

## Acts 8:14-17 “The Secret to Happiness”

Our scripture this morning comes from the Book of Acts, which is a continuation of Luke’s gospel. Think of Acts as Luke’s “origin story” of the early church. In this short passage, we learn that a group of folks up north in Samaria has “accepted the Word of God,” which is a big deal since the Samaritans were seen as “unholy other” by most mainstream Jews of the day. When word got back to Jerusalem that the Samaritans were being baptized but hadn’t received the Holy Spirit yet, the disciples deployed Peter and John to help them out. And they did. Seventy-six word story. Shortest one we’ve had in a long time. Briony had to blow this one up into giant-sized font to fill the back page of the bulletin. So what, may you ask, is so special about this 76 word story? Lots of things!

First of all, when you read about anyone being baptized in the New Testament, they usually receive the Holy Spirit right there on the spot. In the case of these Samaritans, though, they had been baptized, but hadn’t received the Holy Spirit. Peter and John’s solution? They prayed and laid their hands on the Samaritans. “Well, that sounds kind of weird.” Not really. The practice of laying hands on people as a blessing has been around much longer than the Christian tradition. It has been used by many cultures throughout the world, especially during rites of passage when a person is going through a transformation in life. So why did Peter and John have to go up to Samaria to lay hands on these new believers? Did the Samaritans not use the right words to invoke the Holy Spirit when they baptized the new believers? Did they use the wrong kind of water? Was it faulty theology or incorrect liturgy that prevented them from receiving the Holy Spirit? Did the apostles have to send Peter and John because somehow they were more “holy” than those poor Samaritans, and they needed to be there to “do it right?”

Some people think that the only way to receive the Holy Spirit is to receive the *correct* form of baptism. And that’s when most churches turn to the example of Jesus. That’s why the Christian Church (Disciples of

Christ) baptizes by immersion. That's the way Jesus did it. John immersed Jesus in the Jordan River at the beginning of his public ministry and the Spirit descended down on Jesus like a dove. So that must be the formula then. After Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus told his disciples to "go into all the world, and preach the gospel to all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." Later, when Peter preached his sermon on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, the people who were ready to come to faith asked, "What do we do now?" Peter said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." There's that formula again! This must be how we're supposed to do it. But here's a question – Is that what happened when Jesus' 12 closest disciples ... the ones who would eventually be referred to as "the Apostles" ... is that what happened to them when *they* got baptized in water? Well, honestly I can't answer that because there is no biblical account of any of the apostles being baptized in water. There *is* a record of the apostles receiving the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost though. They were gathered together in one place and the Spirit came in like a rushing wind and tongues of fire descended on them. No water involved at all, but the spirit was definitely present.

These Samaritans in our scripture today had been baptized in water, but why did they have to wait until Peter and John got there to pray with them and lay hands on them before they could receive the Holy Spirit? So rather than getting mired in a debate about the correct form of baptism, which is usually what ends up happening when we have these scriptures in front of us, let's talk about what's going on here *relationally*. What I want you to consider this morning is what part *others* play in receiving the Holy Spirit. Remember, prayer and the laying on of hands isn't a "Christian Church" original. Prayer and the laying on of hands is related to passing something on from one person or one group to another. Peter and John's presence, I think, was important because it signified a *connection* between the believers in Jerusalem and the new believers in Samaria. Peter and John had already received the

Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. They had been following Jesus for three years, and were doing their best to continue his mission and ministry. They had come to faith when Jesus called them to follow. But it wasn't until later that they received the Holy Spirit. The Samaritans came to faith because they "believed the Word." In other words, they had already decided to follow Jesus. But in personally receiving Peter and John into their community for a time of prayer and human connection, they were able to experience this exciting, next-level "life in the Spirit" that is so essential to our spiritual growth. So for me, this scripture is all about the importance of human connection and how that relates to our ability to connect with God and to our spiritual well-being. It's about relationships.

In 1938, Harvard University began tracking a cohort of 268 people in an attempt to discover the secret of happiness. Of course they made it sound all official. They called it "The Harvard Study of Adult Development" and it remains one of the longest studies ever conducted about human behavior and development. The data it yielded changed the way sociologists, medical professionals, psychologists, and anthropologists think about how we work as individuals and as a society.

The study eventually tracked more than 1,300 children and grandchildren of the original 268 subjects and found that the degree to which we have strong, long-lasting relationships is the single greatest predictor of how happy or joyful we will be in life. And get this, it has a remarkable effect on our physical well-being and even our longevity. In the 11 years that I've been here, I've officiated memorial services for 9 of our members that lived on this earth a century or more. And that's not counting some of the ones who almost made it but not quite. What does that say about our church? Cynics and nay-sayers might say, "It says your church is a bunch of old people." I choose to frame it in the positive, and quote Maxine Davis, one of our saints who lived to the age of 92 – "We aren't a friendly church. We're a loving church."

Can you imagine that? Strong, long-lasting relationships are the biggest contributors to health, happiness and long life. Not genetics. Not wealth or fame or where we live. Not even our vocation. It's all about relationships. And not just family relationships either. Our friendships and our connections to our local community have an impact as well. So guess what folks? Going to church is good for you after all! So is volunteering, going to parties, family outings, or concerts. Taking a class through CARD or some other adult continuing education center or joining a fraternal organization like Elks or Masons. Playing Bunko. Being a part of a support group. Square dancing. It's all good for you.

So why, then, do we spend so much time, energy and emotion focusing on other things in our pursuit of happiness? Maybe it's because relationships take *work*. They require vulnerability and compromise. We may have to put ourselves in other people's shoes and see things from a different perspective. And this may lead to change! It's so much easier to go out and get a fancy new toy so we can get that "wow!" reaction from a stranger. "Wow! Cool new pickup truck!" Or, "That's a mighty nice looking boat you have there." Or, "Say, is that a Giorgio Armani dress you're wearing?" The only work involved is saving up some paychecks and going shopping. And the "wow" you receive is a lot more immediate than what it takes when you have to invest time and emotional energy into getting to know somebody.

Our country's Declaration of Independence says that each one of us has been given three inalienable rights by our creator: Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I think one of our biggest problems is that we got caught up in pursuing wealth and esteem instead of happiness. Maybe we thought that wealth and esteem would automatically lead us to happiness. But when we consider the number of high-profile celebrities who have achieved wealth and esteem yet have taken their own lives, it's clear that something is missing. One of the great ironies of human behavior is that we'll do something in pursuit of a goal only to have that very thing keep us from achieving what we think we want.

Connections matter. Relationships heal. And I believe how that relates to us is that we cannot live a spirit-filled life apart from a community of faith. You might say, as I often do, “Oh yeah? Watch me.” Believe me, I get that. I am an over-the-top introvert on the Myers-Briggs scale. I spent 9 days of my 2016 Sabbatical in silence up in the mountains all by myself, and it was *easy*. You know what’s hard? Doing a silent retreat at a monastery with other people. That’s when you have to work in community and cooperation with other people without the benefit of the spoken word. That’s where you have to be intentional while doing the day’s work or when you’re eating meals. How do you receive what you need to make it from day to day when you can’t speak? That’s when you have to learn to listen on a spiritual level. That’s where you have to *connect* with others on a spiritual level. That’s not easy. But that’s also where we learn the true value of the Holy Spirit in our lives. That’s where we learn the importance of being one in Christ.