Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

By Belton Jayner, Jr.

October 4, 2015

Text: Acts 8:9-24

“The Spirit Is Not for Sale”

Most of us would agree with the title of this lesson. We sense the wrongness of those who think that because of their purse, position, prestige, power, piety, or pedigree they have privileged access to the Holy Spirit. In fact, that was one of the driving theological issues in the days of the early Methodist movement. Does the fact that I have money and position mean that God elected me over others? Not so! God is an equal-opportunity Lover.

Although we might readily see the truth in this part of the lesson (Acts 8:20), we might not so easily recognize another dimension of the text. Note the setting: Samaria (Acts 8:9; Acts 8:14). Remember the scandal of Jesus’ talking with the woman of Samaria (John 4:1-42)! Remember the shock of Jesus using a Samaritan as an example of a good neighbor (Luke 10:30-37)? Remember how Samaritans chose Mount Gerizim as the center of worship rather than Jerusalem (John 4:19, Deuteronomy 11:29)? I’ve read that even today some Jews do not allow the burial of Samaritans in the Jewish cemeteries in Tel Aviv.

We begin to get the picture. What happens in this week’s text is not business as usual. The early church was so surprised that God gave the gift of faith to Samaritans that they sent Peter and John, trusted apostles, to check out things (Acts 8:14). Evidently, the two decided that the new Samaritan Christians had not received all that God had to give, so they sought to bring the full power of the Holy Spirit to these converts (Acts 8:16-17). I am left to wonder: When have I been willing to settle for less than all God wanted to give? When have I been willing to do less than God wanted me to do?

Simon misunderstood what it meant to get God’s power (Acts 8:19) and although he coached his request in pious terms, the apostles saw it for what it was, a power grab for personal benefit (Acts 8:20-21). I am left to wonder: When have I sought spiritual blessing in order to gain some benefit in my relationships?

When have I tried to look good rather than serve well?

Samaritans. Many in the Church did not see them as likely candidates for faith and fellowship. I am left to wonder: Whom have I placed on the outside beyond my willingness for community? Whom have I felt were beyond the reach of God’s love? Just wondering.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Methodism in the American Forest (Oxford University Press), Russell H. Richey has quoted the first Methodist Discipline: “…Because our Call is, to save that which is lost. Now we cannot expect them to seek us. Therefore we should go and seek them…The house may hold all that come to the house, but not all that would come to the field.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Open me, Lord, to Your wisdom…”

October 11, 2015

Text: Acts 9:19b-31

“Saul Earns Credibility”

To tell you the truth, I didn’t like him very much. Very much! Try “not at all.” For starters, he taught at a seminary for which I did not have much respect. I had read a couple of books he had written and found myself muttering under my breath as I turned the pages.

Then, he made some public statements on issues before the Church. I disagreed with most of what he said, so naturally I thought he was an ill-informed, biblically illiterate, sort of sub-Christian.

Then he came up to me at General Conference. “Belton,” he began, “there is probably a lot we do not agree on, but I have always respected your kindness, your willingness to listen, and your fairness.” Gulp! How embarrassing! I was not sure he had seen the “Fall Belton,” but I was sure that I had previously mirrored his open spirit, his Christian journey, and his generous manner. Have you ever had to change your mind about someone?

I think I can know something of what those early Christians felt when Saul began to move among them as a believer (Acts 9:21). The Common English
Bible translation says they were “baffled.” Other translations are “amazed,” “astonished,” or “staggered.” Not only that, the disciples were flat out scared of him (Acts 9:26). Suddenly, first thing they did and then that one began to accept Saul (Acts 9:19, Acts 9:25, Acts 9:27). What finally changed their minds about Saul?

According to Acts 9:29-36, the family of Jesus went out to get him for Saul when they saw that he was willing to die for the faith. What proof do you and I that would convience the Church that we are indeed followers of Jesus? As the old story goes, “If I were charged with being a Christian, is there enough evidence to convict me?”

In these verses, Luke (author of Acts) often uses verbs in the imperfect tense, the way the language indicates that something happened over and over again, not all at once. That shows up in Acts 9:20 (Saul preached repeatedly), Acts 9:22 (Saul more than once was proved that Jesus is the Christ), Acts 9:27 (Saul kept on preaching), Acts 9:29 (Saul debated on numerous occasions). Church changed its mind about Saul because in many ways, more than once, consistently, he lived and preached Jesus Christ as Lord.

What Someone Else Has Said: Jacob Armstrong (The New Adaptor, Abingdon) has written: “As I hear my generation claim a faith in Jesus, I think the day is coming when I think we should be reminded that we only know about Jesus because of the church. Broken, blunted, and battered, never has it carried the story for all these centuries.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, your prayer begins: “Lord Jesus, bring your Spirit that I might speak with clarity, live with purity, and love with patience...”

October 18, 2015

Text: Acts 10:24-38

“Peter Takes a Risk”

The heart of this week’s text seems to be Acts 10:34, statistically speaking, does not give Peter much to go on but that the God that does not pick one group of people over another. Our faith is often a society of “us” that divide, and this biblical account says that God does not work that way. Racism, Sexism, Classism. Those are not categories that God chooses.

Having said that and noting how difficult it is to set aside those human-devised distinctions, I am caught by a sub-theme in these verses: When I am called to a new attitude, how do I know that it is God who is calling me to change?

Cornelius says because he got a message from “a man in radiant clothing” (Acts 10:30). Peter says he knows because he has just had a vision about all animals being ceremonially clean (Acts 10:9-16). Really? The apostle sees the strangeness of all this, because he has always had an understanding that God did draw lines in the sand between clean and unclean animals (Leviticus 11:1-47; Deuteronomy 14:5-20). No, he is convinced that God was really saying something else. It’s a serious matter for Peter to have to believe that we have misunderstood God’s intent.

But, in no one shows up at our door in “radiant clothing” and if our only vision is of the vacation we want to take next year, what are we to do in order to figure out what God might be saying? It seems so straightforward for Peter to follow God and Peter. For most of us, I suspect, God’s will is sometimes a bit more elusive.

There is a clue for grasping God’s will in the final verse of this study text, Acts 10:38: “You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit...” The word “mes” (which is “away from” or “anciently”) in Acts 10:38 is the word translated “know” is a word sometimes translated to mean “to gaze.” If I want to know God well, I look at Jesus. I hear an echo of the gospel song “Turn Your eyes upon Jesus.” In the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming again of our Lord, we see the will of God. It’s the reign of God for which we pray each time we say, “thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”

What Someone Else Has Said: In On Being a Christian (Douglas Edney, Kings House Press), it is clear that God’s will aims at (our) well-being at all levels, aims at (our) definitive and comprehensive good; in biblical terms, at the salvation of (us all). This is the meaning of God’s absolute future, His kingdom,His victory, His kingdom, which Jesus proclaims...”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, your prayer begins: “Help me, Lord, look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfector of our faith...”

October 25, 2015

Text: Acts 11:1-18

“Trusting the Spirit”

Peter had to explain to some of the Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem how he came to be paddling around with Gentiles (Acts 11:1-3). When the apostle told them that God had given those Gentiles the gift of faith in Jesus Christ, the “home crowd” began to question the faith of God and praise God (Acts 11:18).

Okay. The story has a happy ending (at least for now!); but before we get to that peace and calmness and acceptance, there is a verse that bothers me, tucked away in the middle of the account. Take a look at Acts 11:10.

There are three clear messages from the above difficult text: “...Everything was pulled back into heaven.” That’s like reading a mystery novel, coming to the last chapter, and just as you are about to find out “who done it” you discover that someone has torn those final pages from the book. I want to know how the story ends!

How will all this end for Peter? Before I act, I prefer that God provide me with a clear, step-by-step plan. How do I get from Point A to Point B? But in this account in Acts, before all the details are worked out for Peter, “everything was pulled back into heaven.” The stumpers show up from Caeconarus (Acts 11:11), but that seems only to make the matter more confusing. You and I know how the story ends (Peter goes with these men and Gentiles are saved for God), but Peter had to act before he had the full picture.

What do I learn from this? Sometimes, God points me in a direction and says “Start walking.” All I can see is the next step. Where it will all lead and what I shall be expected to do is not always clear. All that is revealed is “Step One,” then “everything is pulled back into heaven.”

Sometimes, God’s timing is such that I can’t wait for all the answers. I can’t wait until I feel equipped for the job. I can’t wait until I know how others will react. If “everything is pulled back into heaven,” perhaps the thing to do is to start walking. One step.

What Someone Else Has Said: Martin Thien (Ancient Modern Wurksp, Abingdon Press) shares a story he heard from Hoyt Hickman: “…about a Quaker who invited his friends to join him for silent worship at a Quaker meetinghouse. Not knowing the customs of the Quakers, the friend asked when he saw the congregation sitting in silence. After several minutes of silence, he whispered to his host. ‘When does the service begin?’ His friend replied, ‘When the meeting has ended.’”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Now, Lord, is the time...”

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Join other United Methodists as we travel to York, Stratford upon Avon, Oxford, Bristol and London. Visit the Epworth Rectory, The New Room and Wesley’s Chapel. Hear about the “Holy Club” and John Wesley’s “heart-warming experience.” Space is Limited — Register Today

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Awesome Ideas to Make Your Church Fall Festival Rock from United Methodist Communications (http://www.umcom.org) By Jeremy Steele

One of the most anticipated yearly events for many churches is welcoming the community for the fall festival. Some years, though, you may be stumped on new things to do and ways to promote the event. Try these great ideas.

1. The Pumpkin Trebuchet

You can join the “Pukink Chuckin” throwing competitions on television and think, “Wow, wouldn’t it be fun to be a kid again?” You can! Making your own trebuchet is easier than you think. WikiHow has great instructions for building the trebuchet. VirtualTrebuchet.com will help you tweak the measurements of your trebuchet to throw whatever size pumpkin you want. Consider inviting your local scout group to build smaller trebuchets to throw grapes. Voila! You have a new competition for your event.

2. The ‘Great Pumpkin’ Drive-in Movie Night

Set up a video projector and screen or sheet in your parking lot in the evening and have a movie night showing the classic Charlie Brown movie. Family can stay in their cars or bring blankets and picnics. Since the movie is only 40 minutes long, show two back to back to make up for the night’s small children. Make sure you have legal coverage to show motion pictures. Check out the CVLI license which is specifically geared for churches. (http://cvli.com)

3. Character Cut-Outs

Go to any theme park and you’ll find spots where you stick your head through a hole and transform yourself into a bunny, mouse or princess. Use paper, card stock, and a little paint, you can create settings for families to take pictures. From scarecrows to Peter Pumpkin-Eater and his wife, fall offers many ideas for fun picture sets. Just a couple of crafty and handy volunteers hoist on this drive-in project.

4. Pumpkin Face-off

Instead of simply distributing flyers to your members and in the neighborhood, turn them into gifts. Make each flyer a coupon redeemable for a free hot plate at the event. Give coupons to each member to pass on to their friends to let them know in need. You are getting the word out — and giving people the ability to bless others. Members could purchase meals or use the coupons themselves if they have extra food or meals. Members who purchase meals could pay for one or more meals to help cover the cost.

Whatever you do, have fun and be creative. Use your fall festival to share the love of God and Jesus Christ with other people in your community.
In June 2011 Rev. Cleve May was appointed to start a new multicultural faith community in central Durham. Right away it was clear that “Becoming a people who follow Jesus together and live well as partners with God, we are committed to loving Durham in concrete ways. Inviting others to join us as we take seriously God’s heart for every person to follow Jesus, live well and love their city is the CityWell dream, and we believe it’s a vision worth pouring our lives into.”

With an Impact10 grant of $50,000, The CityWell recently assumed ownership of the former Sanctuary UMC site and has made progress in outfitting the property for their mission. The facility serves many exciting purposes of a spiritual and practical nature. It is truly a “Well” of community transformation that indeed is making a difference for all who thirst. This story made real by Impact10.

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