

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

### Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

## **And you shall be My Witnesses ...in SAMARIA**

(Acts 8:4-25)

**Study #11**

### Introduction: Famous last words...

Why are “famous last words” famous? Because they are last.

The last words we hear from a loved one - either before they pass into eternity or before a long separation - will echo in our ears for a very long time. If the speaker is aware that he is giving “last words” he will be careful to make every word count.

The last words of Jesus have stayed on the minds of His followers through the centuries.

Standing on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, we watch the disciples watch Jesus ascend into heaven. He had been with them for three years, training them to follow Him.

They had experienced the trauma of the crucifixion, the delirious joy of the resurrection, and the whirlwind of forty days of post-resurrection appearances.

And they never forgot the last words He spoke to them right before His return to Heaven.

*[Acts 1:8] But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.*

*Worldwide impact!*

Those words contain both a charge and a promise. “*You and no one else will be My witnesses.*” AND “*You are to be My witnesses!*”

The words are visionary in the extreme. Jesus speaks of worldwide impact and those words stir our hearts. We hear Acts 1:8 and think, “*Jesus wants me to impact the remotest part of the world with the Gospel. Sweet!*”

And it IS sweet. But, unless I miss my guess, the earliest disciples might not have settled on that part of Jesus’ last comment. Right before He mentions “*the remotest part of the earth*” He refers to another place - Samaria.

That word had a jarring effect on Jews of that day, and for good reason. If there was one location on the planet that Jesus’ followers might have preferred to avoid, it was Samaria.

*Samaria? Really?*

By the time we reach the first century, the Jews and Samaritans had hated each other for hundreds of years.

The tension began as a geographic one when the Kingdom of Israel divided north and south, with the southern tribes (Judah and Benjamin) being ruled by descendants of David and Solomon, and the northern tribes (the other ten) being ruled by a succession of dynasties not related to the Davidic line.

The tension became a permanent rift when the Assyrian Empire defeated the northern kingdom in 722 BC. These Assyrian conquerors intermarried with the Jews, creating a Jewish/Gentile race that was rejected by the pure-blooded Jews of the south.

Things were so bad that when the Samaritans offered assistance to the Jews who were rebuilding the broken-down Solomon Temple<sup>1</sup> in Jerusalem, the Jews would not even allow them to help.

The Samaritans responded to that slight by erecting a rival Temple on their own sacred hill, Mt. Gerizim.<sup>2</sup>

And by the time we come to the New Testament, Israel and Samaria are separated not only by geography, but by culture, race, and religion. The two nations' contempt was long-standing, deep, and completely mutual.

In Jesus' last words, He sends His disciples to the relatively friendly territory of "***Jerusalem and Judea***", to the sexy excitement of "***the remotest part of the world***", and to the uncomfortable, yucky, awkward land of the Samaritans.

Samaria is the place that's pretty close. It's geographically near. But the people there are weird. They are not like us. They dress funny and talk different. Do you know any Samaritans? This morning, as we watch the Gospel enter Samaria, we'll have cause to think about our own Samarias.

### *Meet Philip, the evangelist*

Last Sunday we saw persecution break out against the church of Jesus. A young man named Saul had watched approvingly as an inflamed crowd threw rocks at Stephen until he died.

Following Stephen's death this Saul became the chief opponent of the church. He savagely attacked believers. He entered their homes to drag both men and women off to jail. (Acts 8:3)

In our story for today, though, Saul fades into the background (he will resurface again soon) as Luke follows the activities of Philip, who takes center stage.

Like Stephen, Philip was one of the seven men chosen by the congregation and commissioned by the apostles to head up the ministry to widows in the church in Jerusalem.

This Philip (not the apostle by the same name) is the only person in the New Testament specifically identified as an "***evangelist***." (Acts 21:8) - and, as we will see today, he was quite an effective evangelist.

Following Stephen's death, it was clear that the other Hellenistic Jewish Christians would, like Stephen, be on Saul's radar for persecution.

So, the Hellenists left Jerusalem. Or, as Luke puts it, ***[8:2]...they were all scattered***. And then he tells us that ***[8:4] those who had been scattered went about preaching the word***.

One of those "scattered" from Jerusalem was Philip.

### **Missionary Activity in Samaria (vv. 5-13)**

#### **Philip Serves (vv. 5-8)**

##### *Philip enters Samaria (v. 5)*

Again, it's not surprising that Philip left Jerusalem. With Saul romping on Christians, he was sort of forced out of the city. And when he traveled north, that, too, was understandable. North of Jerusalem was the large and spacious hill country of Judea.

But Philip kept traveling north through Judea and landed in the region of Samaria. Samaria.

Philip went to the people his people hated the most. I wonder if he may have had Jesus' last words echoing in his mind ("***both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria***"). He may have realized that the people his people hated the most were the people Jesus missed the most.

And Philip didn't just go to Samaria to hide out or to visit.

<sup>1</sup> This was the project overseen by Zerubbabel and in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.

<sup>2</sup> A temple that was destroyed by the Jew, John Hyrcanus, in the 2nd century BC, when he conquered Samaria.

***[Acts 8:5] Philip went down to the city of Samaria<sup>3</sup> and began proclaiming Christ to them.***

Philip's desire to spread the word about Jesus in Samaria is commendable. Way to go, Philip! But, what about the Samaritans? Will they pay any attention to what he, a JEW, has to say?

Well, as a matter of fact, YES! They will.

*Philip's message and miracles (vv. 6-7)*

***[6a] The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing.<sup>4</sup> [7] For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed.***

God had gifted Philip not only with the gift of evangelism. At least on this Samaritan junket He gifted Philip with the ability to perform miracles, to effect healings, and to cast demons out of the oppressed.

And once again, the pattern we have seen over and over again in Acts holds: first, God acts; second, God's people speak. The healings and the miracles and the exorcisms paved the way for proclamation of the Good News which will save the Samaritans' eternal souls.

### **Summary: Rejoicing! (v. 8)**

***[8] So there was much rejoicing in that city.***

Small wonder, that there was "***much rejoicing***" in the city! Miracles accompanied by a life-changing Gospel. Souls were saved and bodies were made whole and minds were renewed. Wow!

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<sup>3</sup> It is possible that the site was the city of Gitta, since this was the birthplace of Simon Magus, mentioned later in this chapter. There was formerly a city named "Samaria" but it had been destroyed by the time of the first century. Herod the Great had rebuilt it, renaming it "Sebaste" in honor of Augustus (*Sebaste* being the Greek equivalent of the Latin Augustus).

<sup>4</sup> On the strength of the example of Stephen and Philip, we can't limit the performance of miracles to apostles only.

And Luke doesn't just leave it at a vague comment about rejoicing. He tells us about the Samaritans' response to the message of the Gospel in both general and specific terms, both personal and communal.

First, there is the personal and specific account of Simon, a man who had, prior to Philip's arrival, made quite a name for himself.

### **Samaria Responds (vv. 9-13)**

*Meet Simon, the magician (vv. 9-11)*

***[9] Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic<sup>5</sup> in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; [10] and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." [11] And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.***

This Simon was not a con artist or a cheap charlatan. He didn't do card tricks. He was involved in something far more dangerous and sinister. He was a man endowed with satanic power.

Magic, involving access to demonic power, was the most debased form of religion in the Hellenistic age.<sup>6</sup> It was occult stuff. And this, I believe, is what Simon was involved with.

Something of Simon's character is seen in that he welcomed the people's praise, allowing them to call him "***the Great Power of God.***"

And when Philip rolled into town there was, all of a sudden, a power struggle. Only it wasn't much of a competition, for Philip was performing miracles by the power of God.

The people in the city had formerly been believing in the dark powers of Simon (Magus). Now, they see in Philip a greater power - and they placed their trust in the Jesus Philip proclaimed.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Magus" was a term that came to be used of a practitioner of various kinds of sorcery.

<sup>6</sup> According to Susan Garrett, author of Demise of the Devil, a study of encounters between the Gospel and satanic powers in the writings of Luke (Gospel and Acts).

*Samaria - from Simon to Jesus (v. 12)*

***[12] But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.***

They saw Philip's miracles, which got their attention. They listened attentively as Philip explained the Gospel and presented Jesus to them. They placed their trust in Jesus and were baptized into a new life with Christ!

In one sense you could say that they turned from Simon to Jesus. We keep reading and find that even Simon turned from Simon to Jesus!

*Simon - from Simon to Jesus! (v. 13)*

***[13] Even Simon himself believed;<sup>8</sup> and after being baptized,<sup>9</sup> he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.***

For now I want you to keep Simon and his story on the back burner. We are going to get back to him shortly. He comes back into the story and his subsequent actions make for very thought-provoking discussions...

For now, though, Luke takes us out of the personal story of Simon to the larger story of the advance of the church.

Word that the Christian faith had established a beachhead in Samaria quickly reached the mother church in Jerusalem.

And this news that the Gospel of Jesus was making inroads FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME into a community that was *not quite Jewish* definitely got the apostles' attention.

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, had Philip performed no miracles, the Samaritans might well have assumed that Philip represented something inferior to Simon.

<sup>8</sup> Notice that the people of the city clearly believed Philip's message about Jesus; with Simon, there is just the general "he believed." Some have argued that we really don't know what he believed.

<sup>9</sup> The fact that he was baptized is evidence, to me at least, that Philip believed that Simon's belief was sincere and well-informed.

To this point Christianity had been an entirely Jewish affair.<sup>10</sup> Samaritans, though, were one half step removed from full-blooded Jewishness. Samaritans were a bridge to the Gentile world.

This development was so intriguing that the entire group of apostles decided to send two representatives to Samaria to check out what was going on, firsthand.

### **Apostolic Activity in Samaria (vv. 14-25)**

#### **Confirming a Genuine Work of God (vv. 14-17)**

*Apostles check it out (v. 14)*

***[14] Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter<sup>11</sup> and John<sup>12</sup>...***

Most Jews of this time period would have avoided Samaria at all costs. But this was not the first time that these two had been in Samaria.

Both Peter and John had been with Jesus when He had stopped off at a well in the Samaritan city of Sychar. There, He spoke with a certain woman who placed her faith in Jesus and became the first evangelist to the Samaritans.

John tells us that ***[John 4:39] many of the Samaritans believed in Him*** after having heard the testimony of the woman at the well.

I'm suspicious that Jesus' time in Samaria not only prepared some of the Samaritans to receive the Gospel through Philip, it prepared Peter and John for a Samaritan revival.

What happens next, though, may shake up some of our categories.

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<sup>10</sup> The sole exception to this rule thus far was one of the seven servants of Acts 6, Nicholas, a proselyte from Antioch. A proselyte was a Gentile who had converted to Judaism.

<sup>11</sup> Harrison suggests that Peter's having been sent to Samaria means that he was not pre-eminent among the apostles at all. I disagree. I think it means that he was pre-eminent.

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly enough, this is the last mention of the apostle John in the book of Acts.

*The Spirit's confirmation (vv. 15-17)*

***[15] [Peter and John] who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. [16] For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. [17] Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.***

This is a post-conversion reception of the Holy Spirit. Hmm...

I have always believed and I have always taught that when a person puts his faith in Jesus, he receives the Holy Spirit. Simultaneously. Yet that is clearly NOT what happens here.

They believed in Jesus. Days passed and THEN they received the Holy Spirit.

So, do I need to re-think my theology? Does a person now, subsequent to trusting Christ, need to receive the Holy Spirit as a separate act? Is THAT normative?

And if not, if it is normative for a person to receive the Spirit when he receives Christ, why didn't it work that way for the Samaritans?

The New Testament lays out the normative experience of the Christian as follows.

- ***[Romans 8:9] However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ (i.e. - the Holy Spirit), he does not belong to Him.***
- ***[1 Corinthians 6:19] Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?***
- ***[Galatians 4:6] Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"***

In the New Testament, the assumption is that believers in Jesus have received the Spirit of God.

And beyond apostolic teaching, there is apostolic practice.

- A couple of chapters over there is zero separation of time between salvation and the reception of the Spirit at the home of Cornelius, the Gentile (Acts 10:44-48).
- In fact, nowhere else in Acts (besides here) can we point to an example of people being saved and then receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 that we were **ALL** made to drink of one Spirit and we understand that **ALL** believers in Jesus are indwelt by and have been baptized by the Spirit of God.

Except here.

Samaria was an exception to the rule. Why? For what reason did God separate their spiritual rebirth from their reception of the Spirit? Why did He give them the accompanying signs of the Spirit (presumably tongues as happened at Pentecost; maybe other signs) AFTER they believed?<sup>14</sup>

The only explanation that holds water, in my opinion, is that this particular incident (Samaritans being saved and being made a part of the same "Body of Christ" as Jews) was such a monumental departure from historical precedent that an abnormal work of God was in order to highlight it.

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<sup>13</sup> Some may point to Acts 19 as an example of a post-conversion reception of the Holy Spirit. But the disciples that Paul found in Ephesus were not Christians, having only been baptized into John's baptism of repentance. They didn't know anything about Jesus, only that One was coming after John. As soon as they heard about Jesus, they believed, were saved, were baptized, and received the Holy Spirit.

<sup>14</sup> Some have suggested that the Samaritans' initial reception of the Gospel was not a reception of Christ, but of Philip. And, that what we read in verses 14-17 is actually their salvation. The problem with this explanation is that Luke doesn't even hint that the original Samaritan response was inadequate, or that Philip's presentation was in any way defective. Clearly, they were saved as they believed and were baptized. Others (John Calvin, among them) say that the Samaritans truly received the Holy Spirit when they believed, but that the apostles' ministry merely provided charismatic manifestations as a public testimony to their salvation. But, again, this seems to contradict the plain language of verse 15, which says that they had not [in any sense] received the Holy Spirit.

This was the first time the Gospel of Jesus had been proclaimed in a geographic, cultural, racial, and ethnic setting other than something strictly Jewish.

So, God sovereignly orchestrated a Samaritan Pentecost.<sup>15</sup>

With the church's leading apostles, Peter and John, present when the Holy Spirit was poured out on these Samaritans, there could be no doubt in Jerusalem and elsewhere that God had accepted THEM as surely as He had accepted THE JEWS.<sup>16</sup>

(And I frankly suspect that if the Jerusalem leaders had **NOT** been in Samaria when the Holy Spirit fell on these new converts, there would have developed a Jewish church, a Samaritan church, and a Gentile church.)

The bottom line? God deliberately withheld the Spirit from the Samaritans until the apostles arrived to demonstrate that they - the Jews - were ONE with the Samaritans!<sup>17</sup>

What happens in Samaria is absolutely definitive for the future of the church. It draws a line in the sand and says, *“Anyone who crosses that line by placing his or her faith in Jesus is united with every other person who has crossed that line. You may be Jewish or Samaritan. It doesn't matter.”*

And today, you may be left- or right-handed, blue- or brown-eyed, rich or poor, young or old. It doesn't matter.

You may hold to any or no particular political persuasion. You may be African-American, Hispanic, Asian, Anglo or mixed-racial. You may have tattoos or not, piercings or not. You may be a patriot serving in the military or a pacifist.

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<sup>15</sup> In the same way, there will be a Gentile Pentecost in Acts 11.

<sup>16</sup> It is clearly implied that the reception of the Spirit here was marked by external manifestations such as had marked the Spirit's descent on the earliest disciples at Pentecost - i.e. tongues, miracles, healings, exorcisms.

<sup>17</sup> J.I. Packer calls this idea “rational and reverent.” In the same way, Michael Greene sees the delay as a divine veto on schism in the infant church, a schism which could have slipped almost unnoticed into the Christian fellowship, as converts from the two sides of the Samaritan curtain found Christ without finding each other. That would have been the denial of the one baptism and all it stood for.

You may be an athlete, a millionaire, a computer geek or homeless. You may have a shaved head, long hair, or a hairstyle right out of the 80's (like your pastor). Graduate school student or High School dropout - it doesn't matter.

If you have placed your faith in Jesus, you are united with every other person who has placed faith in Jesus. And you are welcomed here!

The abnormal, delayed Samaritan reception of the Holy Spirit was to place an exclamation mark on the idea that all believers in Jesus are members of one eternal family.

And now that we've got a handle on that, we return to the text and find the focus back on Simon. We won't spend a lot of time here, but I do want to make a couple of comments about Simon, and the implications of his story for you and me.

### **Correcting a Perverting of the Work of God (vv. 18-24)**

*Simon's GROSS error (vv. 18-19)*

You'll remember that Simon was impressed with the power of Philip to perform miracles. (v. 13) More than that, he craved the ability to reproduce those miracles.

And he thought that he had finally “broken the code” when he saw the signs of the Spirit being manifested as Peter and John laid their hands on the converts.

So, he made a simple request.

*[18] Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, [19] saying, “Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> Simon has been identified with his request for the last 2,000 years. In fact, the term *simony*, which denotes the purchase of ecclesiastical office or favor by money, stems from this incident.

Peter and John were appalled. Back in chapter 3 they were unable to give silver or gold (Acts 3). Now, they were unwilling to receive any - and were shocked that it should even have been offered.

*Peter's SCATHING rebuke (vv. 20-23)*

**[20] But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!"<sup>19</sup> [21] "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. [22] Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. [23] For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."**

That is one scathing rebuke. And we wonder what we are to make of it. What do Peter's words tell us about Simon?

Was Peter thinking of Judas Iscariot when he said what he did about Simon perishing with his money? Is he saying that Simon was not saved?

Or, when he said that Simon had "**no part or portion in this matter**" are we to think of Jesus' words to Peter himself when he resisted Jesus' move to wash his feet (John 13:8)? On that occasion Peter was sorely mistaken, but not lost.

Actually, it is not terribly clear from Peter's words. And unfortunately, Simon's response to Peter's rebuke doesn't help much.

*Simon's response (v. 24)*

**[24] But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."**

- Some who read this see it as Simon's humble, believing request that the apostles pray for him to receive fresh cleansing from God.

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<sup>19</sup> It is not that Simon was attempting to purchase salvation. He wanted to purchase the ability to give to others the gift of the Holy Spirit's miracles. While nothing excuses this grossly wrong-headed request, given his personal history, it is not so hard to understand why he would think he could do this.

- Others see it as a recognition on Simon's part that he did not have a relationship with God and therefore couldn't pray.
- And still other see his request as a flippant dismissal of Peter's words. ("*You can pray if you wish. Not me.*")

There is a lot of debate among Bible scholars about Simon's spiritual condition!<sup>20</sup> And I'll tell you that I don't think that I have the corner on the market on this one. But, I'll also tell you what I think.

When I read in verse 13 that Simon "**believed**" I take it that he put his faith in the message Philip was preaching, just like the rest of the Samaritans did. Evidently Philip thought that Simon was a believer or wouldn't have baptized him.

So, yes, I believe that he was saved. He believed in Jesus and was baptized as a believer.

And the rest of the story tells us that Simon, having been a Christian for SEVERAL WHOLE DAYS (!), still had baggage from his life as a satanically empowered sorcerer that needed to be dealt with! Is that really such a big surprise?

The story of Simon teaches me that people who are saved, will, from time to time, go off in dangerous, wrong directions. Being saved doesn't guarantee an automatic sin-free life.

Upon finding out that someone has committed a sin, fallen into error, gotten mixed up in something they shouldn't be mixed up in, I don't think that we should automatically jump to the conclusion that he or she is not saved.<sup>21</sup> That is one thing Simon's story teaches me. But there is something else.

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<sup>20</sup> One noted Bible scholar, Dr. Stanley Toussaint, lists seven reasons why he believes Simon Magus was not saved, and then, in a remarkable moment of candor, says, "But we can't be sure. He might be saved." Darrell Bock interacts with about ten theologians in his own commentary, all of whom represent different views - and then concludes that Luke leaves the matter open-ended, except to say that Luke shows that Simon had been heading in a wrong direction.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, sometimes those who appear to be saved aren't. They "believe" (but not in Jesus) and may even be baptized - but they aren't actually trusting Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

While we should not automatically doubt someone's salvation upon every evidence of sin, we **should** automatically deal with the situation as Simon Peter did - speaking forthrightly, boldly, confronting sin, and directing the person who is caught in the trespass to the Lord, who alone can restore them.

Peter didn't dismiss Simon. He didn't roll his eyes and say, "*What a loser!*" He didn't walk away from him in disgust. He dealt with him. He loved him well. He continued to relate to him.

And it will be a measure of OUR love when we stay engaged with people who "*believe and are baptized*" and yet still commit sin.

The adventure in this one Samaritan city comes to a close, and we watch as Peter and John head back to Jerusalem. But we notice that they took their time getting home.

### **Apostolic Ministry in Samaria (cont'd) (v. 25)**

*[25] So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.*

Previously, the Apostle John had been the one who wanted to call down fire from Heaven on the Samaritans for having refused hospitality to Jesus (Luke 9:51-55)!

Now, he and Peter are blazing an evangelistic trail in Samaria, inviting the formerly hated Samaritans to become brothers and sisters in Christ. The Gospel really does break down walls. Jesus really does put love where there was none before.

### **Conclusion:**

Jesus promised that we will be His witnesses. And we ARE His witnesses. Period. No one is His witness except us, His people.

But Jesus wants us to be certain kinds of witnesses - bold, articulate, loving - everywhere and all the time.

We are to be His witnesses at home, with our loved ones and with those with whom we feel most comfortable (Jerusalem and Judea).

We are to be His witnesses to Moroccans and Indians and Chinese (the remotest part of the earth), by either going to them or by supporting those who do - and certainly by praying for them.

But we are also to be His witnesses to those who are near to us and not very much like us (Samaria).

So...

may God open EACH ONE OF OUR HEARTS to embrace those who are quite different from us with His incredible love.  
and may He use OUR CHURCH to reach out to the least and the lost - the people He longs to embrace!