wanted to use the Holy Spirit for personal gain, we too want to use God's magic for our own good.

We're all as guilty as Simon when it comes to hoping that we can tap into the spiritual power of the Holy Spirit through our relationship with Jesus. That's what our prayer lives have become. A wish list for God to do God's magic. We pray, mostly, for people who are sick or injured to be made well despite what the doctors and pharmacists and therapists can do. We pray for peace where there is war waged by selfish wealthy men. For financial support where there is systemic poverty. We pray for cars to start when batteries are weak and for God to get involved in sporting events.

In the 2016 presidential primary, Governor John Kasich of Ohio said the quiet part out loud. He confessed, "Like many, many . . . people, the Lord became a rabbit's foot for me: Pull it out on test day, pull it out on Election Day. [I'd say] 'Come on, Lord, I got the rabbit's foot.'" He told the public that his faith has grown and he no longer sees God as a genie in a bottle, but he understood that for many Christians, our understanding of God is that God is there to do magic and to defy the odds and one's own preparation and reality.

It drives me crazy when I hear people invoking God at sporting events. But more than that, I was a little worried at the end of the Orange Bowl game Thursday night because the Notre Dame quarterback, Riley Leonard, who was evaluated for a concussion during the first half, was asked why the offense started clicking after halftime, and he said, "Shoot, I just started trusting the Lord. I looked up and said, Jesus, whatever your will is for my life, I trust it 100%." Then he looked at the reporter and said, "As far as the question goes, I forgot the question, but we got it going in the second half."

I wondered, as I listened to him speak, if his concussion helped him hear Jesus break down the defense or if Jesus used the fluid in his brain to help widen his peripheral vision or if Jesus made the cornerback drop back too far on the slant route.

Prayer is a powerful tool, but it is not the reason the Fighting Irish beat the Nittany Lions. I'm sure there were lots of Penn State fans praying for Jesus to push that final field goal kick wide right, but for whatever reason, Jesus didn't.

But nobody within the sound of my voice should believe that it was God's will for the game to end as it did. You can paint Jesus on a mural overlooking a football stadium, but that doesn't mean Jesus is your invisible 12th man on the field.

Because if God's will is that Notre Dame wins a game and cares about something so insignificant relative to what's going on in the world right now, then that same rationale would suggest that God's will was for the fires in California to destroy lives and homes and businesses. Or that God's will was for people celebrating New Year's Eve on Bourbon Street in New Orleans to become victims of terrorism. Or that God's will was for someone to get laid off and become homeless. You can't say that God was willing to show up in one place and not willing to show up in another just because it favors you.

The Spirit of God cannot be bought, nor does it show up for entertainment purposes or to decide playoff games. Simon could not buy it for his magic show and we cannot buy it for our own benefit.

We cannot buy God's love. Nor can we buy God's power. We cannot buy the Holy Spirit and say, "You belong to me now, like a winter coat that I can put on at will and take off at will." The Spirit of God is for those who believe. It is freely offered by God.

But it's not magic. That's not the power that Peter and John were empowering the believers in Samaria with when they laid hands on them. Instead, they received the Holy Spirit, which seems mystical and magical.

What we did earlier in the service by installing our officers and ordaining those who had not yet been ordained is not magical. It's an ancient rite that connects all the servant leaders of God who have been identified by the body of believers as spirit-filled, and humble, and full of wisdom and compassion; and we have set them apart for work that must be done. And believe me, work must be done. This church is in need of

people who think about how to care for others. Who have we not seen in a few weeks? Who needs some fresh flowers or a call or a card? How do we provide the right Christian education for our children, youth, and adults? What curriculum is available? How do we care for our building and grounds? How do we redesign a website that is engaging and inviting and have an encrypted on-line directory? How do we make the on-line streaming of the service more dynamic? How do we respond to natural disasters and poverty in our community and to a family among us that's grieving? How do we finance all those needs? How do we share the love of Jesus?

It's not magic. It's not a transaction. Having hands laid on you and being set apart for leadership of the church is a spiritual gift and a responsibility. You can't buy your way in. In fact, that's a sign you're not ready for it. Instead, it's a very special calling and heavy charge. Congratulations officers, now get to work. No smoke, and mirrors, and party tricks. Real, loving, service and extra hours at the church and a few difficult conversations to make sure we're always moving in the direction of the Holy Spirit.

You know, that's the real magic. People working together for the benefit of a church and community. The ones who don't do it for a salary or praise or pension. Just doing it for love. There is some magic there. Thanks be to God. Amen.