

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 6:1-9

A church in perspective, with real purpose, powered by the Word

The church was growing in faith and in numbers. The apostles were faithfully preaching and teaching, letting the gospel turn inquirers into disciples. Everything was great. Yet, in the midst of these wonderful blessings of God, a horrible controversy was about to tear the church apart. *“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.”* Everyone wasn't getting their share at the potluck, and we all know, when there are problems with the potluck, gospel ministry comes to a halt. So what did they do? They went to the princes of the potluck: the pastors. Surely they would make sure the facilities were clean, the grass was green, and the pork chops were lean? Thank God situations like this never arise anymore!

“So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.’” “And the families involved quickly went and complained to anyone who would listen, on the phone, in Meijers, and in the narthex.” No, as much as we might cynically expect that to be the next verse, it is not. The apostles acted as leaders, not as popes, and the people accordingly respected their office and gave due consideration to their plan. Clergy and congregation coexisted with mutual concern for each other's needs and thoughts.

“Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” The apostles told the congregation to appoint leaders to handle the various peripheral aspects of the church's life, so that they could do the only thing that truly builds churches and makes disciples: carry out the ministry of the Word. Yes, hammers and drywall may build church buildings, but walls do not make churches. People make churches, and people become church through the gospel and nothing else. Proclaiming the gospel is the Church's real purpose, and without the gospel, a group of people may indeed have a church building, but they are a club and not a church, and clubs will always revolve around decorations and dinners, personal preferences and private parties.

They chose leaders, and notice what the apostles looked for in those leaders: the Spirit and wisdom. Faith and knowledge, trust and tact, in other words. How blessed is a church to have such leaders! How necessary aren't such leaders for the healthy congregational life of God's flock! How beneficial aren't such leaders to those called into the ministry of the Word, the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments! May God give us such men still today! Thank God for giving us such men still today!

When was the last time you talked to our leaders, or, for that sake, to any of the men and women who so often give their time and talents in service to our Lord and our congregation? When was the last time you talked to them, not to complain, but to compliment, not to grumble, but to be grateful? Have you sought to make their burdens lighter by giving your time and not just your advice? Have you marveled at the 80% of the work 20% of our church has done, or have you whined that 80% wasn't 90?

“This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their

hands on them.” The voters called the motion, voted, and the need was met. The apostles made it clear from where this new form of service flowed: from the ministry of the Word. These men were installed with the common consent of the congregation along with prayer and the laying on of hands. These men were called into service by the church to serve for the church for the benefit of the church’s ministry of the Word. This was not unimportant. For their service to be joyful it had to be kept in perspective. They had to remember whom they served and why they served. They served God’s children to aid the ministry of God’s Word. To do this, they had to have a real love for God’s children and be grounded in God’s Word, through personal and group study.

And so what happened then? They had perspective. They had purpose. And, yes, they still had many challenges, but they had the word as well. *“So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”* They presented a clear witness to those around them, and, more importantly, they clearly presented the Word, and the Word did what the Word does. It grew, and as it grew, believers grew, both in faith and in number, as men and women, even prominent Jewish men, became disciples, obedient to the faith, that is, believing the gospel.

So what does this have to do with us? Don’t we face the same challenges? Aren’t we tempted to the same grumbling ungratefulness? Aren’t we discouraged and disheartened by the grumbling of others? Don’t we often lose perspective and forget the purpose for our existence? Don’t we sometimes confuse the church building with the church, the walls with what matters?

So what do we do? We look at the pictures in the back. We look at the pictures of fathers and mothers, of predecessors in these pews. We look at those pictures and remember what matters. It’s not the picnics in the background. It’s not the decorations. It’s not the paint on the walls or the appointments in the chancel. It’s the people, and not just the people, but what enabled them to live on in more than just those pictures: the gospel. When you feel like grumbling or whispering, when you are wound up about something that, when put in perspective, isn’t as big a deal as it seems at the time, look at those pictures, and gain perspective. Do something the Lord can use. I guarantee you will feel better afterwards than you would if you had dwelled on something trivial. Call your delinquent family member. Share the gospel with your unchurched friend. Use your talents to the benefit of your Lord and your fellow members. In short, like the deacons in our lesson, let your gifts fit the churches needs; and trust me, you have needed gifts.

Look at God’s grace in our lesson. First, he gave his people the Word. Second, he gave them ministers of the Word, to preach and teach, commune and baptize. Third, he gave his people needs to be met, that is, opportunities to serve. Fourth, he gave his people servants to meet those needs. Fifth, he gave his people gratefulness for that service. Sixth, he gave his people growth, both spiritual and numerical. How gracious our Lord is! And he has not changed. He is the same gracious Lord today. He has given us the same gifts. May God forgive us for the times we have taken his gifts for granted, when we have seen needs as obstacles instead of opportunities, when we have neglected his Word and the ministry of it, when we have made our servants’ service arduous instead of joyful! May God forgive us, and may he renew us, as he has promised he has and will through his gospel, which sets our perspective! May God grant us purpose, found only in the grace revealed in his Word, the power behind all we do and the motivation for our every fresh start! May we be a church in perspective, with purpose, and powered by the Word! Amen.