

## **The Witch Who Saved A Pastor's Soul**

<sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

<sup>43</sup>Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Samir Salmanovic grew up in Croatia with a Catholic mother and an Islamic father, although neither were practicing. He jokes that they ate a huge feast at the end of Ramadan without ever fasting, and they always had lamb on Easter without ever going to church. Religion was like salt in their family- a tiny bit was OK, but it was very, very easy to have too much of a good thing.

Well Samir was a good kid, but he did what good kids around the world do- he found a way to really get under his parent's skin. As a very young man with all of the fervor of the most zealous convert, Samir became a Bible toting, Scripture quoting Christian of the MOST evangelical kind. Even he admits today that he was pretty hard to live with. And so after two weeks of his assault his parents told him the old Samir was welcome, but this stranger could find a new place to live.

Well, it was a high price to pay, but Samir stuck with his faith. He wound up traveling to America, went to seminary, and he eventually became the pastor of a nondenominational congregation in New York City.

Now, New York being New York, Samir soon discovered his church wasn't exactly what he expected. There were all sorts of people there, with all different kinds of ideas- certainly not all had the same zeal. And one Christmas Eve brought someone that would challenge him like no other. One Christmas Eve his church attracted the attention of a young Korean woman named Soo. That night Samir had titled his Christmas Eve sermon: "The Magic of Christmas". This was posted on a sign right next to the doors of the church which, following Samir's request, were kept open in spite of the cold.

Now to say Soo wasn't a regular church goer was an understatement. Soo was an adherent of the earth based Wicca religion- she considered herself to be a witch. And normally church would be about the last place in the world she wanted to be. And yet that night, she was cold, and lonely, and she was drawn in by the open doors and by this curious sermon title: the magic of Christmas. And once inside she was not disappointed. The congregation surprised her with their warmth and kindness and Pastor Samir spoke words of love, and he spoke them with grace. She had always imagined Christians to be so narrow and judgmental, but that night all she experienced was kindness.

What surprised her even more is that she kept going back, even after Christmas. Now mind you she told Samir right off the bat she was a witch and that wasn't going to change. But if it was OK she would really like to keep coming. And although this made absolutely no sense to Samir's very black and white mind, well what else could he say?

It was certainly not the church Samir expected or wanted- but this bizarre little community turned out to be the church he was given.



When I first read our text from the book of Acts this morning- this description of the early church right as it was starting out, well it just seemed as far from Samir's situation as possible. Where Samir tried to pastor a church with everything from conservative evangelicals to a witch- the community here in Acts is all on the same page.

Awe fell upon everyone, Acts reports. Everyone. All who believed were living together- so close they decided to share even their possessions doling resources out to whoever was in need. Every day they were all worshipping in the temple and breaking bread at home. They had the goodwill of all. And every day more and more people kept showing up.

It's just an incredible scene. All that unity. Everybody all on the same page. It's like the Rajneeshees only without the red clothes and assault rifles.

The thing is- this isn't the whole story. Not by a long shot.

The problem with reading these little snippets out of this big ol' book is you lose the context- you get part of the story but not the whole. See as unified and together as the church sounds in these five verses- well that's about as long as it lasts.

Everyone sharing everything together in common? In the very next chapter two people named Ananias and Saphira strike it rich in a real estate deal and decide to bring SOME of the proceeds to comrade Peter to be distributed but not all.

"Is this it?" Peter asks them.

“Yep,” they say.

“You sure?” he asks them again.

“Uh-huh.” And just like that Kumbaya turns into taps.

And that was just the start. After that, the church splits over every possible issue. Where do you worship? As you can hear in this text, everyone’s worshipping at the temple. Well later folks argue about that- saying it’s better to worship in homes than in the temple. And how about what to eat? These early Christians all followed kashrut, the Jewish cleanliness laws. But later they started fighting about this, too- some of them saying why couldn’t you love shrimp and Jesus, too? And of course everyone’s favorite topic to complain about: adult male circumcision. Everyone who was already circumcised said, yeah, you had to do this to be a Christian. But the guys in the men’s breakfast and golf group who hadn’t were a little less...uh...enthusiastic.

As far as I can tell the church experienced about 5 verses of unity, but the rest of the story in Acts is this mess of folks with strong feelings in honest conflict, all trying to figure out how to live together.



Well Samir’s mess deepened. A couple of years Soo had become part of the congregation. Samir came to love her kindness and gentleness- how she had found a home in spite of keeping her beliefs. Well, Samir was asked to host a national gathering of evangelical pastors. The conference was devoted to healing and wholeness among pastors- most of whom would be coming in feeling pretty battered and bruised. The conference leaders asked Samir to

find someone from his congregation who most exhibited God's compassion and love to pray for the gathering. Samir said that immediately, without hesitation, the first person that popped into his mind was Soo. But just as fast as she came to mind he also knew with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach how utterly impossible and absurd of an idea this was- a witch to praying for evangelical pastors. He'd be thrown out!

I mean welcoming her into the congregation is one thing. But surely there's a limit, right? I mean you have to be realistic. You can't let everyone in the door!



I think that was what caused all the trouble in the Acts text- all those people they let in the door. The last line reads: day by day the Lord was adding to the number of those who were being saved. It has to do with all that new blood.

It's easy to just assume growth is just an obviously positive thing-especially when it comes to churches. In a lot of areas of our life, in our businesses for example, increasing volume and revenue is kind of the point, and it's easy to just import this and assume church growth is a natural and good thing, too. But the truth is growth means change. And change is always hard.

Of course it was easy for the church to be all of one mind and share everything together when it was a tiny movement. They all knew one another and shared the same experiences. But when all those others started showing up, when all those other people started coming in droves- well they brought with them their own perspectives, their own views. And they started asking that great and terrible question: why? Why are we doing that? Why are we worshipping this way and not another? Why are we reading these book but not these ones? Why? And just like

that, within just a few short verses the entire church community finds itself fragmented, fractured, and frazzled.



And yet as hard as all the conflict is- the texts says there's something salvific, something saving, about all these strange faces.

I've always been a little uncomfortable with this phrase "being saved". When people run around talking about whether they are saved or not, or, more often as not talking about whether OTHER people are saved or not, it always feels to me that we're walking on ground that really isn't ours to tread. After all, if grace means anything at all it means that salvation is up to God and a mystery to the rest of us, and, as the Second Helvetic Confession puts it, we should "have a good hope for all."

A lot of Presbyterians are nervous about this kind of language. Back at my former church in Austin we put a whole lot of money into a direct mail campaign that worked out really well. What made it successful is that we had fun with it. We sent out postcards trying to give a good sense of who we were in a way that got you're your attention. The first mailer that went out right around the time that a lot of folks were up in arms about the Harry Potter books. Our mailer read: "Interested in a church that reads books, not burns them?" (I got a few phone calls on that one, I can tell you.) Another one, trying to assure strangers we didn't want to attack them read: "Not looking to 'get saved'...maybe you're Presbyterian?"

But I realized this week I realized there's another way to understand what it means to being saved. When I hear that the Lord is adding to the number of those being saved, I hear a

line being drawn in the sand. And you have the good guys, the saved, on one side of the line- and then you have the bad guys, the unsaved on the other. But as soon as someone steps over that line and into the church- well they become saved, too. It's like God is only inside the church and not out there in the world God created so very good.

But I realized this isn't the only way to understand this. The Greek phrase here is ambiguous- those being saved could refer only to the outsiders, but it could also refer to the whole community. Meaning, the people already on the inside are just as much in process of being saved as the people on the outside- that God is on both sides of the line. And, indeed, that God seems most active at the place where these strangers and insiders mix.

See, the Greek word for salvation- it's sozo. And sozo isn't primarily about heaven and hell. Sozo literally means healing or becoming whole. And just as individuals can experience sozo, or salvation, when they become whole, communities can, too. And when this early church welcomes in that crazy quilt of strangers- when even in the midst of all this chaos people figure out how to make room for one another- well all of them are becoming more whole, more reflective of all God's people.



Well, Samir kept praying and thinking and praying and thinking about what to do with Soo. Everytime he thought about it and the request that he find someone who showed God's love and compassion- he knew the best person in his community was Soo. Period. But just as soon as he would think this another part of him, the strategic part of him, told him this was impossible- suicide.

Finally, he called Soo into his office and sat down with her. After a deep breath he said, “Soo, we’re going to host a pastor’s conference in a little bit that will bring in pastors from all over the nation. They’ve asked me to find someone to offer a prayer for these pastors, a lot of them are coming in wounded and discouraged. I’d like for you to offer that prayer.”

Soo thought about it for a moment. Then she said, “Well, I’ll do it. But I’d like to pray in the name of the mother goddess.”

Samir closed his eyes. He regretted even asking her. Then he said, “You know Soo, the purpose of this time is to support and encourage these pastors- not to enter into a theological debate or broaden their horizons.”

Soo thought about this. “Well, how about if I pray to the Holy Spirit?”

“Deal,” said Samir with a smile.

In order to get along, they figured out a way to make room for each other.



It’s an opportunity our own denomination has given us this week. Some of you know this has been a busy week in the Presbyterian church. For the last several months Presbyteries, or regions, around the nation have been voting on changing our Constitution to allow gay and lesbian people to serve as ministers, elders, and deacons. It was seen as a kind of compromise- it doesn’t require more conservative churches to ordain someone they deem inappropriate, it simply allows other churches to ordain whoever they believe is called. This Wednesday we

learned that the measure passed. The doors are now wide open. Some of us are celebrating this morning, some are grieving, and some of us just aren't sure what to think.

Now, cards on the table- I voted in support of this. I'm part of a generation who views sexual orientation as being akin to handedness- whether someone is right or left handed. I don't really care who someone loves; I care how they love them. That's what important to me.

But I absolutely know this is completely NOT the way a lot of us think. Most of us grew up receiving incredibly strong messages about sexual orientation and the feelings stirred up by all this is intense. And these feelings don't change because a vote took place. Believe me, I know and respect this. I do.

So here is what I want to tell you. I believe God wants us to be like the early church and like Samir and Soo- I believe God wants us to figure out how to make room for each other. If you find yourself this morning celebrating this new openness in the Presbyterian church, please, please, please- now is the time to extend this hospitality not only to the folks you agree with, but to dig deeper and challenge yourselves to love the family members who disagree with this move and who are left wondering if they are still welcome, too. You know how they feel.

And if you find yourself disappointed, saddened, or angered by this vote- there is room enough here for such voices, too. Men and women of good faith disagree with this vote, people I count as friends, and the church needs them. And not because I say so, or because the Presbytery says so- but because Christ's love is more powerful than our mess. That was true for the early church, and it's true for ours, too.



Well, the week of the conference finally arrived. It was huge. People from all over. When the time came for Soo to head to the pulpit and offer prayer over all those pastors, Samir found himself utterly frantic. His heart with in his throat. What on earth had he done? Absolutely believing this would be his last day in ministry, he just decided to his head and enjoy it. He writes: “With the steady voice of a person who has no doubts that our ordinary lives are saturated with the Presence [of God], she said, ‘Dear Holy Spirit, I am not a Christian. But I and my son are cared for in this church. These people who follow you work very hard to make a difference in the world and love people like us. Now they are tired, disoriented, discouraged. Please, make them see how important their work really is. What would our world be without people like them? Help them continue caring so that people like we might find a better way.’

There are religious experiences that have the power to restart our hearts...this was one of those moments...We are scared of finding our God in the other. Why do we fear something so wonderful?” (It’s All About God, p. 5) **Amen.**