

LAYING ON OF HANDS  
Acts 9: 14-24

Samaritans were to the Israelites what Palestinians are to the Israelis. Neighbors and yet enemies. So close and yet so far apart. According to strict Jews, the Samaritans were a half-breed race, once related to the Ten Northern Tribes conquered by the Assyrians in 721 BCE. They assimilated with foreigners and lost their distinctive allegiance to Yahweh, the God of Israel. So those who considered themselves the true children of Abraham looked upon them with contempt.

Two scenes in the Gospels illustrate this attitude. Luke alone tells us these stories. One is Jesus' famous parable of the Good Samaritan, the man who fell among robbers and was left for dead. The religious leaders then passed by on the other side to avoid helping his battered body. Only a despised Samaritan helped the wounded victim to health. And thus Jesus elevates the Samaritan to the role of hero and model, something totally unheard of before.

Then there is the story of Jesus and his disciples passing through a Samaritan village on his way to meet his fate in Jerusalem. These villagers refuse to accept Jesus or give them hospitality. So James and John are moved to anger and ask, "Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" Jesus is not amused and rebukes them. Jesus refuses to fire bomb these Samaritans, regardless of their lack of receptivity.

So it is a real irony that our text tells us that the early church sent out missionaries to all places-Samaria. Philip comes to the Samaritans with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Philip performs healings and exorcisms and people are amazed. Even a local magician named Simon the Great was converted and baptized. More about him in a moment. So even the Samaritans become believers in Jesus, those half-breeds are now brothers and sisters in Christ.

The apostles in Jerusalem learn of this amazing turn of events and send down Peter, the leader of the early Christian community. And who else accompanies him? John! Remember John was the one who earlier with his brother James wanted to fire bomb the Samaritans. Ah, the Gospel makes for strange and unexpected bedfellows! John comes with Peter this time without a threat but with an offer of fellowship and friendship in Christ.

In fact, Acts tells us that Peter and John pray for the Samaritans and lay hands upon them. Then the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit. Now this is all rather difficult to understand. But it appears that when Philip baptized the

Samaritans, it was into the name of Jesus only. Was there no mention of the Holy Spirit? Was their baptism then incomplete? Apparently so.

So Peter and John, as it were, complete their baptism with prayer and the laying on of hands. What does that mean? Perhaps it means that the Spirit that Peter and John had received at Pentecost is now passed on to the Samaritans. Their faith in Christ now is acknowledged and reinforced by the gift of the Spirit. Somehow the laying on of hands completes their faith in Christ and gives them the Spirit of Christ. What Peter and John had freely received they now freely give to their new sisters and brothers in Samaria.

Now the laying on of hands appeared to Simon the Great, the ex-magician, to be a new kind of Christian magic. The kind of magic where the power of God is mine to bestow. So Simon the Great asks Peter if he can purchase the power to lay hands on others and so bestow the Spirit on them. For Peter, because this is blasphemy, he threatens Simon the Great with judgment. “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God’s gift with money!” Thankfully, the text tells us that Simon the Great apparently repented and asked Peter to pray for him.

By the way, the effort to obtain some ecclesiastical benefit or office with money has ever since been called “Simony”. What Simon the Great tried to do lived on in infamy. During the Middle Ages this became a severe problem, because the office of bishop carried with it immense political and economic power. This ecclesiastical office was too often sold to the highest bidder. The bishop then had the unique power to lay hands upon new members and newly ordained priests. People thought of this laying on of hands as a kind of magic-magically passing on the gift of the Holy Spirit. Further, the Medieval Church then developed the notion that the only legitimate laying on of hands had to proceed in unbroken succession back to Peter himself. The apostolic succession, it came to be called. And thus the laying on of hands became the Church’s way of controlling the Spirit of Christ. This of course was all very controversial and very much disputed by the Reformation movement.

This morning I invite every one in this congregation who has been ordained to remember the time when hands were laid upon you. In that solemn moment you were set aside for service. That is what ordination means. That is what the laying on of hands means. Unlike what Peter and John did for the Samaritans, we do not presume to pass on the Holy Spirit to you. We acknowledge that the Spirit of Christ is already within your heart and your life. You received the Holy Spirit when you were baptized. We rather set you aside for service to Christ in this congregation. We formally acknowledge you as called to the office of elder or deacon. We thus commission you to serve well during your term of office. We

give thanks for the gift of the Spirit already present within your life. And we send you forth to serve the Lord with gladness.

So why do we lay hands upon you? It is a way of sending you forth. Think of it as the church huddling together, embracing one another, holding up one another, and launching you into service. It is a way of “paying it forward”. The love and support we have received from the Body of Christ, we now pass on to you. This is not magic. This is not some form of transfer of the Holy Spirit to you. We trust that the Spirit of Christ was already given to you at your baptism. And we believe with all our hearts that the Spirit of Christ is already within you—otherwise we would never have elected you. It is a way of nudging you forward into service.

Think of the laying on of hands as a loving parent gently encouraging the young child to take that dive off a diving board. Parents would never do this if they thought the child was unready to dive or unable to swim. The parent assumes the child IS ready. The child simply needs that gentle nudge forward, trusting that the dive will go well, the water will gladly receive them, and that they can swim ashore. That is the laying on of hands—that gentle nudge that gives you the opportunity to soar and swim and serve! The parent knew all along you had it within you already. And so do we who gather around you this morning to launch you into the service of Christ. We trust that the Spirit of Christ dwelling within you already will bear you up and carry you forward.

I remember well when I was ordained as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament on September 9, 1977, at First United Presbyterian Church of Las Cruces, New Mexico. I knelt before that congregation of God’s people surrounded by pastors, elders, and deacons. As the Presbytery gathered there about me, I felt the power of that great cloud of witnesses testifying to their faith and their love of service. It was their way of saying, “Dive in, the water is warm and ready, the fields are white unto harvest, the Lord of the harvest invites you to join in the labor. Welcome aboard! We are glad to have you.”

So this morning we gather here with our newly elected elders and deacons. We invite you to dive in and join in this labor of love. We lay hands upon you not as some form of magic. We lay hands upon you to acknowledge that you are called and commissioned to serve Christ with “energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.” We gently nudge you now to take that dive and trust the waters and trust Christ who alone is the head of the church. Welcome aboard. Welcome to this ministry.

Thanks be to God. Amen.