

Marked for Hospitality
Sunday, January 19, 2014
Acts 6:1-7
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I had the privilege of spending yesterday morning at Rosemarie Coffman's house with this year's Diaconate. We gathered in her beautiful home on Lowerline, high amongst the trees, around her long dining room table – big enough for all of us with room for one more. We prayed for you and for this church, we shared our dreams and priorities for this new year, we divided up care groups so that each one of you is being supported by this congregation, and we discussed ways that we can continually foster a sense of belonging in this place so that every person feels seen, heard, and welcomed here.

It is sacred work, the ministry of the Diaconate, and I left that table with a strong sense of gratitude for Rosemarie, June, John, Linda Marye, Ken, Linda Easterlin, Lynn, Elizabeth, and Jennifer. These men and women love you and love this church. Together, they have committed themselves in the year to come to being the presence of Christ in your lives and working together, in prayer and ministry, for the welfare of this congregation.

We have eight additional groups within the church that care for various tasks inside and outside these walls, and sometimes they discuss caring for these old walls themselves. One focuses on financial resources and being good stewards of the weekly financial offerings and day-to-day needs of the church. Another brainstorms ways to creatively express who we are as a people to those who are not a part of our fellowship. We talk missions and ministry, future and legacy, celebrations and holy welcomes through coffee and conversation. This is a busy place with people who love the church and seek to continue the unique presence and perspective we offer this city.

In the Acts story I just read, they are just starting out and not thinking in the ways of committees and boards. Some leaders of the church had lived and traveled with Jesus while others were new converts who learned alongside the disciples. There is a problem in the early church. This new way of faith has emerged from Judaism and now includes from at least two ethnic and cultural backgrounds. You might say the two groups represent the original members who formed the community and the new members who bring opportunities and challenges to the church. There's some tension going on between the new and old members.

The leaders of the church are overwhelmed by the amount of work before them. In trying to teach about Jesus and meet the needs of the community by themselves, the

apostles are ignoring a portion of the congregation – and it just so happens that the ones being ignored are all a minority group. The Hellenists come to the apostles to challenge them for not taking good care of the Greek-speaking widows, and the apostles do not shirk the accusation.

The new church carried with them “a long tradition of care of the poor within the synagogue.” This distribution was, at the very least, an important social activity of these Jewish-Christian believers. But it is also possible that the act of sharing resources with those who could not provide for themselves was considered an act of worship.¹

These half dozen verses in Acts demonstrate a lovely, ordinary scene of a church in conflict, addressing that conflict directly, and leaders responding wisely to the need before them. “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables,” they respond. They know they cannot handle all of the needs of liturgical hospitality while also handling spiritual leadership, preaching, and teaching. But they don’t complain that their job description is too packed and those other tasks will have to fall by the wayside. No, they set about to make it right by appointing seven to focus on the task of hospitality and community care, and they prioritize representing the minority group in the ordained leadership of the church. They recruit people of deep faith in God and deep affection for the ones being left out.

What a gem this quick passage is for us in the church, and how often we ignore this healthy behavior modeled for us in scripture. There is a problem in the church, those concerned go directly to the faith leaders who are guilty of ignoring basic life needs in the community, and the leaders respond by saying, “You are absolutely right. We aren’t doing a good job of taking care of everyone, and we know that we can’t do this alone and do it well. We need more leaders, specially set apart, to help us minister to the whole community.”

The work of the apostles remains to pray for and teach the community, and the second group will support that work by addressing the life needs around them so that no one is forgotten.

The story of scripture is so often a reminder that we are shaped for community and meant to share life together, but more often than not we attempt to live and lead by ourselves. We run from criticism and pretend we do not need help, but the biblical model is to reject that ego in exchange for sharing life together.

You are already ministering to me in this way. You have come to me and offered to help engage my children while Nathan and I are in conversation here. You have pulled me

¹ Will Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*, John Knox Press (1988), p. 59

aside to whisper, “I am hopeful about the future of this church, and I trust you as our pastor, but I want you to know that you don’t have to do this alone. I am here to support you.” Every day I get an email, a phone call, or a visit saying, “What can I do? What do you need? How can I help?” We know that we are at our best when we carry each other both in prayer and in action. We know that we must welcome each other and welcome the stranger in Jesus’ name, if we are to be a church that reflects God’s kingdom.

In our church today, particularly in our Baptist tradition, we affirm that everyone bears the responsibility of ministry. One aspect of this ministry to which we are called is making sure that no one slips through the cracks both within the walls of this place and in the community at large. That’s big work, and we absolutely need each other for that type of comprehensive hospitality.

Paul Waddell, writing for the Center for Christian Ethics, articulates this calling: “Christian hospitality is a matter of welcoming, caring for, and befriending the stranger, the poor and needy, the homeless and destitute, the unloved and the unlikable, the weird and the strange, in gratitude to God and in imitation of Christ. It may be the most important Christian calling for our times, but it is one we easily neglect unless we are part of faith communities who make it their aim. For Christians, hospitality is not an occasional gesture but a whole way of being. It is not an interruption to our normal way of life but a habit, practice, or virtue that ought consistently to characterize our lives. How do we become this kind of person and these kinds of congregations in the Church and for the world today?”²

As a newcomer, I am still learning the voice of this congregation as I hear your stories and learn the history of this place. Who is St. Charles Avenue Baptist? What do we value at our core? How do we continue to grow into the kind of congregation that practices hospitality with our whole beings?

Again and again, I hear the swell of pride as you say, “This has always been a place where anyone is welcome. Anyone. No matter who you are, what your background is, what kind of job you have (or don’t), the level education you have earned (or haven’t)—no matter your political opinion or economic influence—there is a place for everyone here. We value the length and width (and even the winding curves) of God’s table.”

That is hard work. It is easier to surround ourselves with people who are just like us and vote like us and think like us and welcome or exclude like us. But that’s not the way of Christian hospitality, that is the way of our world.

² Paul Waddell, “Toward a Welcoming Congregation”, *Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University*. <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/53384.pdf>

“Hospitality is the vocation of every Christian because it is through hospitality that we offer the most compelling witness of who God is, who we are called to be, and what the world through God’s grace can become.”³

Paul Waddell continues in his words on hospitality: “Societies built on strategies of exclusion, societies that train their citizens to be anxious and fearful, hardly give us confidence for the future. Human beings are not created to be anxious, they are not created for fear and isolation; rather, human beings are created for the communion and intimacy that are the fruit of an ever-expanding love.”⁴

Today we ordain two more, Linda Marye and Ken Bickford, to the servant leadership of the Diaconate. They are set apart as hospitality bearers. They will commit themselves to practices that bear the fruit of an ever-expanding love experienced through Christ. They will model for us the way of welcoming the stranger and the other. They will listen to the voice of the congregation and to the concerns of your hearts. They will partner with me in ministry and prayer, and together we will work for the good of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church and its role of being the presence of Christ in this corner of the world.

With affection and gratitude, with confidence and hope, with curiosity and excitement we welcome these two into ordination for servant ministry in the church.

Let us prepare ourselves for their blessing.

³ Waddell

⁴ Waddell