

## CALLED TO SERVE

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Acts 6:1-6

In 2012, a group of Christians in Wilson County set out to ensure that nobody would freeze to death in our county during the cold winter months. They formed a ministry called Compassionate Hands and the following year organized shelters in eight churches. The year after that, in 2014, our church joined in and opened our Annex to house women on Saturday nights. Over the years, almost all of you have participated in this ministry in one way or another. This year, for the seventh winter, we will again host and provide food and shelter to women. On top of that, on three additional nights, we will offer our facilities at the Annex so that other churches may serve as hosts. It is a blessed ministry that we are providing.

In addition to providing shelter in the winter months, Compassionate Hands offers meals throughout the year. Every month or so, members of this congregation prepare food and serve about 35 women and men at the Compassionate Hands campus or over at First Methodist. Serving food to the hungry in the name of Christ is as old as the church itself.

The Gospel of Luke tells the story of Jesus of Nazareth beginning with the prophecy of his birth and ending with the account of his execution on the cross and his subsequent resurrection. The sequel to the Gospel of Luke is a book known as Acts of the Apostles—or the Book of Acts. This book tells the story of the emerging movement known as The Way which was made up of Christ-followers. Today, we call it the church.

The first leaders of the Christian movement were the apostles themselves—the disciples called by Jesus (minus Judas, of course). They were headquartered in Jerusalem and were led by Simon Peter.

At this time, the Christian movement was growing rapidly, and the apostles were kept busy organizing and administrating and preaching. An additional aspect of their ministry was to engage of acts of charity. As you will recall, chief among the commands that Jesus gave us was the call to care for the needy, to shelter the homeless, to feed the hungry. These ideas were not new. If we go back to the Old Testament to Psalm 82 we will find a summary of Jesus' ethical foundation: *Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.*

As the apostles oversaw the growing Christian movement, they sought to fulfill Jesus' command to care for the widows. Why widows? Because widows were an especially vulnerable population. Unless a widow had wealth of her own (which was

unlikely), or had a family to support her, a woman could easily become destitute after her husband died.

So, the apostles, on top of their primary responsibilities, were attempting to care for the needy widows in Jerusalem. But they became overwhelmed by this task. In addition, they became the subject of criticism. The non-Jews in Jerusalem accused the apostles of showing favoritism to the Jewish needy and ignoring other people. As we find in our reading for today, *the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.*

To rectify this situation, the apostles called all the believers together for a congregational meeting. Here, they pointed out the difficulty of fulfilling their ordinary responsibilities to the church plus caring for the needy, as well.

Almost all of our English Bibles translate the words of the apostles as saying, *It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait tables.* That translation leads us to believe that there is something wrong about this task of serving the needy. That is not how it is. The apostles aren't complaining, but they are arguing that waiting tables is not the best use of resources. They need to be preaching the gospel and telling the world of Jesus Christ. After all, they had known him personally. They had traveled with him. They had eaten with him. They had prayed with him. They need to share their story. The old King James Version of the Bible puts it best when it says, *It is not reason that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.* In other words, it does not make sense for them to use all their energy in this particular ministry when there is so much to do.

So, the solution they proposed was simple. They instructed the congregation to select from among themselves seven men to appoint to the task of serving. The stipulations were that the men had to be *of good standing* and *full of the spirit and wisdom*. The apostles, in return, would dedicate themselves *to prayer and to serving the Word* [of God]. The congregation then chose seven men, and the apostles prayed over them and laid hands on them. The seven were ordained to service.

What the apostles found to lack 'reason' was their waiting on tables. The word for *wait* in Greek is the word διακονέω. It is the word from which we get our word Deacon. A deacon is one who ministers by serving. They are literally waiters. According to the Presbyterian Book of Order, "The ministry of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress."

The deacons are one of the two groups of officers in this church. The other group is the elders. The elders, or ruling elders as they are now known, are those elected to serve on the Session. Their job is to oversee the work of the church, or as the

Book of Order describes: “Discernment of God’s Spirit and governance of God’s people.”

The role of elder is referred to many times in the Old and New Testaments. Elders are those who care for and guide their people. In this church, elders are responsible for finances, personnel, the buildings and grounds, Christian education, worship, and more.

Over the past two years or so, the Deacons have not been as active as they have in the past. Partly, that is because of COVID. We simply weren't doing the things that typically involve the Deacons. While the Session could conduct its business virtually, the deacons could not. They are a hands-on organization.

But COVID is not the entire story and I will take responsibility for not bringing the necessary leadership to the Deacons. One of the challenges facing the Deacons is that there are no specific guidelines for their duties and responsibilities. Their role is fairly wide-open. The Book of Order leaves it at a “ministry of compassion, witness, and service.” That can be interpreted in many ways, and Deacons at different churches function in different ways.

At our last Deacons meeting, I formed a Deacons Vision Committee to review the role of Deacons in our church and to recommend changes. That group has already gotten to work. I am looking forward to where this takes us. And I ask that you please keep this committee in your prayers as they seek to discern the future of the Diaconate at FPC.

Another committee that will need your prayers is the Officer Nominating Committee. This seven-person committee is charged with selecting a slate of names to be placed in nomination for seats on the Session and Diaconate. This year will be especially challenging since there are several unexpired terms to fill on top of those officers whose terms will end.

The task of the Officer Nominating Committee is part of what we understand to be the call process. They won’t just be looking for warm bodies to fill positions; they are seeking to discern who, at this point in time, is called to be an elder or deacon. If they contact you, it is because through prayer and reflection, they feel that God is directing them to you. I urge you to accept their call. Serving the church is a challenge. It can also be a joy. As an elder or deacon, you are doing ministry in the most literal sense.

Finally, I want to invite all of you to be deacons for a day—servers such as we find in the Book of Acts. This coming Saturday, in our own congregation, we will gather not to serve meals, but to make them. On Saturday, at 9:00 a.m., we will hold our fourth food packaging event for the organization called Rise Against Hunger. Together, we will package 10,000 meals. To cover the cost of the supplies

and shipping, we needed to raise 35 cents for each meal, or \$3500. Thanks to your heartfelt generosity, we surpassed that goal this week and so far you have donated \$4390—\$890 over our target.

But we are not done. On Saturday I need you together at the church to assemble those meals. There is a place for everyone. Those of you who have done this before know how much fun it can be. If you can't be here at nine, the show up when you can. We'll have a hairnet waiting for you.

As Christians, we are called to do many things—to teach, to preach, to serve. May we always be open to the call of Christ no matter where it might lead us. Amen.