

Trinity United Methodist Church

January 24, 2021

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Scripture: Acts 6:1-7 (NIV)

1 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. **2** 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. **3** Brothers and sisters, 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 **4** and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

5 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. **6** They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. **7** 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.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

Sometimes when I've mentioned to a friend or colleague or whatever the case might be that I've got to go get my oil changed or I've got to go get new brakes put on one of my vehicles, sometimes they'll ask, especially if they're a car person, "Why don't you do it yourself? Those are fairly easy enough tasks to do on a vehicle." Well, over time my answer has become, "It's because I know my limits." I know that my time and energy are better spent on things and tasks that I don't have to YouTube to death. It doesn't mean that I can't learn a new skill; that's not the point. It's that I'm not going to become a car guy. And there have been times that, yeah, I want to fit in, I want to be "manly" in that way, and sometimes I feel a little embarrassed that, okay, maybe I can't change my own oil or my own brakes or whatever the case might be. But over the years I've learned that it's important to know my limits and to celebrate the gifts and talents of

others. For what could easily take someone else who knows what they're doing a half an hour, an hour tops, I know that for myself, it would blow up easily into at least half of an entire day. Not to mention all the frustration and words that a Christian, much less a preacher, probably shouldn't be using. And ultimately the overextending of myself.

That is a sickness of our modern times, I think. The ways in which we overextend ourselves. I've mentioned before about a Facebook friend who, at the beginning of the pandemic, posted that her family calendar had been chock full of activities. All four members of the family each had their own color code with doctor's appointments and team sports and school activities and so forth and so on. Chock full every single day of the week, seven days a week. And all of a sudden that calendar went blank.

This pandemic has been a time when we have all been forced to *slow down*. And I, too, like most of you or all of you, long for a return to "normalcy." But honestly, part of what I hope *never* returns is the "rat race" that life could be P.C.—Pre-COVID.

Because, you see, I remember going through a psychological evaluation when I was beginning the ordination process. I was still in college at the time. It pointed out that one of my things to watch out for is that I never wanted to miss an opportunity. So if somebody asked me to be a part of something or asked me to do something or whatever the case might be, I would always say "yes," because I never wanted to miss an opportunity. That can be a good thing, but it can also have a shadow side to it. Because, you see, every time that we say "yes"—that I say "yes," that you say "yes"—to something or someone, we say "no," by default, to something or someone else. *Every time we say "yes" to something or someone, by default we're saying "no" to something or someone else.*

For instance, maybe you say to your kid, "Yes, let's play spring football," like we have in our household. And then that means that for however next many weeks, especially once games start, we have said "no" automatically to whatever else might pop up on those Saturdays which will hold football games. Because, of course, we want to go support our son, not to mention ferrying him back and forth to that activity.

So, hey, I love football. Football is a great thing. I'm glad my kid wants to participate in it. But by saying "yes" to one thing, we're already saying "no" to something or someone else. And as in this case, we don't even often know what it is that we might be saying "no" to.

Now let me offer a caveat: It doesn't mean that we *can't* say "yes," for fear of what we might be missing out on. The lingo for that these days is FOMO, the "Fear Of Missing Out." That's not what I'm talking about here. What I'm talking about is a tendency to overcommit to things, and so we have no more margin. In fact, if we say "yes" to everything and everyone that wants a piece of us, that comes across our path,

then the more we say “yes” to everything and everyone else, eventually we’ll find ourselves saying “no” to ourselves. There’ll be no room for us to take a break, to take a nap, to get away. And if you think those things might be selfish, I remind you that Jesus took time to get away, to take naps. And so maybe we should definitely seek to be more like Jesus in those ways.

After all, if we say “yes” to everything and everyone else and in turn we wind up saying “no” to ourselves, that is a recipe for what we call burnout. I’ve been there and done that.

Another adage here is that we can’t give others what we don’t have within ourselves. You know, sometimes we might think it’s mean to tell somebody else “no,” or at least, “not right now.” We think it’s mean to put up those sorts of boundaries. But if we don’t have it to give in that moment, then we don’t have anything to give anybody, or to any important tasks, no matter how important we think they might be.

So how do we set these priorities for ourselves? How do we consider what we should say “yes” to and “no” to? Again, it doesn’t mean that we just swing the pendulum the complete other direction and start saying “no” to everything and everyone.

I’m reminded of a business book written probably some 20 years ago now called *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, where he points out that there are all kinds of good things that we could be doing as individuals, as companies, as a church. But what are the *great* things? And that what separates the mediocre companies from the really great, prosperous, well-known companies is that they focused on not just the *good* things that they could be doing, but what are the *great* things that they could and should be doing?

It’s a difference between doing what others *could* do—maybe those are things we choose to do also—but shifting that focus from what others could do to what we are uniquely called and gifted to do. What are those things that *only we can do*? You and I as individuals, even together?

And so in Acts chapter 6 we see this playing out in the earliest days of the life of the church. Remember, Christianity didn’t start out to be what we know it today, as separate from Judaism. It was part of Judaism. Jesus is Jewish. The twelve apostles were Jewish. The earliest converts to the faith were Jewish. And part of what we’ve inherited from Judaism as Christians is caring for the less fortunate, particularly widows and orphans. Those who, especially in biblical times, couldn’t provide for themselves.

And so, in today’s text, we’re introduced to this dilemma that is presented to the early church. There are local Aramaic-speaking Hebraic Jews. At this point they’re all still in Jerusalem. It’s not long after the festival of Pentecost, and there are all these local Hebrew-speaking Jews. But then in the mix, you’ve also got these foreign outsiders,

Greek or Hellenistic Jews, those who lived well outside of Jerusalem, even in other countries, but who had converted to the Jewish faith. And so maybe these foreigners had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost, a great Jewish feast and celebration, and maybe they got caught up in this new movement of the Holy Spirit that we read about in Acts chapter 2, and they stayed. But for whatever the reason, we read that ill feelings have developed between these two groups. The local widows are being favored and the foreign widows are being neglected.

And presumably, they wanted the apostles, the church leadership, to do something about it. The response of the apostles has always sounded a bit harsh to me, though. Instead of saying, “Hey, it’ll be okay,” instead of offering a word of comfort, instead of saying, “Yes, let’s hop right to that, that is a good thing to do”—they instead say this. They say, “It would not be right for us (the apostles) to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.” It sounds like what they’re saying is that serving in the distribution of food, especially to the downtrodden and less fortunate, is somehow less important than the ministry of the Word of God.

It *sounds* that way, especially maybe to our modern ears. But that’s not actually what they say. If anything, they say that waiting on tables is just as important as the ministry of the Word. For they go on. They say, “Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.”

Go back to that opening illustration I shared about me and working on a vehicle. I know my limits; I know that it would be a catastrophe, probably, if I tried working on it. But when I drop it off at a vehicle shop, I don’t drop it off with any thought that “those mechanics” are doing “lesser blue-collar jobs” than my “more important white-collar job.” No! Quite the opposite! I think that that job is super-important enough that I want the *right* people to do it. It’s even why I sometimes shy away from friends who, in these conversations, will say, “Oh, just drop it off by the house. I’ll take care of it for you.” “Really? That old piece of junk you’ve had sitting in your driveway forever that you’ve supposedly been ‘working on?’ Yeah. I think I’ll go and pay somebody to do this for me.”

And then also consider: If the apostles had taken on this responsibility, they flat-out say that they know that if they took on more responsibility, they would be neglecting the ministry of the Word of God and of prayer. Ministry that may not be always readily apparent for the things that that does, but ministry that is vitally important. If we’re too busy in other things to pray and to give attention to God’s Word, then we need to cancel some things in the life of the church in order to get back to it and make time for it.

But also consider this: If the apostles, these twelve men (they had brought another one in, Mathias, to replace Judas) had said, “Yes, let us hop right to that,” then they would have limited the ability for others in the life of the church to serve. By saying

“Yes, we’ll go do that,” they would have said “no” to these other individuals who were found to be full of the Holy Spirit and called to this actual ministry.

And furthermore, it likely could have been a train wreck if these twelve apostles, tasked with seeing probably more of the bigger picture in terms of guiding the life of the community according to prayer and the ministry of the Word—it might not have been in their gifting to devote themselves to a more administrative ministry. Ask the folks at COP to minister to those less fortunate in the most effective way. You’ve got to have some folks with some administrative gifts there, right? To make sure that folks aren’t falling through the cracks and everyone is getting what they need and that the resources are getting to the right people at the right times. There are wonderful people who are gifted in those ways. And there are wonderful people who are not, right?

But as it was, also consider this. How had the church grown up to this point? Prayer. In Acts chapter 2, we often get focused on the Holy Spirit descending with a mighty rush of wind and tongues of fire on the heads and so forth, speaking in multiple languages. But what led up to all that, what made all that possible, was that they were all together in the Upper Room in prayer together. And that is what birthed the church as we now know it. Prayer and then the Word is what grew the early church, and not just in, “Yeah, a few more came that week,” but exponentially. The Word, especially as presented in the sermons of Peter. Those are the only sermons up to this point in Acts that we have recorded, but how did the church continue to grow? Through the word of Paul and Silas and Paul and Barnabas, who went out and started churches and spoke in the synagogues and in the marketplaces. Spoke the Word of God. They preached. The letters that Paul wrote, that we now have in our Bible today, that communicated the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And not just prayer and the Word, but then these seven men (men partially because it was biblical times, but no doubt women can be equally as called to this task, and we see in Acts where women are involved in ministry as well)—what *number* of men were finally chosen? **Seven**. And if you’ve been in Bible study with me, or if you’ve been listening any kind of closely, seven is a biblical number, right? The number of *completion*. Of *totality*. In other words, when they follow the Spirit in this way, the church continues to be complete and whole, and it continues on like it should.

And so, again, in that vein I’ve been sharing with you the last few weeks our Strategic Plan here at Trinity for the next three to five years. We started off in week one talking about how we’ll **cultivate a deeper connection with our community around us** through use of our spaces that our community already uses, but again, how can we bless more intentionally the people who use our spaces? Who park in our parking lot? Who come to our FAC for various community activities?

Secondly, we will **empower and equip our congregation to serve**, especially through the discernment and use of our spiritual gifts. Getting the right people on the right bus. And this passage today speaks to that as well; what can really happen when those who are gifted for a particular ministry are able to be put in place to accomplish those great things for God.

Thirdly, we'll **build congregational unity** through ways in which we can foster broader connections across all three worship services on Sunday morning, so that we're not just an 8:30 person or a 9:30 Rivers of Life person or an 11:00 person. We're members and friends of Trinity United Methodist Church. We're followers of Jesus Christ, here in this body of Christ, and we *happen to attend* one of those services.

And then fourthly, today I share with you the fourth and last goal in our Strategic Plan. That **Trinity will adjust internal systems to support strategic goals**. One of those ways is we'll adapt the leadership model and structure to facilitate a missional focus. In other words, one of the ways we're already working to do that is, in our Church Council meeting this past week, we changed our agenda. So far, ever since I've been here, our Church Council agenda has been organized by committees in the church and we basically go down the list, and each committee says, "This is what we've done. These might be some things we're looking to do." But pretty much it's, "Yep, this is what we've done." And then as things arise that we talk about needing to do together, we'll tackle those. But largely, it's been a bit of a looking-back focus in those leadership meetings.

So we've already changed the agenda to have these goals in front of us, these four goals—deeper connections with the community, empowering the congregation to serve, building congregational unity, and adjusting internal systems to support our strategic goals—so that we're forward-thinking as leadership in the church. So that we're adjusting our leadership and our structure for that missional focus. Not just, "Hey, what have we done that we've always done before that we feel like we should do again?" But to say, "We haven't been doing so hot on this. What are some new things we could try in the future, in the next weeks and months to come?" Things of that nature.

We're also exploring communication strategies for internal and external communications. This is an instance where ever since I've gotten here, and I think beforehand, you as a church have been saying, "We need better communication. Some of us have no clue what's going on. Sometimes it's hard to get details on things." This is an instance where, just like the apostles in Acts chapter 6, it's not that they said, "Pfft, we don't want to be worried with that. We want to be focused on the Bible and prayer." They said, "This is a need, and this is too important for us to give split attention to. Let's get someone who can *focus* on this need of the church."

To that end, Staff Parish has put together a Director of Communications job description, and we'll be advertising that soon. So be praying about who God might be calling to help us with this specific need that we have here at Trinity in the area of communications. Just like I want the right people working on my cars, I want and we want the *right person* and *right people* of our church helping that person to help us better communicate internally and externally to our community and outside world as well.

And then thirdly within that goal, we'll continue to look at our staffing. We've got fantastic staff already. How might we best support our staff and potentially add some more, potentially find other ways that volunteers can engage with our staff, so that again, we're accomplishing our mission of building authentic relationships and leading through impactful service?

So that's the fourth and last goal of our Strategic Plan. That's where we're headed. Developing connections with the community, equipping and empowering our congregation to serve, building congregational unity, and adjusting internal systems to support all of these goals and all of that to which God is calling us.

Because again, Trinity is a great church. We've got a lot of good things going on as a church. But what I want us to really pray about is, *What are the great things that will help us fulfill our mission of building authentic relationships and leading through impactful service?*

And furthermore, for those of you watching who aren't part of our local community here in Smithfield and our local expression of the Body of Christ here at Trinity—for all of us, there's all kinds of good things we could be doing. But what are the *great* things to which God has called *you* and *me* and *us* and has equipped us as individuals in the Body of Christ? Another way to ask it is, to what might you need to say “no” in your life, or at least “not yet” or “not now,” in order to say “yes” to where God is leading you at this point, at this time?

And through it all, I want to bring us back to that idea of Covenant. How do we live as covenant people? Covenant people with God? Covenant people as a church, as the Body of Christ? Covenant people with our community? Such that we live out that we are blessed to be a blessing? And furthermore, how do we live as covenant people with all of those in our lives?

Again, I invite you to pray the Covenant Prayer:

I am no longer my own, but yours.

Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you.

Praised for you or criticized for you.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service. And now, O wonderful and Holy God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are mine, and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, Let it also be made in heaven. Amen.