

“Called to Be Servants”

Acts 6:1-7

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If the Church Universal--the Church as the Body of Christ and Jesus' personal representative in the world--didn't first come into being until the day of Pentecost which we read about in Acts chapter 2, that is, the day the Holy Spirit descended upon those disciples in the Upper Room, then we might say that the MODERN Church--the church as we now know it in terms of its form and structure--didn't originate until four chapters later, in Acts chapter 6 with the creation of the first board of deacons. As the congregation grew in numbers, it became necessary to create some structure in order to handle the ever-expanding set of needs and responsibilities within the Early Church. Therefore, they created a "division of labor" by choosing from among its followers seven persons "of good repute and full of the Spirit and of wisdom" to perform service on behalf of the church- in this case, to wait on tables and make sure that EVERYONE was tended to and thus treated fairly and justly.

The term for "service" in the Greek is *diakonia* from which our English word "deacon" is derived, and it is used three times in our text- in v. 1 which speaks of the daily *diakonia* for the widows; in v.2, which speaks of the *diakonia* at tables; and in v.4, which speaks of the *diakonia* of the Word. A problem had arisen among them which made the creation of this "board" necessary. It seems that the GENTILE Christians in the church were being treated as second-class citizens by the JEWISH Christians as their widows were not being served at dinner time. Rather than the twelve disciples taking time out to mediate such disputes, they wisely chose to select certain persons to take care of such problems which would leave them more time to devote to preaching, teaching, and prayer.

However, this was not the FIRST time that we see such a "division of labor." In the Old Testament, we read how Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, saw his son-in-law trying to do too much and, in the process, wearing himself out; if he couldn't take care of himself, then how was he ever going to take care of OTHERS. Therefore, he counseled him to choose able persons from among the people--persons who were trustworthy and of sound character--to handle many of those decisions, thus freeing Moses to handle other, more PRESSING responsibilities.

Not just deacons but EVERYONE who calls him or herself a Christian, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ, is NO LESS called to a life of humble, faithful service--REGARDLESS how lowly--in EVERYTHING he or she might do. As it says in Colossians: "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ." (3:23,24) The most AMAZING thing about our passage is that for a task as lowly as waiting on tables and ensuring that the food was fairly distributed, they looked for persons of good repute, persons full of the Spirit and of wisdom who possessed real character. However, it seems not just ANYONE would do. The task required a member who was MATURE in the faith, someone who wouldn't grumble about the work as being too tedious or too menial but rather someone who looked upon it as though it was the most

IMPORTANT job in the world, as though it was service unto Christ HIMSELF. That can be the ONLY way that our service becomes “as unto the Lord.”

Unfortunately, we live in a society and a culture which rewards power and success above all else, which says that you need to blow your own horn as loudly and as often as you can for no one ELSE is going to do it for you, which preaches climbing to the top despite how many persons you may have to step on in order to get there. It’s in our DNA that we all love power; we all want to be in charge rather than be the one having to do the dirty work. This same attitude can no less infect our CHURCHES. In one of my previous pastorates, we had a long-time member who thought of herself as the "queen" of First Church. This person loved to give orders and it seemed no decision could be made without everyone having to defer to her first. Well, it came to a head one particular Sunday when we were preparing to have a potluck dinner immediately following worship. One of the newer members of the church, a Jamaican woman who for several years had proven herself to be one of our most dedicated deacons, had come by the kitchen to drop off a casserole she had prepared for the luncheon. Well our "queen," thinking she was a visitor, an OUTSIDER to the church, began yelling at her as though she was a little child or second-class citizen, saying, "You, what are you doing there! You're not supposed to be there. Get out of there and stay away!"

The deacon in question called me the next day to express how hurt she was, and RIGHTFULLY SO. Well, I was irate. I immediately drove over to our resident “queen’s” home, explained the situation, and then asked her to apologize to the woman, telling her that as long as I was pastor, such behavior would never be tolerated. That night, she called me up to tell me how she had a wonderful conversation with her, that they were even going to get together after church the following Sunday. I thanked her but of course the problem was really much DEEPER than an insult that required an apology. This Jamaican woman and her husband had already been active in our church for several years. She was a DEACON and one of the most spiritual members of our congregation, and yet our "queen" had never even taken the time to get to know her because she was too busy trying to play a role and lording it over others in our fellowship rather than being a SERVANT to all FIRST.

But such attitudes are not limited just to church MEMBERS- we as church PASTORS can be EQUALLY at fault. I have witnessed ministers abuse their own staff and even members of their congregation. Usually they serve larger churches where they are used to having people do everything for them. It doesn’t take me long to figure out that these pastors have probably never ministered in a smaller church where they had to wear many hats at once; where they were forced to function as pastor, secretary, and maintenance man all rolled in one; where they were responsible for not only preaching and teaching but preparing the bulletins each week and the newsletter each month, helping to wash dishes after church dinners or even cleaning the bathrooms when the toilet occasionally overflows. Only THEN could they come to appreciate the time and work that others give to the church and how valuable our church volunteers really are. It’s obvious that they had forgotten that their primary call to ministry is to first be a SERVANT to others and NOT their master. As Jesus himself said to his disciples:

*You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great*

*men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42b-45)*

In my former church in Indiana, Rose and I were very active in our Soup & Serenity ministry where each Thursday before noon, we offered a quality meal to the entire community free of charge. To begin with, I was amazed by the large number of volunteers who weren't even members of our congregation and yet who faithfully showed up week-after-week to help set up, cook, serve, and then help clean up afterwards. Just prior to opening our doors, we'd come together in a circle for prayer. Then we'd welcome everyone into Fellowship Hall with large smiles to do whatever we could to make their next hour special: If they wanted more coffee or needed more bread or another cup of soup, we then dutifully trotted back to the kitchen to get it for them. I'm sure that for many of them, that may have been the only time of the week when they were accorded such respect, and yet we did it lovingly and faithfully because we enjoyed being of service to others, and what's more, serving them in this manner is as Jesus said, to minister unto HIM. Eventually, I came to think of them as my Thursday congregation.

But there was ANOTHER motivation I had for assisting with Soup & Serenity and that was that it kept me well-grounded and insulated me from wanting to climb up upon that high pedestal which many congregations like to enshrine their pastors and where many pastors enjoy being. Being up there can be very heady, but it can also be a very DANGEROUS place for it can lead to all manner of abuse in the church. When I was the minister of Old First in Waterloo, Iowa, I was helping to apply tar to a section of the roof tiles where a major leak had developed as there was no way I was going to allow any of my older members to climb thirty feet up that ladder and risk falling. Afterwards, one of my elders heard about it and made the remark, "Dave, we don't want to see you do that again. The ministers of First Pres just don't do that kind of work." Having been in construction in my former life, my response to him was, "Well, Jesus was a carpenter and Peter was a fisherman." The fact is that what Thursdays at Soup & Serenity demonstrated to everyone else that I was no different than the lowliest person in this church, in the community, or even IN THE WORLD for that matter, that as a Christian and child of God, I had been called to be a SERVANT FIRST and one cannot be a leader of ANY SORT if he or she has never first been a SERVANT to others.

Early on in my ministry, I led a Presbytery-wide workshop on "Servanthood and the Gospels" and the conclusion I came to was this- that Jesus, as the very revelation of the face and heart of God, reveals God PRECISELY through his servanthood, that THAT is the true nature of God- that ours is a SERVANT-God. Gentleness, meekness, selfless love- these are the most genuine marks of divinity for such qualities lie at the very heart of God. If I could rid the church of one particular image that has been the dominant face of God for centuries, it is the one of God as an all-powerful, all-consuming, jealous God ready to strike down those who transgress him. Rather, we honor and adore a "servant God," a God who loves us with an everlasting love, a God who never stops pursuing us even when we run from him, a God who is always attending to our needs.

I wish to close by saying that the people who inspire me MOST are really those who

humbly and gently go about their business, never drawing attention to themselves, never looking for personal glory, but doing what has to be done with a servant's heart. I returned this past Friday after spending two weeks away on Study Leave at Chautauqua in southwestern New York. Chautauqua is an educational and cultural institute I have been attending close to forty years now where for nine weeks during the summer, thousands of persons from all over the world come to refresh their spirits as well as their minds. I currently serve on the board of one of the organizations there which provides low-cost housing for any who would like to attend throughout the season as staying at Chautauqua can be quite expensive. It's called the ECOC (the Ecumenical Community of Chautauqua) and it truly IS a community- most people return year after year and we've come to regard them as part of our large ECOC family. A large reason for coming is not just to attend the programs, lectures and worship services held each day but to see old friends and create NEW ones.

It is a "community" in every sense of the word with many attendees volunteering before the season begins to help clean and get everything in order for the hundreds who'll be lodging there throughout the summer. And then, after the season has concluded, a number of us stay for an ADDITIONAL few days to help clean and close the facility in preparation for the following year. During the season, everyone is expected to be helpful and gracious. For instance, I met George Bell for the first time- a 97-year-old retired minister who arrived with his family and couldn't have been more fun or entertaining. He was full of great humor and we hit it off right off the bat. One day, he lost his balance and struck his head on the floor. He was taken to the emergency room where he was fitted for a large patch on his bald head and then returned to meals in the Shaw kitchen with the same smiles and gusto. There was Joe Kovitch, one of our newest board members, who works as an administrator for the Episcopal Church and because of a botched operation years ago on his spine, now functions in a wheel chair. We enjoyed some wonderful conversations throughout the week with everyone ready to help him for anything he may have had some difficulty doing due to his handicap. There was Norm Price, another returnee, who was envious of my French Press that provided the particularly strong coffee he craved each morning. On my last day there, he presented me with a bag of dark French roast coffee fresh from Starbucks which he had gone out of his way to purchase in appreciation for our week together. In other words, LIKE THE CHURCH ITSELF, the ECOC could only function as it has for close to a century now to the degree we are willing to become servants to one another, relating to each other with humility and love in our hearts.

But one LAST story I want to share which I believe is particularly instructive. A few weeks back, as I was packing my vehicle to leave for Chautauqua, a car pulled into my driveway and a strange man got out. He approached me with an extended hand and said, "Hi, I'm Tom Usher and you must be Dave. I stopped by several times during the week but no one was home." Thinking at first that he was just another salesman or insurance man, it then hit me who he was- this was my neighbor whose home was located directly behind ours on the other side of our fence. I shook his hand and said, "Yes, I'm Dave and this is a complete honor." You see, Thomas Usher, for fifteen years, served as the President and CEO of U.S. Steel- at one time THE LARGEST corporation in the world, and he had come to my humble home just to see Rose and me and introduce himself to us. You see, the cause of this meeting was that several months back, while he and his wife Sandy were vacationing in Florida for the winter, one of his large trees came crashing down, destroying our fence, decapitating one of our pines, and causing a huge mess in the backyard. After Rose and I

determined it was HIS tree that had caused all the destruction, we walked over to this home one street over to inform him what had just occurred. However, when we saw no one there, we left a note for him in the mailbox. A few days later, his son, who was watching the house during their absence, called to say that he had seen the note and relayed the information to his parents. They told him to tell their personal landscaper to make contact with us and take care of anything that had to be done. A few days later, he himself called to say that when they eventually return home again to Oakmont, he wanted to stop by and meet us.

Well true to his word, everything was fixed and taken care of with the results FAR GREATER than it was before. We got a new fence and even some new trees planted at his expense. He was now back from Florida and wanted to introduce himself, apologizing for any inconvenience it may have caused us. I took him inside and called Rose down to meet him. After our introductions were over, we spent the next forty-five minutes getting to know one another and showing him the finished product in our backyard. We shared some about our backgrounds as well as things we're both currently involved in- how I'm a semi-retired minister who along with Rose moved here from the same community in Indiana he once lived and worked in. He couldn't have been more gracious and promised we'd see each other again.

The point of the story is not to name drop but to provide an example of how real servitude always begins in such an attitude of humility and genuineness. Tom Usher is a person who has sat with Presidents and heads of state, a man once regarded as one of the most powerful men on earth. Head of what was at one time the largest corporation in the world, he has been accorded the moniker "the man who saved U.S. Steel" and voted one of the top 100 leaders in Pittsburgh's history. He grew up under the same humble and middle-class strictures that I and millions of other have and though he has ascended the rungs of great success over the years, he seemed never to have forgotten his roots and what made him the success he eventually became. He didn't just pick up the phone and say, "David and Rose, we're home now and I'd like you both to stop by OUR home so Sandy and I can meet you," requiring us to make a pilgrimage to his front door in order to have an audience with him. Rather, after the third or fourth time stopping by OUR home, he finally caught us at home and, true to his word, revealed himself to be the humble and genuine individual he was and a major key to his own success.

Such persons remind us all how SERVANTHOOD goes to the very heart of what it means to be a child of God and to faithfully live the Christian life- certainly more than any sermon or book on theology ever can! Jesus stands unequivocally on the side of those who SERVE- on the side of those who make NO claim to leadership, with those who know themselves to be nothing more than what the grace of God has made them. He knows all too well that one can never become a leader without first having been a servant to many. This can't help BUT force us to re-evaluate our ambitions and concepts of greatness. We must adopt a practice of servant leadership by embracing the principle that greatness in God's eyes is only achieved by first becoming a servant to all, by modeling the example that Christ HIMSELF gave us who "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:5-8) We must cultivate a culture in our homes and here in our church where persons are encouraged to aspire, not to greatness as the

WORLD might define it, but rather to that first principle of Christ's kingdom, that "the one who is least, shall be the greatest; the one who serves shall in the end be the leader of us all" for what is ULTIMATELY at stake is THE CHURCH ITSELF- its FUTURE, its WITNESS, and its RELEVANCE in the world. Let us pray...

*Lord, as we discern the meaning of our call to servant leadership, help us recognize the ways you seek to minister through our lives. Inspired by the knowledge of your abiding presence, may we have the courage to reach out and support one another, to stand firm in what is true, to decrease when others should increase, and to lead with vision and compassion, as faithful followers of Jesus, your Son. We make this prayer to you in his name. Amen.*