

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Vero Beach, Florida
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Psalm 65:5-12
I Corinthians 7:29-31
Acts 6:1-7

"The Joy of Servanthood"

Text: "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." Acts 6:7

We have a tendency to believe that the early church was free of all discord and strife. Nothing could be further from the truth. From its inception, diversity of belief and how to practice one's faith has troubled the church. As someone has humorously written,

"To dwell above with the saints we love,
O that would surely be glory,
But to dwell below with the saints we know,
Well, that's another story."

The hymn writer said,

"Like a mighty army moves the church of God,
Brothers we are treading where the saints have trod.
We are not divided all one body we,
One in hope and doctrine, one in charity."

To sing of unity is one thing. To practice it is quite another. But notice from Scripture that God is not a God of disorder. God does not intend that the Church, which is the bride of Christ, be riddled with strife.

The Early Church, in its best form, was composed of members who are diverse in culture and economic standing. It was divergent in race as well as language. Some were Jews and some were Greeks. Peter's sermon at Pentecost had welcomed 3,000 divergent souls into the Kingdom of heaven.

His sermon spoke of the universal need of the human heart to be freed from sin and to discover the forgiveness of God and to be adopted as His children. Out of this common need the Holy Spirit called men and women to redemption. The church was born. Its focus defined, its mission undertaken.

The thrust of the early church was to proclaim again and again the goodness of God as it was found in Jesus Christ. Perhaps that's one of the reasons they had such outstanding growth patterns in that day and age. They proclaimed Jesus Christ. They talked of his birth, his life, his ministry, his sacrificial death and his glorious resurrection. What they heard in word they dared proclaim in deed.

They continued what was a Jewish custom, that of caring for the poor, the handicapped, the widows, the orphans. Each Friday morning two collectors were sent from the Synagogue. They made their way to shops and markets about the city soliciting a collection for the poor. The collection could either be in the form of money, food or clothing. Later that same day those goods were distributed to the needy. For those with emergency needs, they were given temporary relief. Those with permanent needs were given enough food for 14 meals, two meals each day for 7 days. This fund was called the "Kuppah" and it meant basket for they collected the gifts in a basket. In addition for those in pressing need, a daily house to house collection was made and it was called the "Tomhui" or tray.

It was apparent that the early church continued this practice. They cared for one another. But they also went a step further. They disposed of their worldly goods and in the words of Scripture "they held all things in common." Generosity and love abounded in their midst until oversights began.

The Hellenists were the Greek-speaking widows. They were being slighted in what they received. Now division and rancor raised their ugly heads. When love is focused upon self, the seeds of discord abound. A meeting is held. The facts are exposed and the oversights are addressed. Through the instruction of the Holy Spirit they appoint 7 godly men who are of good repute. It does not say that they weighed all the facts and somehow randomly decided on who would serve them.

The Holy Spirit undertook to guide and direct them. Again, there is the reminder that God is a God of order and purpose.

Notice that these 7 were not called to a meeting, rather they were called to serve. Throughout the Gospels the word "doulos" is used 14 different times to describe the ministry of our Lord. It means servant or slave. We remember the words of Jesus, "I came not to be served but to serve." We in the Presbyterian Church are very good at having meetings. We jawbone an issue to death before we ever get around to really doing something about the issue.

Every man and woman in this church ought to have a ministry because we are all called in our divergent way to serve one another. We ought to be committed to giving.

Dr. F.B. Meyer said this about the local church: "It is urgently needful that the Christian people of our charge should come to understand that they are not a company of invalids, to be wheeled about, or fed by hand, nursed, and comforted, the minister being the Head Physician and Nurse; but rather the people should come to know that they are but a garrison in an enemy's country, every soldier of which should have some post or duty, at which he or she should be prepared to make any sacrifice rather than quitting."

In too many churches we discover sadly that the same few timidly raise their hands and say, "I will serve if no one else will." It should awaken all of us to the fact that 20% of our congregation does 80% of the giving in terms of time, talent and treasure.

Bud Wilkinson was a famous football coach. Some years ago he was asked, "What contribution does professional sport make to the physical fitness of America?" To no one's surprise, he answered, "Very little." He said, "A professional football game is a happening where fifty thousand spectators, desperately needing exercise, sit in the stands watching twenty-two men on the field who desperately need rest." I wonder if in some ways that isn't a description of the church today! Too many of us have discovered that it's awfully comfortable on the side lines.

The early church possessed a great deal of mutual love. They dared to care for one another. They saw each other as a means of giving and exhibiting the glory of Christ in their midst. I wonder if our church couldn't be an example of that very thing. Caring for one another, lifting one another up, bearing each others burdens.

Many years ago, two students graduated from Chicago-Kent College of Law. The highest ranking student in the class was a blind man named Overton, and when he received his honor, he insisted that half his credit should go to his friend, Kasprzyzak. They had first met one another in school when the armless Kasprzyzak had guided the blind Overton down a flight of stairs. This relationship developed into a friendship and it became a beautiful example of interdependence. The blind man carried the books that the armless man read aloud in their common study and thus the deficiency of each individual was compensated for by the other's ability.

There isn't a person in this sanctuary today that doesn't have some deficiency that could be aided, helped, improved by the abilities of another. Life is too short to go it alone. We need to be about the business of helping one another through life. Wouldn't it be a wonderful picture for the Church if we could be that interdependent - one upon the other. Sharing our talents, our labors of love with the thought that we would glorify Christ and in the process benefit the entire body of believers.

They had an abundance of love and they dared to reach out one to another. As a consequence, what might have torn that church apart with strife, discord, rancor and ill feelings, became an opportunity for ministry. Every problem in the world is an opportunity for God. Isn't that a wonderful way of looking at it? What is God going to do with us in order that we might help to alleviate the problems of another? It takes courage to reach out one to another.

A missionary told this story many years ago of a tribe in Africa. A child had wandered off into the high jungle grass and could not be found. The tribe went forth, every man, woman and child in search of this lost one. The next day, the tribal members all held hands as they walked through the tall grass and this enabled them to finally discover the child but it was too late. She has been attacked by a wild animal.

In her anguish and through tears, the mother cried, "If only we would have held hands sooner." It is not enough that we all share a common goal. We must all work together to accomplish that goal without hesitation, to serve one another, to edify, encourage, build up. We too need to hold hands.

We must do so. Why? Because the love of Christ compels us! In this way, perhaps it will be said of us as it was the early church, "they were one in the Spirit, they were one in the Lord."

Let us pray.

Father, in our ministries, allow us to see what you would do with us. Save us from all vain glory and make of us a servant people. Make of us a caring body of believers that is willing and able to reach out and touch someone for the sake of Jesus for we ask it in His name. Amen.