

Acts 6:1-7

"No One Does Everything, but Everyone Does Something: Priorities"

There is an old story about two blind men who had both been healed by Jesus. They happened to meet one day, and each was so excited to meet someone else whose sight had been restored. They talked about the wonder of sight, the color of flowers, the glory of sunrises, the faces of children and grandchildren. They talked about the power of having seen the face of Jesus. They were laughing and having a great time together, when one of them said, "And do you remember how Jesus took spit, made mud, and put it into your eye?" The other guy looked kind of stunned, and answered, "Why no, he just said, 'Receive your sight,' and I could see."

The first man said, "Wait a minute. You mean he didn't use any mud?" "No." "Well, did he at least have you wash in the pool of Siloam?" "No, of course not. Who ever heard of anything as ridiculous as mud in your eye, washed off in the pool?" "Well," said the first man, "if he didn't put mud in your eyes and have you wash in the pool of Siloam, you are still blind! Blind - do you hear me? Because that's the way Jesus healed me; that's the way he does it!"

Then the second man began to get angry. He shouted, "Mud, mud! Who ever heard of using mud?! That's the dumbest thing I have ever heard! You still have mud in your eyes. You're the one who's still blind!" They got into a big argument - their relationship was destroyed, and right then and there, they formed the first two denominations: the Mudites and the Antimudites!

Of course, this is not a true story, but it could be. Conflict in the church is as old as – well as old as the first church – according to our Scripture lesson this morning. As the new

church began to grow, and more and more people came to know and believe in the risen Christ, the remaining Apostles were rather overwhelmed. They had so much to do! They were intent upon fulfilling the Great Commission of Christ - going about the business of teaching, preaching and baptizing. Of course, this meant dedicating their lives to studying the Word and being in prayer so they *could* deliver the Good News of God's grace.

But added to these responsibilities and many more that arise in a church, the new church was carrying out the practice of waiting on tables, as they had before. This meant they collected food from those who had enough and delivered it to those who did not – the poor, the orphans, and the widows. The Apostles simply did not have time to do ALL of these things. And to complicate matters more fully, the church may also have been, without meaning to, establishing a pattern of racial discrimination. Here's what I mean.

Although the early church was entirely Jewish, it was made up of two different groups of Jews. The Hebraic Jews who had been born and raised in Israel and spoke Hebrew, or more likely Aramaic. And the Grecian Jews, Jewish-Christian converts who spoke Greek because they had been born and raised *outside* of Israel. And it was the Hellinists – the Greek speaking Jews, who felt they were being neglected. And as many of us do when we feel left out or put down, their solution was to whine and complain!

But I for one am really thankful that this problem arose because it created an opportunity for us to learn how to set our priorities in the church today. You see, the church learned early on that the body of Christ CANNOT function with only one member – even if he or she IS the minister! It takes every one of us doing something in order to carry out the work of God. Fortunately, Nazareth Presbyterian does this well.

But I decided to include this passage in our study of what it means to "be the church" any way because it is in times of success that problems often arise. When things are going along just fine, it is easy to maintain the status quo. To think that everything is sufficient and nothing needs to be changed. Some might call it just going along with the flow. Well, I have a friend who always says, "The only thing that goes with the flow is a dead fish!" What she means is that question, doubts, problems and even arguments often lead to the discovery of what needs to be changed. Because even if something is really good, I believe we can always make it better!

I read the story once about a ninety-six year old woman was present at EVERY Bible study her church had. She came with her lessons prepared, having written out the answers, though she had done so many times before. One day, a tactless, younger woman asked her, "Why do you work so hard on these lessons when you are so old? Does it really matter?" The women thought for a minute and then said confidently, "I'm just cramming for my finals!" This story reminds us that God never wants us to quit trying to be our best. We are never to cease giving our best for God's kingdom and God's glory. We are never to give up seeking God's will for our lives.

So in view of the controversy in the first church, the Apostles had to come up with a plan. And in doing so, they set a pattern for success that is still used in churches today. The apostles got together and elected some helpers who were "of good standing and full of the Spirit of wisdom".

Now let me be clear – the disciples were answering the call of God. They were NOT being exclusive or having a self-righteous attitude. God had called them to be IN the word and IN prayer in order to fulfill their call. But this did not mean that other, just as important responsibilities, could go unmet. The Apostles were no different from preachers today in that, no

one can do two things at once and do them well. What I mean is that I cannot preach on Sundays and keep the nursery too! Preachers and nursery workers are equally important, but just called by God to do different work. So helpers were chosen in the new church to spread the workload around.

Today, these helpers are our Elders, Deacons, Sunday School teachers. They are the ones who prepare the barbeque and set the tables. They are the women who take flowers to the sick and the children who bring energy and joy to our worship and the teenagers who represent us when they attend Montreat. They are the choir members and circle leaders and cemetery trustees and the list goes on and on. So the early church set the example of the need to establish our priorities *for* God and to make God our first priority. And this way of "being the church" still serves us well.

But I believe the most important part of this story for us today is that the leaders of the early church had the wisdom and took the time to find the right people for the right jobs. Remember that I said that it was the Greek speaking converts who were feeling the most neglected? Well, when Luke recorded the list of the first seven deacons in the church, we discover that it was made up of six Greeks and a proselyte – a recent convert! You see, these men already had a personal connection with the very women that were feeling left out. And when they carried out the ministry of the whole church in the name of Jesus Christ, how included those widows must have felt, knowing they were being served in God's name by some of their very own!

So in order to be the church, we must seek God's will, set the right priorities to accomplish that will and then ask for guidance to carry God's will to fruition. And I believe that when we do this it creates faith in the Lord AND faith in each other too. Because first we have

to learn to trust God for the solutions to our dilemmas. Then we have to trust others to be able to do what God has called them to do rather than leaning on ONE PERSON or ONE SMALL GROUP to do all of the work.

However, there is another important priority that we can learn from this story. And that is to maintain the priority of prayer. Because as soon as the men had been chosen for this task of carrying out the day to day work of the church, Luke tells us that the Apostles laid hands on them and prayed! And friends, I believe in the power of prayer. And I believe this congregation does too!

I didn't just list the names of the Commissioners to our General Assembly meeting in the bulletin so we could be in the know. I have been a Commissioner to GA and it is both a huge privilege and a great responsibility! When I went to General Assembly in 2010, I got a letter from a lady in Chicago whom I had never met and still don't know. Her circle and acquired the names of some of the Commissioners to that year's GA and committed to pray for them.

The night before I left, I received her handwritten letter telling me that she would be praying for me by name every day that I was there. And friends, I felt her prayers. I landed on a very difficult committee with divisive issues to discuss. And the prayers of this still unknown woman gave me the confidence to remember that God had called me to represent our Presbytery at this meeting and therefore, God would give me the wisdom I needed to serve him faithfully.

Prayer must be a priority for any church who wants to be effective in her call to be the body of Christ. And then and only then can we at Nazareth Presbyterian or in any other church experience the success that we read about in our story this morning.

To that end, we have nine youth and two adults going to Montreat in July. I am planning on asking eleven members of families to volunteer to be personal prayer warriors for these folks

representing us at Montreat. If you after today's sermon that the Holy Spirit is asking you to make this a priority, let me know. If you don't then I will be asking you later!

Luke ends this passage by saying, "The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem." In fact the entire book of Acts is one story after another about believers coming to Christ because of the way this first conflict was handled. By God's grace an interruption that threatened danger became an opportunity for further growth.

So when we seek God's will in prayer and set our priorities in the right way, we are the church. When we use the individual gifts that God has given us to strengthen the whole, we are the church. We when pray with and for one another for guidance and wisdom we are the church. And the Gospel continues to be told again and again.

There is an age old poem that I think sums up our need to set our priorities as individual members of the body of Christ, as Nazareth Presbyterian Church and as the church universal that I would like to close with. You may have heard it before, but consider what our churches could be if we made this our creed every day.

**The most beautiful story given to man
Was written long ago
By Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
Of Christ and His mission below.**

**And you write a gospel, a chapter a day,
By your deeds, whether faithless or true;
When others read it, what will they think
In the gospel according to you?**

**It's a wonderful story, the Gospel of love,
As it shines with Christ's life divine.
Oh, that its truth might be told again
In the story of your life and mine.**

You are writing each day a letter to all;

**Take care that the writing is true.
It's the only gospel some people may read,
The gospel according to you.**

Author Unknown

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.