

The Book of Acts: A Spirit-Fueled Adventure!
Two Portraits of Conviction
Sermon on selected verses of Acts 8:4-40 (6/18 & 6/19/16)
Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

As I've already said, it's good to be back with you all here at McCabe, after a weekend away last weekend following our Annual Conference session in Sioux Falls. Annual Conference is always a very full time with colleagues and with our lay members to Annual Conference.

I'm grateful to have been able to take a few days off afterwards for some rest and relaxation with my husband and family. I'm also deeply grateful to Jim Jenness, one of our lay servants here at McCabe, who left Annual Conference early so he could get back here in time to preach and lead worship at McCabe last weekend.

Jim preached on the story of Saul's conversion in Acts chapter 9. As it happens, I'll be preaching on that same story *next* weekend, so those of you who were here last weekend – and who will be here next weekend – will get the opportunity to hear a couple different perspectives on the same biblical text!

Jim's sermon last weekend on Acts 9 was about transformation...and, really, *transformation* is a major theme throughout the book of Acts – because, throughout the book, we meet people who are meeting Jesus for the first time through the apostles...through the healing miracles they perform and through the words they speak.

See, when you meet Jesus – when you *really* meet him – you can't help but be transformed...you can't help but be made new...which is exactly what we see in the two distinct portraits of transformation – or, as I've phrased it in the title for this message, the two distinct portraits of *conviction* – in verses 4-40 of Acts chapter 8.

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The term “conviction” is so often associated with the law:

you get *convicted* of a crime and that means you are found guilty of having committed that crime.

When it comes to our life of faith, similarly, “conviction” often relates to sin: you somehow feel *convicted* regarding a particular sin in your life – perhaps you got caught in it, or someone directly challenged you about it, or you came to realize how problematic that sin actually is for you and others – and then you repented, you changed direction, you turned *away* from that sin, and you turned toward a life filled more abundantly with Christ's love. That's “conviction”.

A “conviction” is also a deeply held belief or value – something in your mind and heart that affects your behavior. We see this in positive and negative ways every day:

a conviction that Jesus calls us to welcome the stranger motivates many Christians to offer kindness to people they don't know and to offer welcome to people who are different from them...

whereas a conviction that certain groups of people are *inherently unworthy* can lead to the kind of mass violence that terrorized Orlando last weekend and that, almost exactly a year ago, terrorized Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Conviction is a powerful, powerful thing. We experience it in our lives, we see it affect our world, and it's all over the place within the pages of Scripture – including the book of Acts, the book of the Bible that is our focus for the summer here at McCabe.

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Our church newsletter for June and July included a reading plan for the book of Acts: each week of the reading plan corresponds to the preaching text for the upcoming weekend. The purpose of this reading plan is to give you a chance to read along with the sermon series.

If you've been reading along, following the Acts reading plan, and if you've been here in worship regularly since mid-May, you have experienced about the first third of the book of Acts.

And, if you've been paying attention, you have noticed the palpable presence of the Holy Spirit.

The book of Acts begins in the immediate aftermath of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. At that time, Jesus' followers were waiting for a sign from God as to what they were to do next.

That sign came when, on the first Pentecost – 50 days after Jesus' ascension into heaven – the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles, enabling them to share the message of Jesus in languages they did not know how to speak.

It was the first time that message was shared in a way that folks outside Jesus' own territory could learn about him. And the message of the Pentecost story is that God's love and power in Jesus Christ are for *everyone*: regardless of who you are, where you're from, or what language you speak.

That's the message of Pentecost *and* it's the message that drives the entire book of Acts. After Pentecost, the apostles were fueled by the Holy Spirit to share the message of Jesus with anyone who hadn't yet heard it. They healed in Jesus' name and they taught and preached about Jesus unashamedly.

We have heard about the Spirit convicting and directing the apostles in nearly every story we've read in this book of Scripture. As far as stories go, the Holy Spirit could absolutely be considered the main character in Acts. Yes, there's Peter and Paul and Philip and Stephen – they are all incredibly important throughout the stories of Acts, but none of them are ever as important as the Holy Spirit.

In the book of Acts, the Spirit is wild – doing unexpected things like busting apostles out of prison and, as in the case of today's story, instructing Philip first to meet an Ethiopian official...and then mysteriously taking Philip away from that same Ethiopian official immediately after Philip baptized him.

That said, before we think a bit more about the Ethiopian official, let's take a look at the story early on in today's section of Acts chapter 8: the story about Philip and Simon the witch.

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Early in Acts chapter 8, we are told the apostle Philip went to Samaria and that, while he was there, people crowded around him to hear him teach about Jesus and to witness him perform healing miracles. Well, in the city of Samaria, there was a man named Simon who had, for a long time, “practiced witchcraft and claimed to be somebody great.”

Simon's witchcraft – I'll call it *magic* – did, indeed, amaze people. But it was simply that: *magic*...perhaps illusions with no real power behind them other than Simon's own intelligence and ability to manipulate. Yet even he was somehow convicted by what he was hearing about Jesus.

So Simon became a believer and was baptized. However, his magician's heart didn't change right away: he seemed only to want access to the Holy Spirit as a way of further amazing people with his own power. He brought money to Peter and John and said, “Let me have this power! Then anyone I place my hands on will also be given the Holy Spirit!”

When the apostles performed healing miracles, and when they laid hands on people to give them the gift of the Holy Spirit, it was as a witness to Jesus Christ. It was never about *them*. It was never about what *they* could do, rather, it was about what *God* could do through them. But that's not what Simon was interested in. Simon tried to *purchase* the power of the Holy Spirit:

Simon wanted to amaze people simply for the sake of being amazing to others.

His heart wasn't right...so Peter called him on it in a pretty powerful way by saying to Simon, "You and your money will both end up in hell if you think you can buy God's gift! You don't have any part in this and God sees that your heart isn't right. Get rid of these thoughts and ask God to forgive you."

In this particular instance, that was all the conviction Simon needed: he asked the apostles to pray for his forgiveness – and that's the last we hear of that Simon.

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Simon was convicted by Peter's words – harsh words of challenge that went straight to Simon's heart. The Ethiopian official's conviction came in a slightly different way – in perhaps a more gracious, inviting way. //

As the second story in Acts chapter 8 goes, an angel of the Lord told Philip to travel south along a desert road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza. That day, an Ethiopian official was traveling the road on his way home from worshiping God in Jerusalem – likely near the Temple.

This official was a high advisor – the chief treasurer – for the Queen of Ethiopia and it's very important for us to know that, for a very specific reason, this Ethiopian official was a religious outsider. He was drawn to the God of Israel and, in fact, when Philip encountered him, he was in his chariot reading the book of the prophet Isaiah.

However, this Ethiopian official was a eunuch – meaning, he had been castrated... likely, because of his close working relationship with the Queen. That was just something they did back then.

Many translations of the Bible make it clear this Ethiopian official was a eunuch; the translation we use here most of the time left that out, probably because it's easier not to talk about eunuchs!

But, the fact that this official was a eunuch is crucially important to the story because his being a Eunuch made him "unclean" according to Jewish religious law. In fact, in Leviticus 21, it clearly states that eunuchs could not enter the house of God. Yet this man had made a long pilgrimage to Jerusalem simply so he could worship at the Temple.

We don't know the details of his trip to Jerusalem – like, we don't know whether or not he was allowed in or near the Temple to worship – but we know he was exploring the prophet Isaiah on his way home from Jerusalem...and that is what he was doing when Philip encountered him.

The Holy Spirit told Philip to meet up with the Ethiopian official's chariot and the two men began a conversation about what the official was reading in Isaiah.

And, of course, Philip used that as an opportunity to tell the man the good news of Jesus Christ...good news that included him, a eunuch who was expressly excluded from the Temple simply because of who he was.

Again, the message that drives the book of Acts is the message that the love and power of Jesus Christ is for *all* people – no matter who you are, where you are from, what language you speak, etc. The Ethiopian official was so convicted by this grace-filled message that he ordered the chariot to be stopped so that Philip could baptize him right then and there.

Unlike Simon the witch, the Ethiopian official's heart was in the right place – in fact, his heart *started* in the right place. His sense of conviction was from feeling the grace of Christ, from learning that God loved him as he was and that he could be welcomed into the church in a way he couldn't have been welcomed into the Temple.

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Conviction is a powerful, powerful thing. As I said earlier, conviction can lead to loving, welcoming acts...or it can lead to violent, hate-filled acts.

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Most of us, I suspect, find ways of behaving in response to our convictions on a regular basis.

If we are convicted that prayer is important, we will be prayer warriors. If we are convicted that learning Scripture is important, we will be students of the Bible. If we are convicted that Jesus Christ is Savior to all people, we will welcome the stranger and be brave in telling others about him.

And sometimes we may find ourselves convicted by the Spirit, interrupting life as we know it, compelling us to do something we weren't planning to do.

Many of us are familiar with the gentle leadership and guidance of the Holy Spirit: it's how we figure out what kind of work God wants us to do, what kind of service we are called to, or perhaps even the quiet sense that we need to check-in with a loved one for some mysterious reason.

Other times, God's Spirit convicts us in a more startling way.

For example, throughout Acts, the Spirit is constantly convicting the apostles to go to a specific place or to talk to a specific person. (Like the Spirit telling Philip to go to the road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza...the direction that led him to the Ethiopian official.)

My most recent experience of the Holy Spirit convicting me in a powerfully specific way happened a year ago – like, almost exactly a year ago. And it was directly related to the shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston,

South Carolina.

For the record, the Holy Spirit convicts me on a very regular basis, day by day, but the particular instance I'm going to share with you was quite possibly the most dramatic experience of conviction I've ever had.

It was the middle of the night, a day after the shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston last June. Earlier that day we'd had a meeting at church during which one of the attendees had asked me if we at McCabe were going to "do anything" in response to the shooting – hold a prayer vigil, or something like that.

The person asking the question was asking not only because it was a tragic mass shooting in our country, but because it had happened to Methodist brothers and sisters...beloveds of God who had been killed simply because of the color of their skin.

I responded feebly to the question, saying nothing was planned at that point...but the question stuck with me through the evening.

Then, in the middle of the night that night, a couple hours after I'd gone to sleep, I woke-up with the worst lower back pain of my life. It was like my muscles were clawing at each other and I thought, "I better get back to sleep fast or this pain is going to keep me up all night."

But I could not for the life of me get back to sleep. The pain was too excruciating... and that question was screaming loudly in my head: "Are we going to do something in response to the shooting?" A church member had asked me the question that evening, but, in the middle of the night, alongside that horrid back pain, I began to suspect it was the Holy Spirit convicting me.

I lay there for about an hour, trying to push past the pain and to suppress the question, but I couldn't accomplish either. So I finally yielded. "Okay, God – *fine!* We'll have a prayer vigil. I'll plan it in the morning." And, wouldn't you know it, but my mind instantly rested.

That, along with the 2 Ibuprofen I took for the back pain, helped me finally get to sleep. The next day we held a prayer vigil in our sanctuary, remembering those who had been hatefully gunned-down, praying for their families, and challenging ourselves to empty our own hearts of hatred and prejudice.

The prayer vigil was small, but that didn't matter. The Spirit had convicted us to do it and it was so important. Acts of hate-filled terror do not get the last word in this life.

I wasn't here last weekend and early this week when it would have made the most sense to plan a prayer vigil following last weekend's mass shooting in Orlando, but we *did* have an extended period of silence during the pastoral prayer today: it's not the same as an actual prayer vigil, but it's something. It's a way of lifting to God those who were slain by hatred...and a way of asking God to rid our own hearts of the kind of hate that leads to such terrorism.

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Simon the witch and the Ethiopian official were both religious outsiders: Simon because his heart was filled with pride and self-glorification...the Ethiopian official because he was a eunuch. Yet both men found themselves convicted by the challenging, forgiving, grace-filled love of Jesus Christ.

Simon and the Ethiopian official: two very different portraits of conviction. But, how about you? What convicts *you* about the challenging, forgiving, grace-filled love of Jesus Christ?

For me, it's often a call to action or a challenge to turn away from a destructive mindset. For you, conviction might be a call to receive much-needed comfort or to reorder your thinking about someone or something.

Conviction comes to us by the Holy Spirit in many forms...which is both good news *and* great challenge.

So may God help us respond appropriately when convicted by the Spirit. And, with word and deed, may we, like the first apostles, share the good news of Jesus Christ with all we encounter. Let us pray:

Almighty God, send your Holy Spirit to breakthrough into my heart and into McCabe United Methodist Church. Lead us to bold, new ways of sharing your love with one another, in our neighborhood, in Bismarck-Mandan, and beyond. May we look to you always as we build your heavenly kingdom on earth. We pray this in the powerful name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.