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The United Methodist Church  
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By Belton Joyner, 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 10:30-36)? Remember how Samaritans chose Mount Gerizim as

bible+study

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

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 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 couched 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 wideness...”

October 11, 2015

Text: Acts 9:19b-31

“Saul Earns Credibility”

To tell you the truth, I didn’t

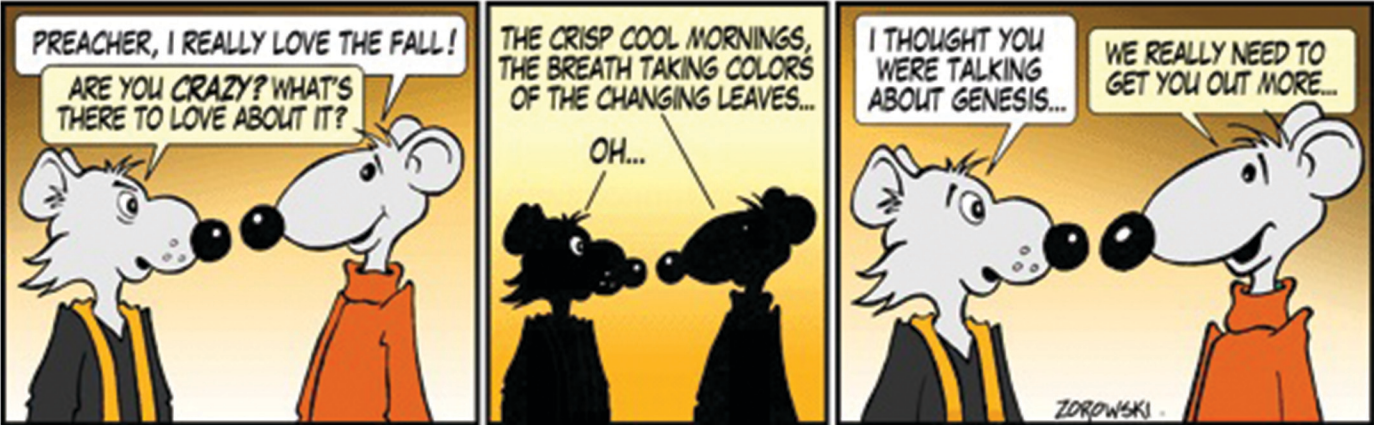
like him very much. Very much? Try “not at all.” For starters, he taught at a seminary for which I did not have much respect. I had read a couple of books he had written and found myself muttering under my breath as I turned the pages. Then, he made some public statements on issues before the Church; 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 “full Belton,” but I was sure that I had previously misread 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

Church Mice

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Bible translation says they were “baffled.” Other translations say “amazed,” “astonished,” or “staggered.” Not only that, the disciples were flat out scared of him (Acts 9:26). Slowly, first this one 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 9:29-30, the family of believers began to go to bat for Saul when they saw that he was willing to die for the faith. What proof do you and I give that would convince 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 happens over and over again, habitually. That shows up in Acts 9:20 (Saul preached repeatedly), Acts 9:22 (Saul more than once proved that Jesus is the Christ), Acts 9:27 (Saul kept on preaching), Acts 9:29 (Saul debated on numerous occasions). The 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 Adapters*, Abingdon) has written: “As I hear my generation claim a faith in Jesus but decry the church, I think we should be reminded that we only know about Jesus because of the church. Broken, blemished, and battered, for sure, it has carried the story for all these centuries.”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “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, stating clearly that God does not pick one group of people over another. Ours is often a society of “isms” 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 can be 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 he knew because he got a message from “a man in radiant clothing” (Acts 10:30). Peter says he knew 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 previously he had always understood that God did draw lines in the sand between clean and unclean animals (Leviticus 11:1-47; Deuteronomy 14:3-20). Now he is convinced that God was really saying something else. It’s a serious matter when we decide that we have misunderstood God’s intent.

But, if no one shows up at our door in “radiant clothing” and if our only vision is of the vacation trip we want to take next year, what are we to do in order to figure out what God might be saying? It seems so straight forward for Cornelius 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 “messiah” means “anointed one.”) The word translated “know” is a word sometimes translated to mean “to gaze.” If I want to know God’s will, I look to Jesus, I gaze upon 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* (Doubleday), Hans Küng wrote: “...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, let your prayer begin: “Help me, Lord, look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter 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 palling 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 cheer 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 above and then, boom! “...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!

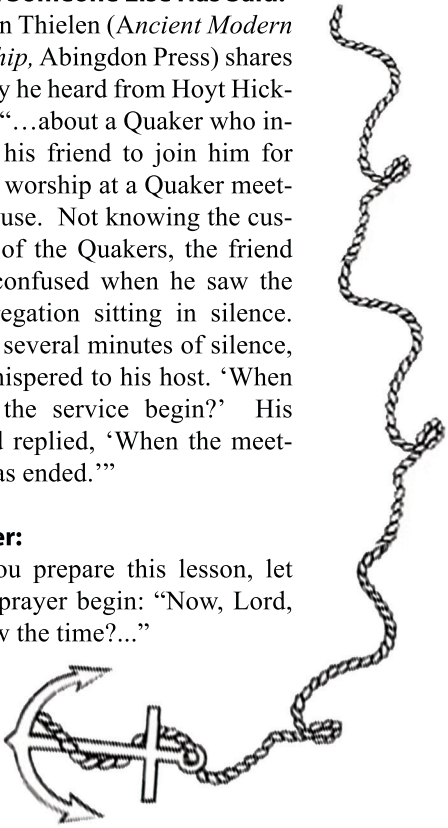
How will all this end for Peter? Before I act, I prefer that God provide me with a clear, step-by-step plan. How do I get from Point A to Point B? But in this account in Acts, before all the details are worked out for Peter, “everything was pulled back into heaven.” The strangers show up from Caesarea (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.”

So, 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 Thielen (*Ancient Modern Worship*, Abingdon Press) shares a story he heard from Hoyt Hickman: “...about a Quaker who invited his friend to join him for silent worship at a Quaker meetinghouse. Not knowing the customs of the Quakers, the friend was confused 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 now the time?...”



**vip report**

**MARRIAGES:**  
**William Creech** (Bath) married Carolyn Hughes on Saturday, July 18.

**BIRTHS/ADOPTIONS:**  
Congratulations to **Dave Allen** (Concord, Graham) and Heather Bixler, on the birth of a son, July 29.

**Cleve May** (City Well), and family are celebrating the adoption of Cayden Manuel Vasquez-May.

**Stephen Dunn** (Capital, Elevation), and wife Amber, welcome a new child, into foster care with them.

**DEATHS:**  
**HOLTSCRAW**, Thomas, (retired) died Aug. 9. Service was Aug. 12 at Concord UMC, Roxboro.

**SEAWELL**, Claudia McPherson, widow of William A. Seawell, died Aug. 17

**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 may have seen the “Punkin Chunkin” throwing competitions on television and thought, “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. Families can stay in their cars or bring blankets and picnics. Since the movie is only 30 minutes long, it is great for families with 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. Using clip-art, plywood 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 these fun picture centers. Set a couple of crafty and handy volunteers loose on this creative project.

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**4. Pumpkin Faces**  
Instead of carving or painting pumpkins, let people make themselves look like pumpkins. Order black, green and orange face paint. Set up a station with mirrors and plenty of disposable cups and brushes, and watch the fun as people turn themselves or their friends into a fall decoration. Consider having prizes for some of the funniest and most interesting pumpkin faces.

**5. Free Meal Coupons:**  
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 or people 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 need. 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 joy of being children of God with other people in your community.





God was moving to open hearts, minds and doors in a diverse group of interested persons who would become the core of The CityWell.

Cleve says of The CityWell vision, "Jesus came to give us life to the full and we are convinced of His desire to produce in us lives that are purposeful, joyful and relationally rich, lives that bear the significance of partnership with God in the renewal of our city and world. In the context of Durham, we believe this means The CityWell must intentionally embrace, reflect and redeem the energy, creativity and diversity of our city. So, within our community we seek to form deep, mutually life-giving relationships across lines of race, class, education and ability.

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

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