

June 30, 2019  
Acts 8:14-25  
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## **“Not For Sale”**

**Good morning. We having been making our way through the book of Acts over the past few weeks: this could be a much longer project if we to take every chapter and verse; instead I have been dipping in every few chapters or so as we follow the narrative of the mission of the church and the activities of the apostles after the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Along with this sermon series on Acts, many of you have been studying the book “Draw the Circle.” We are in the midst of prayer challenge here at Creekside, where individuals have made a commitment to daily prayer and listening for God’s voice. When we listen, journal, and pray I believe that we are drawn by the Spirit to be centered in the peace and grace of Jesus Christ, and sent out to share the mission and vision of the church.**

**Some things have been happening in and around Jerusalem since Peter and John healed a man who was lame from birth, back in chapter 4. You may remember the apostles’ bold statement to the Jewish council when they were released with a warning and told not to teach or preach in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. They responded, “You decide whether God would want us to listen to you or not. But we cannot keep silent about what we have seen and heard.” A stirring speech, and the Jews had no choice but to let them go. The very next section in my Bible is titled, *The Believers Pay for Boldness*.**

**The rest of Chapters 4, 5, and 6 include stories of community with the believers sharing their possessions; of service with them appointing a group of seven men to coordinate distributing food to widows and orphans. This group was headed up by a man named Stephen, who was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. But in the midst of this good work, there is increasing pressure and persecution from the Jewish authorities. Some of the apostles are arrested and sentenced to death and released only because of visionary testimony by a**

Pharisee on the Jewish council. Then members of the synagogue start false rumors about Stephen, get him arrested, and have false witnesses testify against him. Sound familiar? That is at the end of Chapter 6. Chapter 7 is a long speech by Stephen to the council in his defense, which ends with him saying, “You stiff-necked people! You are forever opposing the Holy Spirit just as your ancestors did. You killed the prophets who foretold the coming of Jesus Christ, and now you have betrayed and murdered him, too.” Stephen pays for this boldness. He is dragged out of Jerusalem and stoned, and those who did it lay their costs at the feet of young Pharisee named Saul, who watched the whole thing.

When you pray for boldness from the Holy Spirit, you may end up paying for it. It might cost your reputation, or your pride. It could cost your freedom or your health or your life. That is a pretty high cost; few if any of us will ever have to pay that to proclaim our faith, but there are believers in Nigeria and Malaysia and North Korea who have had to pay that price.

The apostles who saw Stephen killed were bold, but they weren’t stupid. They scatter from Jerusalem, pursued by Saul, who was searching house after house and dragging men and women off to prison. This brings us to Chapter 8, and the apostle Philip, who has fled Jerusalem south to city of Samaria. He is enthusiastically received because he is casting out demons and healing the paralyzed and the lame. There is a man named Simon who is particularly interested in what Philip is doing: Simon was a magician by trade, and although his magic was good enough to make a living, it was nothing like what Philip was doing. Simon watched in amazement as the people of Samaria believed in the good news of the kingdom of Jesus Christ and were baptized. Simon himself came to believe and was baptized, and he hung around Philip all the time, trying to see how Philip accomplished the signs and miracles which took place.

Our text begins in Chapter 8 verse 14. Peter and John are sent to Samaria because they have heard about Philip’s ministry there. Peter and John lay hands on the new believers who were baptized in Jesus name, and those believers receive the Holy Spirit. Simon watches in amazement and says, “I want to buy *that* kind of power. How much do I have to pay you to make it so when I lay my hands on someone

**they receive the Holy Spirit?” Peter sets Simon straight in a hurry. “You and your silver can go . . . away. Did you think you could buy God’s gift with money? You have no part in this power.”**

**I don’t know if you have ever bargained with God -- by that, I mean if you have ever prayed that if God would just do something -- like help you pass this exam, or get you that job, or let your child live -- that you would do something for God in return: go to church every Sunday, stop drinking, give \$100,000 dollars to the church. (I guess God hasn’t answered that prayer yet) I have prayed prayers like that and I believe that God answers imperfect prayers from imperfect people. But I agree with Peter, who made it clear to Simon that the power of the Holy Spirit is not for sale. As Stephen, full of faith and the Holy Spirit found out, power is not for sale but it comes at a cost. The more I notice God at work in the world, the more aware I am of answers to prayer, and that they don’t necessarily make our lives simpler. I want to tell you about some answers to prayer that I heard about this week: one from a friend of mine, one from a member of this congregation, and one from me.**

**Jackie is the friend who gave me a copy of “Draw the Circle” this April. Eighteen months ago she was in an automobile accident which left her with thousands of dollars in medical bills and a lot of anxiety about driving a car. The accident was not her fault; the other driver acknowledged this at the scene of the accident, but changed his story when contacted by his insurance company. Jackie eventually hired a lawyer, and in April gave 6 hours of testimony in mediation. This May, she had a deposition where she was scheduled to sit for cross-examination by opposing lawyers for 10-12 hours. She was so anxious on the drive to Indy that she took her prayer journal, and when she arrived early, sat down to write to focus herself. The opposing counsel was late: they had discovered a discrepancy in their case with the hospital bills. They decided to drop their case against Jackie and pay all her medical bills. That was Day 40 of Jackie’s prayer challenge.**

**Grace Mishler has committed to the 40 Day Prayer Challenge at Creekside. She is praying each day at 7:00 a.m., and has laid out a scarf (maybe more than one) in a circle on the floor to remind her to pray. On Tuesday morning at 7:01, she was praying for refugee**

children. At 7:03 the phone rang with an offer from the Conway Education Center in Belfast, Ireland, offering her training to work for the protection and safety of children. Grace will be in Ireland with her granddaughter for 5 weeks this summer. Although Grace didn't know it until after she received the call from Conway Center, they are a half mile away from where she will be staying: an easy ride by taxi or city bus.

I have been praying for our Community Ministry at Creekside, specifically the recipients of our container gardens. It's been a learning process, and there have been some hiccoughs along the way, especially in developing relationships with people whom we think would benefit the most from vegetables they grow where they live. How do we identify them and why should they work with us? There were a couple folks who stopped by our planting day at Church Community Services on May 18, just to see what we were doing. There was a man and his mother who planted a container: she did not speak much English, but he was clearly fluent in both English and Spanish. I called him the next week to see how his garden was doing, but he didn't return the call. Last week I texted him, and asked about his garden and another question. Here's a bit of that conversation:

**Me:** Are you interested in doing translation which could help our ministry?

**Him:** What is the need? English service with Spanish translation over earbuds? Translation of literature for your Spanish community?

**Me:** You have more skills than we thought we needed. Maybe we need to think bigger.

**Him:** Joseph had more skills than needed in all aspects of his journey, but God made him a dreamer and filled him with potential and purpose beyond his 10 older brothers. Any step is a good step. I'd be happy to help with your ministry in any way I can.

I don't know where further conversation will lead; almost certainly to places I didn't expect when I sent that first text. I believe that the Holy Spirit is at work here, and that scares me a little bit, frankly., because any illusion I had of Creekside being in the driver's seat is (and should be) wrong. We can't buy the power of the Spirit, but it comes

at a cost. Developing relationships takes time. Working with people from varied communities and cultures means learning different rules and expectations, and, which takes some humility about our own. It will take financial resources: feeding the widows and orphans in Jerusalem meant that the disciples had to share what they had. And finally it will take communication. Communication may be the greatest miracle of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Acts 2 says that when the apostles were speaking, all of those gathered *heard* the message in their native language. Speaking is only effective if someone is listening. If God is speaking, but we're not listening, the power of the Spirit is not going to do much for us. If we are not speaking to God about the desires of our hearts or our dreams for this community of faith, God can still act, but we won't know it's an answer to prayer if we have not been praying. If we believe our prayer has been heard and answered, we had better be listening to one another to discern together what resources of time, energy and money we need in order to go where the Spirit is leading.

Blessings to you this coming week. Please remember the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference and the leaders who have been working diligently to listen for God's vision for our denomination. Pray for those gathered that they may listen before they speak, and speak in ways which build up the body of Christ. May you be drawn by the Spirit into praise and service. Amen.