Message: "God's Power Attracts"

Imagine a husband who, instead of showing love, listening to his wife, and investing in their relationship, simply hands her a $100 bill every time they have a disagreement or whenever he wants her to do something for him. He treats marriage like a vending machine: put in currency, get out the desired result.

What'll happen? The marriage would quickly crumble because love and intimacy can't be bought. They require a mutual surrender of the heart. You may say, "Sure, pastor, but this is a false analogy. No one would do that." Fair enough.

What about the times when a husband doesn't tell his wife he loves her, thinking she'll "just know"? Or when a wife doesn't show respect to her husband, because "he hasn't earned it"? What's left is two people counting, "She did this, so I'll do that" or "He reacted, so I'll respond."

What we do at home, we do in church. Which means we may treat God like a vending machine or Santa Claus. We may not realize how we seek a transactional relationship with the Holy Spirit, offering things in exchange for what we desire: peace, contentment and spiritual life. Our scripture for today reminds us God wants a covenant relationship, not a transaction. You can't buy intimacy with God.

Let's reflect on this together. Like last week, we need to back up a bit to see the bigger picture first. If you're following along in your Bible, I invite you to turn to Acts 6 & 7.

The high council who threatened Peter and John confront Stephen. His ministry of care to a marginalized community has been upended by malicious lies. He's on trial. Enraged by his Spirit-filled words and presence, the council shriek, cover their ears, tackle him and throw him out of the city. Then they stone him to death (Acts 7:54-58).

Luke tells us Stephen's last prayer, "*Lord Jesus, accept my life!*" Falling to his knees he shouts, "*Lord, don't hold this sin against them!*" Then he dies (vv59-60, CEB). What faith and love!

Jesus' followers are viciously harassed after Stephen's death. They scatter, going into the nearby villages. But they aren't silent. They tell people about Jesus and they continue their daily practices.

Stephen's partner in ministry, Philip, goes to a city in Samaria. To the people of Jerusalem, Samaria was a wasteland of outcasts and heretics. Philip shares Christ's message of salvation, love and grace. He continues his ministry of care.

Philip didn't see a wasteland. He saw a field ready for harvest. He saw prevenient grace. God was already at work long before Philip ever showed up, just as God is at work in our community today.

Luke tells us how they respond, "*When the people heard what Philip had to say and saw the miracles, the clear signs of God's action, they hung on his every word. Many who could neither stand nor walk were healed… And what joy in the city!*" (Acts 8:6-8, MSG)

This sets the stage. Earlier we read "page two," the rest of the story. Here's the first part: "*Before Philip's arrival, a man named Simon had … baffled the people... He claimed to be a great person. Everyone, from the least to the greatest, gave him their undivided attention and referred to him as 'the power of God called Great.' Simon had their attention because he'd baffled them… for a long time*" (vv9-11).

Do you remember the early days of social media? I do. Back then it was all about "click throughs." How many people visited your site or page and then followed through in some way. You got paid based on how many people visited.

But an interesting thing happened. Companies began noticing people buying fake followers and likes just to look important and influential. They wanted the *clout* and the perks of influence without doing the actual work of building a community or offering real value.

This reflects what happens in the real world because power attracts. And the extraordinary power of God attracts most of all. We all, to some extent, wish we had the power to make things go our own way. What would you do if you won the lottery?

But some take this to the extreme. Their "pitch" is very practiced. They know how to lie and deceive, tapping into our inner voice. This is the "bait." Then comes the "hook," when they ask us to do something we normally wouldn't. All sorts of people seek to take advantage of us. And our shame gives them influence or clout over us.

Simon was the original seeker of "spiritual clout." He doesn't want to lay hands on people for their benefit. He wants the status of being the one who *could* lay hands on them for his benefit. He wants the platform, the gift, without the servant's heart. He wants fame, money and power.

God's favor, salvation and the Holy Spirit are free gifts of prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace. They can't be earned, bartered or purchased through wealth, status or transaction. Those who try to do so will end up disappointed.

It's like fool's gold. You can be fooled by iron pyrite because it looks shiny, metallic and valuable at first glance. But it's brittle, worthless and reacts poorly to heat. Simon's pitch was fool's gold. It looked brilliant and amazed everyone, but it had no real substance. Sound familiar?

Philip was a vessel of the Lord, bringing care and joy to people who were rejected and marginalized. This is the difference between God's true power and the counterfeit power so many seek to wield over us.

This is where the prosperity gospel, "performance" Christianity or following God for personal leverage, influence or financial gain fail. Some want the *power* of the Spirit without surrendering their *pride* or selfish ambition. This is a caution for clergy, laity and civic leaders. It's a warning against corruption, power-tripping or treating faith as a stepping stone.

What I find amazing is this: Simon was baptized by Philip and supported him (v13). This tells us his inner transformation was incomplete.

Outwardly, we can go through the motions and have emotional responses to grace, but this doesn't replace a genuine, humble turning of the heart toward God. We receive grace in baptism or communion, but acceptance and salvation come when we are nurtured by a community of faith and trust. This is why participation in church life is important. We need to receive care to be able to give care.

Hearing the news, guess who the apostles send to check it out? Peter and John (v14). Yep, the same Peter and John who healed the disabled person, were thrown in prison and then stood up to the same authorities to defend their faith in Jesus and their right to share it.

You may not know it, but the same John wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village six months earlier because he felt offended by them (Luke 9:54). Jesus showed his loving heart for the people then and corrected his disciples.

John arrives as a changed person in the power of the Holy Spirit. John is seeking to do God's will, even if it means going to people he personally didn't care for. If anything is ever to heal our world of our racial, social and political tensions, it will be the power of the Holy Spirit. But it will require us to change our hearts and lives.

When Peter and John arrive from Jerusalem and lay hands on believers to receive the Holy Spirit, Simon is impressed. This is *real* power, not trickery. He wanted it, as it'd boost his status. So, Simon offers to buy the ability to give what only God can give.

Imagine someone who buys a front-row ticket to see a famous athlete or musician. They wear the jersey, cheer the loudest, and take photos to show everyone they were there. But they don't actually know the person. Simon wanted to be in the front row of Jesus' movement because he liked the crowd's energy, but he didn't want the humble lifestyle of following Christ. He's a fan, not a follower.

As usual, Peter reacts strongly, "*May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!*" (v20). Peter knew Simon's heart wasn't right with God. Simon was bitter and still limited by his old life, his bad habits, his old patterns. Peter urged Simon to turn back to the way of life.

But the change Simon needed to go through was hard. To be in a genuine relationship with the Lord, Simon needed to give up his false practices. They'd only lead to his death and the death of people in the community. To follow the way of life, he'd have to change his life, find a new livelihood and make friends with new people.

All too often we're like Simon. We're like addicts. We're addicted to our lifestyle, selfish desires, popularity and the way we live. We know it's not healthy or meaningful. And when our conscience nudges us, we drown it out, doubling down on our bad habits. Even when we get clear for a time, we may fall right back into patterns of self-deceit.

Simon knew this. The most *hopeful* thing he does is ask Peter and John to pray for him so the severe consequences won't fall on him. It's only when we admit we need help from outside ourselves, from a higher power, a spiritual power, that real change can begin.

When we're open to God's presence we find confidence in God's work, which shapes our inner being and how we live.

Peter and John knew this. Without God's presence, without the One who walks alongside, the journey will be too much for us. Life happens. Choices are made and allegiances given, yet presence is needed.

They came to be, and to bring, God's presence. This is the ministry of all believers. When we spend time with Christ, his fragrance, his Spirit, goes with us. God is with us.

Peter and John gathered everyone and said, "Hold on to this. The same presence that came to Jesus like a dove descending and a voice proclaiming is offered now to you. You may not see a bird. You may not hear a voice or even a whisper. But hear our voices and know you aren't alone any longer. You are loved. Hold on to this. Hold on together, and you'll be on your way."

This is good advice as the way won't be easy. There will be those who seek to deceive and mislead. There will be water and there will be fire.

Here's the good news: you won't *be* alone. When (not if, but when) you go through the water, God will be with you. You won't be alone. When (not if, but when) you go through the fire of conflict, God will be with you. You won't be alone. It will be hot, wet and painful, and you'll think you'll be burned to a crisp or drowned, but God will be with you. You aren't alone.

Hold onto God's promise. Faith doesn't mean safety or security. Just ask Jesus. It means presence. It means community. That's our gift. It's a joy for us and then through us to the world. It's what we offer. There are no secret answers, no quick fixes, no easy steps to a better life. There is presence.

"Best of all," John Wesley said, "God is with us." Amen

Let us pray …

Acts 8:11-17 (CEB)

He had their attention because he had baffled them with sorcery for a long time. After they came to believe Philip, who preached the good news about God's kingdom and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Even Simon himself came to believe and was baptized. Afterward, he became one of Philip's supporters. As he saw firsthand the signs and great miracles that were happening, he was astonished.

When word reached the apostles in Jerusalem that Samaria had accepted God's word, they commissioned Peter and John to go to Samaria. Peter and John went down to Samaria where they prayed that the new believers would receive the Holy Spirit. (This was because the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) So Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit