



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



Serving Others

Text: Acts 6:1-7

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Today's story in the Acts of the Apostles is a story about serving others.

Luke tells us that the Hellenists were complaining to the Hebrews that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The Hellenists, of course, were Greek, not typically from Jerusalem and there has always been a lingering question on whether they were Greek Jews who had converted to Christianity or Greek Gentiles who had converted to Christianity.

It doesn't much matter what their background was except for the fact that there were people being neglected.

The apostles do recognize this as a problem and conclude that these women needed to be cared for and fed, but they needed to add people in order to do this so that the apostles could continue to preach and do what they had been doing.

So seven men are chosen to be, using the Greek word, *diakonia*, deacons, to serve the needs of these widows. The word 'deacon' literally means helper and these individuals were chosen by the early Christian Church to serve as helpers to all those in need. They were chosen and blessed to do this special kind of ministry.

There are several things that stand out in this passage.

First is this. So much of ministry, so much of discipleship is doing mundane, almost tedious tasks. It's not to say that these aren't important tasks; they are crucial. They just don't seem very glamorous. Providing food for the widows in the community was not a glamorous job. It was a job of service to those in need. It was, in so many ways, serving others in the most mundane of ways.

But its significance was earth shaking. A church that did not care for the most basic needs of people was not something worth being a part of. A church that did not reach out

to care for others was a church missing the point of the Gospel.

I had a man in a church I once served who said something that left me speechless. He said, "I don't believe in benevolence." I was stunned silent. If one is a Christian, and one doesn't believe in benevolence, what exactly do we believe in. The very core of the Gospel is about serving and caring for others, benevolence. To not believe in serving others is, frankly to miss the point.

In the history of Christianity missionaries learned a lesson. Their job was to go around the world and win people for Christ. Many of the moved to countries far away, learned the language, and preached the Gospel. Nothing happened. People didn't respond.

As time went on, missionaries learned skills. Then they went to the countries and did stuff with people, built things, healed people with medicine, etc. They didn't always do big things, but a lot of little things to serve people. People then began to turn to Christ. It wasn't until the missionaries learned to serve others that they were successful.

The Gospels are filled with miracles. The miracles, from a Biblical perspective, weren't there to dazzle people and impress them. They were done to show that Jesus had come to **serve** them and he was sharing God's goodness with them. His service, in this particular way, opened people's hearts and minds to his preaching.

When we forget to serve, we forget something a the core of the Gospel.

Secondly, real leadership in the church comes from people who have the heart of servants.

There is a recurring theme in the Gospels concerning the apostles. The apostles often seem to serve as little more than foils to Jesus on so many different levels. They seem to spend a great deal of their time wandering clueless from one thing to another.

We often mistakenly conclude that Jesus saw them to be stupid.

They weren't. Jesus was teaching them a lesson in humility----a really important lesson. He was teaching them that they were going to be servant leaders; not the entourage of a rock star.

Jesus was, in his time, a rock star. I don't mean that he sang. But he was a person who attracted people who followed him around. Being an apostle was heady and thrilling. They were with the most popular preacher----a person who attracted large numbers of people. People who were impressed not only by Jesus, but by those who were his closest associates----the apostles.

Jesus was a great miracle worker. To get to him, you went through his closest associates. The apostles. It was thrilling and very ego gratifying to be an apostle at that point.

In the Gospel of John, 13th chapter, we have a story, however, of Jesus washing the feet of the apostles. And they are not happy. Peter rebels.

The tradition was that when you arrived at a person's home, that person would provide you the resources to wash your feet. If, however, the person was from wealth, they would provide a servant who would wash your feet for you.

So when Jesus got on his knees and began to wash the feet of his disciples they began to become alarmed. Jesus was the host—but the host was supposed to have some underling do such a seemingly demeaning job as washing feet.

One would think, from an apostolic perspective, this wasn't all that good, either. After all, here they were, the 12 apostles who were supposed to be learning to model Jesus' behavior. Washing feet was **not** in their job descriptions.

Peter's rebellion is very real. Peter was recognizing that Jesus was teaching them what being a servant of God was all about. Being a servant of God is serving others. Peter was still thinking of his entourage status. It was a lesson in humility he had to learn.

Often, in our day and age, we, as Christians, expect the world to treat us better because we are Christians. A person's Christianity gives them a unique, often special status. When we hear that a person is a church-going Christian we generally hold that person in higher esteem than others who are not. Thus, when we are, ourselves, church going Christians, we take that status upon ourselves.

Being a Christian, however, isn't about achieving status. Being a Christian is not having things come our way because we are entitled to it. Being a Christian is, at heart, being a servant to God and being a servant to others. Being a Christian means to have the heart of a servant.

The story begins with a need to feed the widows. It goes much deeper, however, deep within the core of Christianity.

It is a reminder to us that our faith is often lived out by serving others even in the most small of ways. It is also a reminder to us that to walk with Jesus is ultimately to walk with one who serves and to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, we need to have a heart like Jesus, the heart of a servant.