

Intro

Ben and I divide up the household chores based on what bothers us the most. Or what we notice the most. For example - Ben is in charge of the trash because it is fairly likely that I would come upon a full trashcan, bag it up and place it down right next to the trash can as opposed to taking it outside to the bin. I see some of you cringing -But you should know that I do the toilets - because it would take Ben 3 months to notice one was dirty. We all have things we miss.

Scripture

Today's story from Acts is one where the apostles miss something - well some *ones* who are right in front of them. It all begins because the number of people who are following Jesus continues to grow. And that group of people is becoming increasingly diverse. What began as a small group of Hebrew-speaking Jews has expanded to include Greek Jews - who spoke differently and were likely raised differently. And the Greeks - or Hellenists as they were called in the reading - begin to notice that their widows are being neglected in the serving of the meals. You can imagine that there is a lot of scholarly debate over what is actually happening without a lot of details. But it is clear that in this community - where the promise of who they will be together is that none are neglected and all are fed - some are getting missed. Which creates divisions over cultural lines.

And so the Greek followers bring the problem to the attention of the Hebrew apostles. And here begins a lesson in handling conflict within a group well. The apostles listened. They did not get defensive. They didn't panic. They did not try to brush the problem under the rug or pretend like it was unfounded. In fact they clearly recognize that it IS a problem and take steps to solve it. The apostles are overwhelmed. The community has grown - a LOT. They can't meet all the needs alone. In fact they can't even SEE all of the needs alone. They are bringing and serving food, studying, praying, preaching - and when the community was small enough for all of that to happen organically - it worked well enough - but now that it has grown - now that there was more rich diversity - they missed. They didn't notice who wasn't getting enough. And when it was brought to their attention - when it got named. They listened. And worked together for a structural system that would serve them all.

The apostles and those who were concerned talked things through as a group and elected 7 other followers to make sure that everyone was getting fed. In fact - the apostles listened so well to the marginalized and minority voice within their community - that all of the newly called out leaders are Greek. William Willimon notes that "the church showed an awareness that leadership drawn from the oppressed may do the best job of representing the interest of the oppressed." The Greek speaking Jews are less likely to miss the widows whom they already know.

And then the community prayed and laid hands on them and blessed them for this important ministry - that's the word used for what they are being called to do - ministry or service. It is the beginning of deacon ministry within the church.

And so out of this conflict - this problem within the early church - we see a path forward that led to many more people being involved in the ministry. We see a community willing to adapt to changing needs and realities - leaders willing to listen and trust one another. We see the church being forced to institutionalize - not because institutions are perfect, but in an attempt to meet the fundamental and real needs of the group. Something that was not able to happen organically. And we see more growth. Often we think of conflict as leading to division and decrease - but here we see the message of Jesus continuing to spread and more people choosing to follow.

Deacons - and all of us

We are blessed here at Stone Church to have a vital deacon ministry. A group of people who serve and minister within this community. They send cards, offer rides, make calls, and visits. They participate in anointings and draw us together for communion and footwashing and love feast. They make and serve meals and generously distribute funds when those kinds of needs arise.

Our deacons are amazing - compassionate, giving, servants.

But the ministry of caring and serving cannot be contained only within that group. Or only within the pastoral team. Because we are bound to miss. In fact, if we have missed - you or someone you love - we need you to be like the Greeks and tell us - because like Ben not noticing the toilets or those early apostles not noticing particular groups with whom they were less familiar, our church thrives when we have diverse perspectives opening up new ways of seeing and new people to see and new needs to see all around us. What new people or groups might we reach out to in love and compassion because of who YOU encounter and notice that I do not? What new ministries might we begin because of the unique gifts YOU bring but I do not?

Because continuing to grow as a people and a church requires a diversity not just of perspectives, but of gifts. Which, friends, look around you - we have. We have those who are gifted at running meetings or taking minutes, who think creatively, who listen empathically....we have folks who can make us laugh and those who make us sing along. We have people who read well and bake well and design fliers well. Those who can make visits and calls. And those who tell us their stories. We are so gifted - and from the mundane to the flashy - every single gift is needed for the ongoing function of the community.

YOU have something vital to this community of faith - and vital to the work and ministry of God's church. You do. Each and everyone of you. You do that work here and in your daily lives in offices and schools, at the library and sporting events, having dinner with friends and learning to know someone new. You do it with children and aging parents. You do this work of love and compassion and hope in this space and outside it. We are going to spend some time blessing that in each other - maybe recognizing it in ourselves for the first time

or the first time in a long time - and blessing it during our meal together - but we are also going to do that for one another as a part of our worship - just like the church in Acts.

In our scripture this morning, they laid hands on one another and so I am going to ask you to do the same. I want you to rise as you are able and reach out a hand to someone in front of you (or near you) - perhaps laying it on their shoulder. My hope is that we can lay hands on each other - all the way up and back so that we are all connected and everyone is included. If you are on zoom, look around at the folks who are joining on their screens - and perhaps reach a hand out in blessing toward them and toward those gathered in the sanctuary. Let's pray together:

Holy Spirit who calls us to be servants of Christ in places of need everywhere - in our homes, in this community of faith, in our neighborhoods, and all across the world. Summon out the unique and important gift we each bring. Make us fearless in sharing it. Fill us with wisdom, patience, hope, compassion and love. Bless us - live in us - as we grow, adapt, and serve. In Christ we pray. Amen.