

Sandals, Fire and a Fork
(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, January 10, 2010)

Acts 8:4-24 ⁴Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. ⁵Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. ⁶The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, ⁷for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. ⁸So there was great joy in that city.

⁹Now 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."

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 ¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

I suppose the people 2000 years ago were not all that much different from most of us today. Times were tough back then, probably a lot worse than they are today. And people were looking for somebody to lead them out of their troubles, just like a lot of people today are looking for somebody else to solve their problems. Today we might be expecting the President to solve our problems, or the mayor, or maybe even the pastor. Back then they were looking for a Messiah. And we can read in the Acts 5:36 and 37, and in history, about some who rose up in those days and claimed to be the Messiah, or they at least gathered a following.

Simon the Samaritan and John the Baptist both could be included in this category. One obvious difference between these two is that Simon was trying to make a name for himself, but John was pointing to another, who he said would follow after him. Simon seemed to enjoy being the center of attention and he loved his power to amaze his followers. He became so intent on increasing his powers that he even tried to buy more power, the power of the Holy Spirit. But it doesn't seem that he wanted that power to help others, or to give glory to God. It appears that he wanted the power just to build himself up.

John the Baptist, on the other hand, clearly did not seek power for himself. Sometimes when people came to him, he criticized and rebuked them. He did not try to build up a following, or increase his own importance, but instead claimed that his whole ministry was to point to the one who was to come, to Jesus, the true Messiah.

John uses an interesting image – he says that was not even worthy enough to untie the thong of Jesus’ sandals. That is an ancient image. Back in that time, when people kept slaves and servants, a wealthy man might have a number of slaves in the household. Each one would be assigned various tasks – perhaps as a chef, or one who would serve food, or one to wash clothes or clean the house. But at the bottom of the list of slaves would be the one who would clean the master’s sandals. That could be really dirty work, because in those days there were no paved roads, no sidewalks, just dirt paths, and people walked. Sandals could get pretty dirty by the time a person came home. The one who would untie those sandals and clean them, was the lowest of all the slaves. And John says he is lower than that. He says that Jesus is so great, that he cannot even untie Jesus’ sandals. Can we come to Jesus with that much humility in our hearts?

But then John goes on to use two more images. He says that he baptizes with water, but Jesus will baptize with fire. We might think of the image from Pentecost, where flames of fire descended on the apostles, and they were filled with zeal and power to proclaim Christ to the world. But I would also remind you that the image of a purifying fire occurs frequently in scripture. I am sure that every one of us can recognize what Jesus has come to do. Are you ready to have the impurities burned out of your soul?

John then uses the image of a winnowing fork. Have you ever seen one being used? I occasionally saw village people in Ghana harvest rice in by using that ancient practice. They would cut the rice stalks and carry the bundles to a threshing floor, usually at the edge of the field, but sometimes at the house. Then they would take sticks, or maybe even a winnowing fork, if they had one, and beat that bundle of stalks to knock the grains from the stalk. They might toss some into the air so that the breeze could blow the chaff away, and then beat the stalks a little more, to make sure all the grain was loosened, toss it up again, let the breeze blow the chaff away again, and then toss the stalks away and collect the grain from the threshing floor. As you think about that image, ask yourself if you really want to come to Jesus if he is standing there holding a winnowing fork?

When you were baptized, or when you joined the church, if the pastor had told you to humble yourself, more than the lowest slave, and to prepare yourself to be purified by fire or have the chaff knocked out of you by a winnowing fork, would you still have wanted to join the church and become a follower of Jesus?

Of course, there is something else here. We see it in those last verses, in the baptism of Jesus. Luke tells us that after Jesus was baptized, heaven was open, the Holy Spirit descended on him, like a dove, and a voice spoke from heaven saying, “You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.” Remember, it was just last week that I reminded you that in baptism we are all adopted by God. In baptism we become sons and daughters of God. All the fire and all the winnowing is not to destroy us, but to raise us up, just as a good parent raises a child to be a good person. When we are baptized, we become sons and daughters of God, and whether we hear it or not, that same voice speaks to us from heaven, saying, “You are beloved, with you I am well pleased.” May I translate this into a more modern phrase? God says, “I love you.” Not because of what you said or what you did, but because you are my child.

Oh, I am sure we are going to mess it up. We will make mistakes – there is going to be a lot of chaff in our lives. But there is hope. Even Simon, who was so resoundingly condemned by Peter, asked Peter to pray for him. Was that a moment of repentance? We might think so, because his name is recorded by Luke. He may very well have been known by the early church, not because of his magic, or his following, but because of his repentance. We cannot know for sure, but when confronted by Peter, I see humility and repentance in Simon’s response.

And that is the starting point for us. We have been baptized – we are now loved sons and daughters of God. But as we stand before God, let us be humble. Let us remember that we are not worthy to touch his sandals. And we are in need of the purifying fires and the winnowing fork, but God will not destroy us. God will remove the impurities and winnow away the chaff. Because God loves us.

“You are my son, my daughter, the beloved, in you I am well pleased.” Amen.