

First Presbyterian Church
The Marks of the Church: Blessing
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Psalm 23; Acts 8:14-24

June 1938 was a year in which the world seemed to be coming apart. The Japanese war of conquest in China was in motion with battles across the mainland. The Nazi war machine was gearing up and the government issued a declaration that all able bodied men could be called up for service. Jews were being attacked with growing frequency. The civil war in Spain was raging and Franco's forces were slowly defeating their enemies. Hitler was named Time's Man of the Year. Italy was threatening other nations. The great depression, while abating somewhat, was still gripping most of the world. In other words, the world appeared to need a hero...and they got one. They got Superman. Yes, issue #1 of Superman appeared on the shelves of comic stores in June of 1938 and has been there ever since. The staying power of superheroes is amazing. Each of us probably has our favorite. But superheroes are nothing new. There was Hercules, Odysseus, and Gilgamesh among others. While all of these were fictional heroes like Superman, there were real life superheroes. These were the magicians. Magicians like Simon.

To be clear, magic in the First Century is not what we think of as magic. Magic today is David Copperfield with sleight of hand, smoke, mirrors, and illusions that can all be explained. Magic in the First Century was the act of manipulating the unseen forces in the universe to advantage one person over another. Think of it as casting spells, using magic potions that caused the unseen spiritual forces to bend to the will of the magician on behalf of his or her clients. This was the career to which Simon had been drawn, and as such he was probably constantly upgrading his skills. So when he saw Peter and John pray for the Samaritan believers and for the Spirit of God to inhabit them, he wanted in on the action. He wanted to buy the Spirit so that he could do the same "magic." Let's be clear, however, that we don't know what the physical manifestations of the arrival of the Spirit were. Maybe a grouchy people turned into a people of love; maybe people started speaking in various languages as happened at Pentecost. We don't know, but what we do know is that something dramatic occurred.

Simon's request was met with Peter's usual over-the-top kind of response, that the Spirit was not for sale, because the Spirit was a gift. And most importantly for our time this morning, that Peter and John were merely the conduit of God's blessings that God desired to give to the Samaritans. I realize that this passage does not use the word blessing. But for me, that is what the gift of the Spirit is. It is the ultimate blessing of God. What is a blessing? To put it simply, blessing is the favor of God bestowed on individuals or communities to fill them with God's love so that they are encouraged, sustained, and transformed. Let me say that again, blessing is the favor of God bestowed on individuals or communities to fill them with God's love so that they are encouraged, sustained, and transformed. If you want to see blessing at work, we can look to David in Psalm 23. The context of the Psalm is that his life is on the line. He is in the shadow of death. But God blesses him with God's own presence. The image that should strike us this morning is that of God anointing David's head with oil. Anointing with oil was an act that essentially said to a stranger, you are welcome here and you are safe here. That the stranger has received the favor of the host, thus encouraging, sustaining, and transforming the stranger into a friend. Therefore, David can find the strength to go on.

I would argue that the same can be said of the believers in Samaria. Before the arrival of Peter and John, they were people who believed something about Jesus. When they were blessed by the Spirit, they became people who were something. They became people who were encouraged, sustained, and transformed, filled with the love of God. What I would also argue is that they too became conduits for the blessing of God; that they became those through whom the blessings of God flowed out into their community and into the world. What this means is that blessing, being a conduit for blessing, is one of the marks of the church. The church is to be the community that anoints others with oil. The church is to be the community that encourages, sustains, and helps to transform people through the work of the Spirit that we have been given. My friends, what this says is that the church is not simply another social service agency, or a gathering of like-minded people. We are instead a Spirit-filled, Spirit-led, Spirit-guided community, called to be the conduit for God's blessings to the world. And this is something that you all do well.

You, the members and friends of Everybody's Church, understand how to be conduits of God's blessing to the world. You bless people through what you do at Alcott Elementary when you teach children to read. You encourage, sustain, and transform them. You blessed people when you took food to hungry families throughout the pandemic. You encouraged, sustained, and transformed them. You blessed children in Ukraine with your gifts of money and goods. You encouraged, sustained, and transformed them. You blessed the clients at Baldwin Center through the overwhelming gifts of diapers. You encouraged, sustained, and transformed them. You bless foster families and children in the foster system by the work you do with Rev. Dr. Kate. You encouraged, sustained, and transformed them. You blessed people when you gave to our covid fund that helped more than a hundred families avoid eviction or utility shutoff. You encouraged, sustained, and transformed them. You bless people by your constant prayers for those you know and those on our prayer list whom you might not know. You encouraged, sustained, and transformed them. And there are so, so many other ways in which you have blessed and continue to bless the world around you. You are living out this mark of the church.

This morning however, I would like us to celebrate one who has been a blessing to so many of us, and I know she does not want me to do this but I will anyway, to speak of the blessing that Jan Peters has been over the past 38 years. Jan has been a blessing to those of us who have worked alongside her. She has always been present; ready to listen, lend a hand, offer us encouragement, and help to sustain us when things have not been easy. She has blessed so many families in this church when they have been grieving the loss of one that they loved. She was ready to listen, give a hug, show compassion, and do whatever needed to be done to ensure that the church was a place of encouragement. She has blessed strangers. Most of you are probably unaware that we regularly have people call us or drop by looking for assistance. Jan was always there for them, even when we had nothing to offer. Many of these people became her friends over the years and Jan not only offered them financial assistance, but words of love and encouragement. Jan was a conduit for God's blessing.

This morning we celebrate Jan and the example that she has offered all of us. My challenge to all of us this morning is to simply ask ourselves, how am I being a conduit for God's blessing so that people might be encouraged, sustained, and transformed?