

The Orphan Annie Problem
What Can Stand in the Way Series
Acts 8:5-24
Week 2: March 19, 2017

Welcome/intro/vision

A quick bit of family business:

A couple of weeks ago we closed out our capital campaign and I shared with you the great news that our goal had been \$300,000 for the land up in northern Chatham and we'd gotten commitments for \$395,000—which was awesome!

We said that we thought more folks were likely to make commitments who just hadn't quite gotten around to it

Which, I'm excited to report, several more folks did—and so over this past couple weeks our total has gone up from \$395 to \$427,115! Praise God and thank you again!

Now If you've made a commitment and if it's at all possible, we'd ask that you give some portion of it in March—in the bulletin you can see that it's easy to set up online or if you're going to give in check form, you can just write capital campaign on the memo line

If we can develop a track-record of great follow-through on our commitments, that puts us in a great position to negotiate a better deal with the bank when we go them in a couple of years for a larger construction loan for a building

Plus, our goal is to pay off that land as quickly as possible. We negotiated a zero pre-payment penalty clause so we can pay the land off whenever the money comes in without any additional cost for us, which means we're paying less interest on the loan

So thank you for your pledges and please, if it's possible, if you could get started in March it sets us up for a better process.

This is week 2 of our What Can Stand in the Way series, if you missed last week due to snowpocalypse or because of springing forward, let me get you up to speed

We're looking at the story in the New Testament of how the very first followers of Jesus after he left them were scattered due to a massive persecution that broke out against them

Now before he had left them Jesus had told them to be about the mission of being his witnesses and bringing his good news to the ends of the earth, but Jerusalem was pretty comfortable!

and they'd fallen into the trap that most of us will fall into, which is to prefer our own comfort to being on mission

And we put that battle in mathematical terms:

The Scriptures tell us that **Mission>Comfort**; that to be about the work of bringing healing and reconciliation and mercy and grace to a weary and broken world, that's real life! But our culture tells us this:

Mission = Comfort—our culture tells us that our mission in life is to make ourselves as comfortable as possible for as long as possible

But the invitation from God is to be about a life that's much bigger than ourselves, to join with him on his mission and in his work in the world

Important whether you've been a church person your whole life or this is your first time ever in a church setting

We meet here to connect with God through worship and looking at the Scriptures, and that's critical to a life where faith

But then we leave here to meet with God out there, looking to be a part of his mission, because we will meet God on mission in ways that we'll never meet him here in these seats.

And the good news as we saw last week is that anywhere God sends us and anywhere he puts us, God got there first. Our job is to simply come alongside what God is already doing around us, and partner with his work in healing this world

And this morning, we're going to be back in the New Testament book of Acts to look at the same guy we looked at last week named Philip as he flees persecution in Jerusalem and has another adventure where he meets God in another unlikely place

And today we're going to meet someone who has a rather dramatic experience with God and then as his story unfolds we're reminded that spiritual growth is a process and sometimes it takes longer than we want it to

Anyone here ever had an experience where you saw very clearly the gap between who you are and who you want to be or wish you were?

This seems to be a daily occurrence for me, and that gap seems to get particularly exposed in the relationships that I'm closest to—my wife and my kids.

I like to think of myself as a patient guy—but how I respond to my kids often exposes that there's this gap between who I am and who I would like to be

I love my wife—she's incredible, one of the most gifted, warm, incredibly competent and capable people that I know

and I want to be the kind of husband that communicates to his wife that she is loved and cherished on a regular basis

But every so often something will happen and I realize how much I take her for granted

or I'll find myself dropping a ball that would have meant a great deal to her, would have communicated love to her but I didn't think it was important enough to attend to

And of course at times when the people around me expose my gaps, who do I want to blame? Is it my fault or my kids fault that they expose my impatience? Theirs, of course! I don't want to deal with my issues, I'd rather blame them!

But the invitation from the Lord when I'm exposed is for me to continue to be about the good work of my own character and spiritual growth and formation.

Today where we're going to land is in the simple reality of this gap between who we are and who we want to be—and more importantly, who God made us to be—and how we might humbly, by God's grace, begin to close that gap.

So if you've got a Bible, turn with me to Acts 8/no Bible/free Bible

We're picking up immediately following this major outbreak of persecution against Christians who have been huddled in Jerusalem:

⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there.

Pause here, take a look at the map again from last week: here's Jerusalem, Samaria is just up here to the north

If you're new to the Bible you might not know that in this simple sentence we're tripping major switches and triggers for the first century Jewish audience who initially read this because Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Hated with a passion. All kinds of historical reasons for this

But this was a place that Jesus had named specifically just before he left as a destination where the good news would be proclaimed

and so here goes Philip crossing lines of race and nationality, freaking out the Jewish audience first reading this

When Philip gets there, God gives him power to do all sorts of miracles and great works and he has some tremendous success, then we get this specific story about a man in the city:

⁹ Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, ¹⁰ and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is rightly called the Great Power of God." ¹¹ They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery.

With this passage, we get to the heart of one of the tenants of Christianity and one of the most contested and disputed parts of it:

that at the core of the universe is a pitched spiritual battle of light and darkness

And for some of us this sounds completely implausible because you've bought into a counter story and a counter core tenant of western culture

which essentially has told you that there is no real spiritual world, everything is just atoms and protons and electrons

And spirituality is nice if it helps you to get along

but most of that is hocus-pocus stuff made up to keep kids in line and it sort of helps people when they're in trouble

but you can sort of opt-in or opt-out of it because it's probably not all that real to begin with and any spirituality that you think sort of works for you is fine because it's all the same

But I want to propose to you that that story is one recently constructed way of viewing the world, and I want to suggest to you that it's worth stepping back from and asking some important questions.

That perhaps the fairly recent attempts to dismiss all spirituality as essentially wishful thinking or something that you can opt-in or opt-out of based on whether or not it fits your current needs or moods

is itself wishful thinking because it essentially puts us at the center of the universe

WE get to decide what's true or not about spirituality, which WE like because it puts us in full control and whatever we decide is true or real is actually true or real—when my kids do that, we call it wishful thinking. When adults do that, perhaps it's also wishful thinking!

The very first ever temptation recorded in the Bible is that if we disobeyed God WE could be just like God. We fell for it and it was a colossal disaster

But that has not stopped us from falling for it over and over and over again.

Every generation, every culture, every epic or period in human history has essentially found either religious or ir-religious ways to buy that same lie and act on that same temptation that we could be just like God

Always ends with the exact same predictable results: smaller lives, more pain, more conflict, more exploitation, and broken relationships all around—we become LESS human, not MORE, when we fall for this lie that we can be just like God

and of course this is because our attempts at being God results in disconnection from the God of the universe whose grace and love we were made to run on like a fish was made to swim in the water!

The dismissal of spirituality as the larger, essential world in which we all participate in is itself a spiritual product of this pitched battle between light and dark

In this passage we're looking at in this time, there was little debate about the spiritual world, it was just a question of the forms it took

And Simon the sorcerer has found a form that he thinks works for him. He's found power in darkness and he's leveraging that power for fame and fortune and glory

And so far it's working for him, but darkness always collapses back in on itself.

We cannot wield darkness, we can only be used by darkness at great personal cost and then discarded

In our culture and in our day, there are some who try to embrace or leverage darkness for power and personal gain in direct spiritual ways

But I want to propose to you that there are a couple much less overtly spiritual ways that darkness goes to work in people all around us and in our own lives in ways that we can all see.

One way is through addictions. Almost every recovery program in the world talks about the importance of the spiritual dimension to overcome addictions

Because the power that has possessed us through whatever it is that we're addicted to is spiritual

An addiction is the psychological, emotional, and spiritual attachment to the forces of darkness cloaked in some other package or substance.

And so apart from spiritual healing, it is about impossible to ever be truly free from an addiction

Another place in our culture where we see the powers of darkness at work is racism.

At the very founding of our country, we embraced the demonic idea that people from Africa were less human, in biblical terms we declared that they were not made in God's image, and therefore we were free to exploit them

It was woven into our Constitution, and try as we might we cannot seem to shake its horrific effect on our country, can we?

I want to propose to you that legislation and education and programs are all very, very important, there's no way we get healthier without those things in place

But if we as Christians do not do our part in the spiritual work in our own local communities of praying for spiritual deliverance from this darkness, there is no way that it will ever, ever, ever go away

If you're a Christian here this morning, let's have a moment here: the Scriptures command us Christians to love our neighbors, you want to know one of the best and most creative but most essential ways that you could possibly love your neighbor, our neighbors?

Pray that the power of the Light of Christ would break the stranglehold the power of racial evil has over our country

We see this happening right here in this passage, as Philip crosses racial barriers and builds a newly reconciled community in the power of the name of Jesus. We're praying that God might do the same thing right here in our church.

Simon has been leveraging darkness for his own glory for what appears to be a good long time. He's got followers, he's got a name for himself, he's got power, but he's also on a collision course with this guy named Philip who has come to shine light into darkness.

Let's see what happens next:

¹²But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

So Philip shows up, and he surpasses Simon's show with greater miracles and more importantly a greater message

Simon did great things, right? Not just smoke and mirrors, real power—and whose name was made great through those miracles? HIS own! He drew people to himself and fed his own reputation through his miracles, it was all about him.

Then Philip showed up and does even greater things but whose name does he proclaim?

Not his own but the name of Jesus, the kingdom of God, and this invitation to everyone to be a part of it

Simon wields dark powers and darkness can always and only point to itself and be self-serving, self-aggrandizing.

Philip does greater miracles in the power of the Light, but the miracles are there to validate and authenticate the message which pointed to something greater—not Philip but Jesus who is the Lord of Light

And Simon sees this, is compelled by it, and he puts aside his old ways and embraces the message of Christ—but as we'll see in a minute, he's been living with an economy where power is leveraged for personal gain and glory for a long time and some old habits die hard.

Now news of all of the goings on in Samaria get back to the original apostles back in Jerusalem and here's what they do:

¹⁴ When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria.

There are different takes as to why the muckety-mucks in Jerusalem needed to come and check out what was going on in Samaria

My take on it is that given the historical animosity between Jews and Samaritans they didn't trust it, maybe were even concerned about what was going on there.

So they send two big-wigs to go and see what's going on

¹⁵ When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Here's one of the most disputed parts of the whole Bible—everywhere else in the New Testament, when people believe in the name of Jesus, they get the Spirit

Some scholars suggest that because the Samaritans and Jews have a particularly charged history, having Peter and John who are the pillars of the early church be the ones who bless them with the Spirit is all a part of the work of reconciliation that God wants to do.

At any rate, for those of you who like nerdy theological conversations, drop me an email this week and we can arm wrestle over this later, there's something else I want us to spend our remaining time looking at

¹⁸ When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money ¹⁹ and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Anyone remember the movie Annie?

There's the 80's version and then there was a re-made one a few years ago which is outstanding, better than the original actually

In both movies orphan Annie comes to live with a rich man and of course because Annie comes from a poor orphanage background where it's a hard knock life, for her

She has patterns of behaviors from life in the orphanage that do not fit with life in her new environment.

She carries over old habits and ways of thinking, ways of relating to resources and to people that do not match pitch with her new standing and her new space as a child in a freakishly wealthy household

Simon is having this Orphan Annie Problem. He has spent many years as a sorcerer. When you're trading in darkness, the economy is very simple: you use or you are used
to use author Brene Brown's language, you're either a Viking you're a Victim: you gain and acquire power or you are conquered by others who have power

And Simon is carrying that mentality from his old way of life, just like Annie, into his new way of life in the kingdom of God

And just like Annie, those of us who are watching this story kind of cringe—in my small group this week people laughed and groaned when we read that he tried to buy the power from the apostles --we sort of know that's not how life in the kingdom of God works

You had to buy your way into power in the kingdom of darkness; but in the kingdom of the light, you do not grasp and acquire power through purchasing it but by submitting to it.

The way up is the way down. Back in January we looked at a passage where Jesus said: You want to be great in my kingdom? GREAT! Serve. Serve, serve, serve and serve.

Simon sees power and grasps right after it in ways that he's bringing in from his old way of life. And as we'll see in a minute, he gets a bit of a sharp rebuke or correction from Peter.

But I want to pause here and say that the Orphan Annie problem is a problem for all of us.

All around us are all these different economies, all of these different ways that people try to navigate and make life work here in the various little kingdoms of darkness

But when we come to trust in Jesus, we are adopted as sons and daughters of the most high God, residents in the eternal kingdom of light!

But when we come to faith those old ways of life continue to shape how we relate to God and we have to re-learn how to do life in this new location.

We come from a world where we think that we should get what we deserve—do good stuff and get rewarded, do bad stuff, get punished--that's how a just society should work!

But when we come to the kingdom of God what we get is this radical change: grace comes NOT to those people who have earned it, forgiveness doesn't come because we've cleaned ourselves up

But instead grace and forgiveness comes rushing even to those who are the least deserving, and they pursue us quite apart from our cleaning ourselves up and making ourselves presentable

In a world where we are constantly having to perform in order to earn approval and love, the kingdom of God runs on a radically different economy

You do not earn God's love, you simply receive it as a gift.

In a world where the economy runs on status and title and outward appearances, God says he looks at the heart

In a world that says love things and use people, God calls us to love people and use things.

And un-learning those old ways and habits of thinking and replacing them with this new economy, this new paradigm, this new way of relating to people and things to ourselves and God all of that takes time, doesn't it?

And here we see that in spite of the work of God in Simon's life, he's still a work in progress. Much like all of us.

Now, for better or worse, Simon's gaff happens in front of the apostle Peter who's pretty famous for being rather direct, and here's the response he gets from Peter:

²⁰ Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. ²² Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. ²³ For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

²⁴ Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me."

As rough as Peter is on Simon, here's the truth: some of the most loving words spoken into my life have been the most direct words and the hardest to hear.

There is love and grace in a direct word of correction like this. And Peter is doing Simon a huge favor in giving him a very firm "no" to his business proposition

And he uses a very important word that's loaded up with meaning: he calls Simon to REPENT of this wickedness.

Repentance means to do a u-turn, change direction, the literal greek word is meta-noia, which means to change your mind—Peter is calling Simon to change his whole mindset about how life in God's kingdom of the light works

Repentance in church world is often associated with the very first time we come to faith in Christ. We do a u-turn from life apart from Christ and commit ourselves to following him and going in his direction

But it turns out that repentance is not a one-time thing. Simon and you and me, we're all works in process and so repentance in the Christian life is an ongoing habit, not a one-time event

An old dead theologian once declared that the whole of the Christian life from beginning to end was a life of repentance

And that maturity in the Christian life was obviously about breaking out of old habits and patterns and getting rid of sin in our lives

but real Christian maturity he said was mostly about shortening the lag time between when we sin and when we repent—he said the goal of the Christian life in many ways was to close the gap between when we become aware of something we've done wrong and when we confess it and turn the other direction.

My friends, when we bring our mis-shapen ways of thinking, our old economies and our old ways of relating into the kingdom of God, it robs us of the life we could have in God

Those ways of relating were part of what was dehumanizing us and robbing us of life in the first place!

And so God who loves us so much he comes to meet us wherever we are, in whatever state we're in, loves us enough to not only meet us in the midst of the darkness

but he loves us enough to call us out of darkness and to teach us what life in his life-giving kingdom is supposed to look like

So he calls us to a life of ongoing, habitual repentance: there it is again, God, forgive me, I don't want to live that way any more. Help me to move in the other direction.

And so our Take-With today, our Wildly Important Take-Home question for you to pray about and consider and wrestle with is this:

What's your next step in your journey of leaving behind life in the darkness and learning to live in the light?

For some of you, it's ***believing at all that there is a light and darkness***

If you're a good secular conservative, it can tend to drift into Viking or victim mentality, me and my tribe and America and apple pie and take care of your own and that's all there is

But you don't have to be a religious person to see that strict Viking or victim mentality robs us of the opportunity to live life of genuine love and courage and sacrifice for others that makes us most human

If you're a good secular liberal, it can drift into there is no light and darkness, it's all just various shades of gray that are equally valid and we should just all be accepting and warm and squishy

And you don't have to be a religious person to see that 'it's all just equal choices' is simply not true

Nazi Germany wasn't an equal choice, Jim Crow laws weren't just equal choices, if I was abusing my children that's not just a personal choice you should call the police!

there are good choices and bad choices, ones that give life and ones that steal it away

And while overly black and white thinking has caused a tremendous amount of pain and damage in the world and yes for sure there is gray and not everything is so neat and clear

But if we over-correct for that, and try to make everything gray then we are robbed of the ability to decry injustice and stand up for what is right

and if we deceive ourselves into thinking everything is gray and any decision I make is okay we end up with muddy gray lives full of ridiculously bad choices and a mess of a world

For those of you on your spiritual journeys considering Jesus

perhaps your next step is to pray to understand that there is light and that there is darkness and to start to understand what it would look like to live into that kingdom of the light

It starts with Jesus, the one who the Scriptures declare as the Light of the World who has come to shine his light in the darkness and the good news is that even the dark of death could not overcome it.

For others of us, we're like orphan Annie, like Simon:

we've embraced the kingdom of God but we've got old habits that don't belong, ways of relating or thinking or operating that aren't a part of living in God's kingdom that we've absorbed from our culture

Jesus invites us to be on a continual journey of learning what it means to live as a child of the kingdom of God, to be on a ***journey of ongoing repentance*** not to beat ourselves up but so that we might actually become more and more free!

Can you imagine how much richer life would be if you could ditch cynicism and anxiety and guilt and fear and striving for fortune and glory and applause and approval and what if you replaced all that gunk with faith, hope, and love?

You would be more alive and all that you did would be more life-giving

And the invitation from this passage this week is to take your next step into the kingdom of light—to perhaps identify what those old ways of thinking and relating are and ask God for help to get rid of those, to un-learn that way of doing life

What's your next step in your own journey of leaving behind life in the darkness and learning to live in the light?

One of my favorite authors is named Lesslie Newbiggin, he was a missionary in India for many decades, and he said something that I want to close with that combines the work of repentance and the call to be on this unstoppable mission, here's what he said:

“When traveling in India to visit a far off village we might set out very early in the morning to avoid traveling in the heat of the day. Perhaps we might travel west.

As we pass people traveling the opposite way coming to meet us there will be at least a faint light on their faces. If we stop and ask them “where does the light come from?” They will simply ask us to turn around (do the U-turn, repent) and look towards the east.

A new day is dawning, the light we saw was just its faint reflection in the faces of those going that way. They did not possess the light; it was a light given to them.

The church is that company which, going the opposite way to the majority, facing not from life toward death, but from death towards life, is already given the first glow light of a new day. It is that light that is the witness.”