

Sermon- Staying on your Call

Scripture: Acts 6:1-7

Sunday, October 10, 2021

Today we are going to look at one of the problems the early church faced and how the Apostles solved it. Our passage is in the start of the 6th chapter of Acts. Scholars who do the chronological research tell us that we are about 5 years past Pentecost at this point. The church at this time is growing extremely fast and when you grow that fast you are crossing into new ethnic groups. In this case the ethnic group that is coming into the church are the Greek speaking believers who were originally Jewish. They were Jews who grew up in other parts of the world and therefore had different mother tongues. But these Jews had returned to live in Jerusalem at the time. We also know that this community many widows. How so? Well one of the things diaspora Jews did in those days is that they returned to Jerusalem to live out their twilight years. And one of the ways God has arranged things is for men to die sooner than women. It was true then and it is true even today. We know that this happens for a reason. Women actually have better immune systems than men, perhaps to handle the challenges of child birth. So because this was a Greek speaking Jewish community of retirees there were a lot of widows in the group and they were all Greek speaking. 401ks and Social Security was not invented yet so the only way this community was able to survive was because the church took care of them. And the church did a terrific job of being that social security for the needy. In those days the Jewish system had two kinds of programs. One was called the *quppah*. This was a weekly dole of money for the resident needy. This was an amount enough to buy 14 meals and it was given out every Friday. And the second was called the *tumhuy*. This was the daily distribution of meals and this included food and drink that was delivered house to house to serve the needs of the transient needy. The church programs incorporated both the *quppah* and the *tumhuy* programs.

But here is why things got challenging. You see when you serve the needy you have to have a system where you know who the needy is and where they live. You also want to make sure that there is no fraud in the system and the right people are taken care of. In this case the needy were Greek speaking and the leadership were Aramaic speaking. When you don't speak the language how do you have a grasp of who the resident needy and transient needy are? Only insiders have a real handle on details like this, right? It is like if us starting a food distribution program for Hispanic or Congolese speaking people. We are surely going to have a lot of people not getting the food until we have some Hispanic or Congolese speaking people in charge of the program.

In those days because the 12 Apostles were in charge of all the programs the church was involved in and because of the language issues I talked about it looked like the Aramaic or Hebrew people got their needs met but the Greek speakers did not. This skewed distribution was not the intent of the leadership but the effect of the way it was managed.

So when you step back you can clearly see that the Apostles were spending a lot of time managing a food program that they were not in a position to manage. All that time spent managing the food program, was time taken away from being first hand witnesses to Jesus in a way that only they could do.

This clearly was not ideal. So what did they do when this problem came to their attention? They suggested that some elders be selected from among the insiders who were well respected and full of the Spirit and able to manage this program well. The idea was very well received. So the congregation selected 7 people, all of whom Greek speaking, (you know that from the names of those selected) and the apostles laid hands on them and blessed them and empowered them to take over the program and they went on to focus on their unique Apostle responsibilities.

When you look at the big picture, you see that there was a problem in the community that emerged because their rapid growth had placed them in a new situation. That problem was brought to the attention of the apostles. The apostles acknowledged the problem and suggested a solution. The community accepted and implemented the suggestion. Because these steps were taken, the original problem of the Greek speaking widows being left out was solved and the church continued to grow because the Apostles continued to witness and more people were involved in leadership. He

Before we go on there is one more dynamic I want to examine. You see the Apostles here did a fantastic job of solving the problem when it was brought to their attention. But how did the problem arise in the first place? In other words, the Apostles were so focused on their calling to be witnesses to Jesus. So how did they get sucked into spending a bunch of time doing something that they should not have been doing in the first place?

Let's rewind the tape on the history of the church back to Pentecost. At that time the apostles were focused on teaching about Jesus powerfully, and spending a lot of time in prayer and doing amazing miracles. As a result more and more people believed and the church grew. As the church grew, the needs of the congregation grew. Church growth happens most in PIPSY¹ populations. One of the P's is the poor. The widows in that time had no source of income or support and so they needed to be provided food. So they started a food ministry. With a food ministry you have to cook the food and distribute it. You also have to know who actually needs the food. Leaders are people who ask the questions and find out what needs to be done. When they find out their first instinct is to jump in and do it. Initially they went to 5 houses with food, then they went to 10 houses. Initially the people being served would have been Aramaic speaking. So when

¹ PIPSY, an acronym for Poor, International, Prisoner and Sick. Y is used to simply turn the term into an adjective for using it in a sentence. This is from the book Megachurch to Multiplication by Chris Galanos.

someone had a need, the message got passed around till it reached the leadership. The leadership made sure that the needs were verified and when cleared got put on the distribution list.

At some point, the groups expanded and a whole new ethnic group became Christ followers. They had the same needs. But the systems did not change to account for this new situation. The main reason for this was that the leadership was so busy taking care of all these people that they did not have time to think of why they were doing what they were doing or if the whole system was running well. They just reacted to the needs that came to their attention and as they say the “crying child gets the milk”. But after 5 years of intense growth, the growing pains emerged, the systems needed to take care of the needs of the church had clearly changed.

But this story has a happy ending. The problem was brought to the notice of the Apostles, the Apostles acknowledged the problem, prayed and proposed a solution. The solution was accepted by the congregation, 7 insiders who were wise and spirit filled were out forth by the congregation. These people were blessed and given the authority by the Apostles to run the program. Finally the twelve went back to doing what only they could do which was preaching the Good News and being the most important first hand witnesses to Jesus Christ in the history of the church.

Now the critical question for us is, what lessons can we learn from this situation. After all we are not trying to run a food distribution program. I would like to focus on two major lessons for our church.

First, we have to make sure we adjust our systems to the situation we are in. We can't be doing things the same way when we were in the growing phase of the church and the plateau phase of the church and continue the same things in the downward phase of the church. When you are going uphill you go heavy on the gas pedal. When you are on the flat terrain you go easy on the gas but your leg is still hovering over the gas pedal.

When you are on a downhill, your leg is not on the accelerator but on the brake this time. If you don't have your leg on the right pedal for the situation you are in, you are either going to stall or crash and you would not want that. The Apostles had to adjust their methods so that their approach was relevant for the multi-ethnic rapidly growing church that they were in. Our situation may be different from the church in Acts 6 but we too are in a new phase and we need to adjust our actions for the phase we are in, if not the consequences will not be good.

The second lesson from this text is that you should always make sure that everybody is doing the job they are both qualified and called by God to do. And when I say qualified, I mean qualified in God's eyes. You might be wondering, "what is qualified in God's eyes?" If you go by what the Apostles were looking for in the candidates they were asking for two things. A person who was well respected by all, that means a person who had a track record of using God's wisdom to conduct their lives. And secondly, they wanted someone who was "filled with the spirit". In other words someone who knew how to exercise God's power in their lives. So the two qualifications for leadership in the church are God's wisdom and God's spirit power. That takes care of the "qualification".

What about the "call?" The call is what God has put in your heart to do. This is best understood by looking at the examples. The apostles were "called" to witness and preach. What they could testify to nobody else could. So for them to do anything else with their time would be a loss for the church for all ages to come because what the apostles preached became the New Testament which the church in every age relies on. Even though we are not as big or significant as the apostles. But the Bible says that each of us have been created as uniquely and we have good works that were specifically designed for us to do. Nobody else can do what God originally designed for us to do.

So the question for us is, in our local church today, how many of us are doing jobs that we are both qualified and called to do? You may be the only person who can talk about

a piece of the history of AMC. Or you may be the only person who can minister to a particular individual or encourage someone in your life or build something that the church needs. If you are not doing what you are called to do, then a time may come when the sun sets and the time to do anything is over and what you really needed to do is left undone for all history.

So it is really important that God's servants are functioning in their calling. And to make that happen you may have to like the Apostles find other qualified people to delegate the task or contract it.

Now you may ask, what if there is nobody to do something? What if there is nobody to delegate or no money to contract a task? Well, if God has not called others to fill in the task that needs to be done, or not provided the resources to contract it out then there is only one thing left. To let go of the task. Because church was never supposed to be a burden just like the Sabbath was never supposed to be a burden for the people. Jesus said my yoke is easy and my burden light. When church becomes a burden, there is something wrong there and Jesus is not in it. And if Jesus is not in it, it is definitely time to let go.

On the other hand, the church is supposed to be the body of Christ where one person is the eyes and one person is the nose and another is the hands and another is the legs etc. If the body loses a leg you will start hopping a round. If you lose both legs you will be unable to move. Yes, you can try and do a handstand and use your hands for walking as well, but soon your hands will get tired and overburdened. That is when you start feeling that church itself is a burden. Is there a magic number for a group to continue as a church? I don't think so. But when you have a body with vital parts missing, you don't have a body, but just a collection of overburdened organs. At that point, you know it is time to let go.

So if we learnt anything from the Apostles actions in our text today it is that when the situation on the ground changes, it is time to change the way we operate. Secondly, if we don't have a full team needed to do church, we are not the body of Christ anymore but a bunch of overworked organs. That is not the kind of church Jesus Christ had in mind. So the question then is, when you apply today's Acts 6 portion to our worshipping community, how can we be reconfigured from overburdened organs to a new setting where each of us are beautifully functioning organs within a full body of Christ? May God answer that prayer for each one of us in the days to come. Let us pray.