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St. John's Episcopal Church
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While the apostles were in Jerusalem, news came to them about all kinds of good things happening in Samaria. The ministry and the proclamation of the Gospel message by the man whom you and I know as St. Philip had resulted in a wonderful increase of baptized believers. The Word of God (meaning Jesus), the apostles are told, is being accepted in Samaria!

For those of you unfamiliar with the relationship that Samaritans and Jewish people shared with one another, this was incredulous news. This was news that was borderline *unbelievable* and most definitely questionable. The mission of the early Church, at this particular point in time, is not focusing on the Gentiles and most certainly not on the people of Samaria. Samaritans and Jews *do not like* each other, for reasons of socio-economic class, race, and faith ~ barriers which were just as real *then* as they still are today. In fact, St. John asks Jesus, during his time on earth, if they should call fire from heaven to rain down upon a particular Samaritan village where Jesus' ministry was not welcome. In case you're wondering, Jesus said "No."

So no doubt ~ some apostles and other disciples in Jerusalem were "skeptical" and *that* is putting it *mildly*. So that is our opening scene and *that* is why Peter and John (the same John who wanted fire to come down from heaven) went to Samaria ~ to see if the reports were true.

Well, the reports were *very* true and upon seeing with their own eyes and hearing with their own ears, Peter and John pray and the people receive the Holy Spirit.

Now some people simply leave the story at that point and move onwards. But others ~ others are puzzled. Why didn't the Holy Spirit fall upon the new Samaritan converts when they were baptized? ~ in whatever way the presence of the Holy Spirit was being manifested. Because earlier in the book of Acts, indeed, at Jesus' own baptism, the Holy Spirit's presence is made known at baptism. So why the delay? Why *wait* for Peter and John?

Two answers: one based on theory and the other based on fact. The theory is that the conversion of the Samaritans is an event of such importance that it takes the presence of St. Peter and St. John to give it *authenticity* for the rest of the questioning Church. Peter and John open their minds and they go and they *see* ~ and they see not just for themselves, but for the wider Church.

The theory makes sense. It is based on good theological rationale and theological logic. However ~ the fact that there is even a "theory" as to why the Holy Spirit waits for Peter and John to come to Samaria points us toward a more important *fact* which is simply this: God the Holy Spirit is not someone or something that can ever be completely figured out. The Holy Spirit exists, to be sure! ~ but the Holy Spirit is not for sale, cannot be managed, cannot be controlled, cannot be manipulated, and cannot be completely figured out.

Many Christians say, "I understand God, I understand Jesus ~ but I just don't *get* the Holy Spirit!" That's a normal thing to say! That's a normal feeling to feel! A person is not theologically inept if they don't completely understand the Holy Spirit! We're not *supposed* to! At the same time, however ~ just because we don't fully *understand* the

Holy Spirit, that doesn't give us permission to *ignore* the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit still exists even if we do not fully understand how the Holy Spirit works. To make a very rough parallel illustration, we don't ignore our cars even though we may not completely understand all the different intricacies of how they're put together. We open our minds and “listen”. We *observe* what's going on. And then we act.

Thus the very first step that a Christian person can take in their life in helping to discern what the Holy Spirit is up to or what the Holy Spirit would have them do in a particular situation ~ the *very* first step for a Christian person to take is to create *space* for the Holy Spirit to speak. For example, have you ever tried to give advice, counsel, or direction to a person who is *intent* on not wanting to hear what you have to say? “Let me help you with...” ~ “No, no, I got it!” “Let me show you...” ~ “I know what I'm doing!” “But I just want to share with you...” ~ “I'm good! I'm cool!” And so you're left with a choice: you can either take your hand and place it over that person's mouth ~ risking, of course, the fact that they might bite you ~ or you can quit talking and leave them to their own devices.

The latter, I believe, is the experience that the Holy Spirit has with many people. God the Holy Spirit is saying, “Let me help you, let me show you, let me share with you” ~ and we keep saying, “We got it! We're good! We're fine! We're cool!” And so the Holy Spirit says “Fine” ~ and stops talking. As much as God might like to put His hand over our mouths! ~ the Holy Spirit stops talking and leaves us to our own devices.

I have years of personal experience in thinking that I had life all figured out ~ only to find that I was simply being left to my own devices. In fact, sometimes the only time

that the Holy Spirit spoke to me was to say, “I told you so!” Thus my theological advice is to be like St. Peter and to be like St. John and give the Holy Spirit space to speak. To put our hands over our mouths, if that is what it takes, and give the Holy Spirit space ~ space to show us, space to help us, and space to share whatever the Holy Spirit wishes to share with us.

Does it really work? ~ or is this just a theological conjecture?

Well ~ to the skeptics, I want to turn your attention to the notice in today’s bulletin regarding the phenomenal turnout for this year’s Christmas Alternative Giving Program. Over \$18,000 was raised for eight different programs which the community of St. John’s shares a relationship with ~ with St. John’s being simply the vehicle through which people could make donations and practice an alternative method of Christmas giving than has been the norm. But when I am asked to what do I credit the “success” of this year’s program to or why I think it did as well as it did this year, my answer is simple. Over 20 people came together to plan this year’s Christmas Alternative Giving Program. But instead of meeting and putting forth thoughts and suggestions and ideas ~ we used a process which intentionally and purposely created space. We created space for the Holy Spirit to speak to us and through us. We put our hands over our mouths (symbolically, not literally) ~ and prayed. And after we prayed, we shared. We shared the ideas that came to us within that sacred space of time, we put those ideas in concrete actions ~ and the results? The results speak for themselves. The results speak as to what can happen when space is created for the Holy Spirit to speak.

There are other things that Christians must do, to be sure, in order to discern whether an idea or a thought or a action is from the Holy Spirit: does what we're doing give glory to God?; is what we're doing in keeping with the ministry, teachings, and life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?; are people's lives being transformed?; are our lives being transformed? ~ *all* these tests can be applied. But the very first step ~ some might say, the most *important* step ~ is to create the space. To put our hands over our mouths and listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying ~ and then be surprised by some very, very unforeseeable, yet so wonderfully theological, results.