

**Sunday, May 10, 2020 - Fifth Sunday of Easter**  
**“Responsibility and Privilege”**

Acts 6: 1-9; 7:2a; 51-60

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Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

The little movement called the Way was quickly growing. 120 at Jesus’ ascension. 3,000 more at Pentecost. No numbers are given as Jesus’ disciples, now branded apostles, go and preach publicly in the temple in Jerusalem and encounter first a stern warning and then imprisonment for their ceasing to preach in the name of Jesus, as more and more people come to faith, but our reading today tells us it’s continuing to grow.

One byproduct of the growth of the church was the increase in complexity of the human system of this church and the scale of the needs of the people. It’s the same sort of thing we saw at Mountain View as our ministry needs increased to the point that we needed additional professional staffing and you called Pastor Brad to be a pastor for our church - for which I’m extremely grateful, especially in times like these. To be sure, adding staff is one solution to some of the issue of complexity and greater need, but what we see in Acts 6 isn’t adding staff. It’s the apostles recognizing something that has always been true - there’s more to the church than the stuff that the pastors do, and even if there were a church where the pastor had time to do everything, that’s not healthy or wise for training up people as disciples of Jesus. Sometimes we pastors today, and apparently the 12 apostles then, too, can forget that they don’t need to do everything or be everywhere. You are the church! You are adopted in baptism, forgiven through God’s Gifts of the Word and Sacraments, you have the Holy Spirit living in you, you are sent on His mission to love and disciple other people.

So you see that Acts reading today and the seven people entrusted with some combination of what happens between our Elders, Care Committee and other ministry areas today. Lead and organize. Check in with each other. Help each other. Pray with each other. Comfort each other. Deliver meals to each other. Encourage each other. Train each other. Do life together. Be the church.

Notice that it this starts with a great privilege - the privilege of receiving God's Gifts. He makes you right with Him and outfits you with what you'll need to carry out the responsibility now entrusted to you - to love and disciple other people.

See we believe in something called the priesthood of all believers, a term we get from our epistle lesson in 1 Peter 2. Maybe you've wondered why we refer to our clergy as pastor, a word related to the idea of a shepherd, as opposed to a priest. The reason is simple - the word "priest" is already taken. You're the priests. Priests are middle men with direct access to talk to God, ask forgiveness of sin, share His forgiveness with one another when we wrong each other. That's not only pastors, that's every Christian. Disciples of Jesus don't just passively take in what the religious experts have to give. We live out what God has done through us in Jesus Christ! After all, in your baptism the Holy Spirit lives in you.

I was speaking with one of our homebound folks earlier this week over Zoom and we returned to a conversation we'd had before that was finding extra meaning in the COVID era. This person may not be in a position to volunteer, head up a committee or lead a Bible study anymore - instead, they pray - regularly, fervently. How wonderful! Prayer isn't the only thing priests do but it's one of the main things that priests do. We pray - pray for God's will to come about. For protection from evil. For God's intervention on behalf of other people. For more people to turn away from looking for answers within ourselves and instead heed the call God puts on their life, as He wants all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

And I think that's a poignant bit of wisdom from this one homebound person because all of our lives have been a lot more like that lately, haven't they? The orders to stay in, the lessened social connections, the greater amount of time left to contemplate our own thoughts, the heightened prospect of health challenges, emotional challenges, financial challenges and the like. Maybe you, Christian priest, have been feeling more ineffective, resentful, angry and powerless lately because so many of the responsibilities that you enjoy, that provide a sense of meaning and purpose as priests in God's Kingdom are altered or even

impossible to carry out. Let's not forget that the responsibilities God entrusts to us don't define us. The privilege God gives us - that we should be called the children of God - these define us. His Gifts, making us His, forgiving us in Jesus, giving us the Holy Spirit - this is where God gives us our identity. No matter your place in life, no matter the type or level of responsibilities we carry out, you're a child of God!

That all brings us around to another truth - which is that sometimes the scale of responsibility entrusted to us is as God's children is burdensome. God's mission is not for the faint of heart. It means speaking truth, especially when inconvenient. And speaking of inconvenient, God's mission calls on us to inconvenience ourselves when by doing so we can love others.

One of those lay leaders chosen by the apostles was Stephen. As he lives out his life as a disciple of Jesus, sharing the Good News everywhere he goes he instigates and annoys other people to the point that he ends up in trouble before an angry mob and is brought the high priest for questioning. So Stephen lays out what he has been teaching. Just like the people of Israel turned their back on the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob when they asked to worship the gods of Egypt instead of the God Moses spoke for, they were turning their back on God again by crucifying Jesus.

The words are harsh- you stiff-necked people, you persecute the prophets like your fathers did, you murdered the Righteous One... not all that different than what Peter told the crowds on Pentecost from our reading a few weeks ago, right? Three thousand in that crowd were cut to the heart and asked what they must do to be saved. Stephen gets run out of town and is stoned to death. No matter what may come, that's the responsibility for those privileged to look on the kind face of our Lord in Heaven and pray for others to be forgiven, as He first forgives us.

And those closing words of Stephen's earthly life show us his motivation in this harsh truth was none other than love. Out of love for his own people he wanted them to see Jesus

as the greatest prophet of all - the Messiah and Lord. Love for his neighbor set a burden on him that ended his life.

The call on God's mission to love our neighbor is the same for us today. In some cases that means taking calculated risks, appropriate to our roles and training - our medical workers and first responders fit that bill. It's also love for our neighbor that compels us not to go to them, not to take frivolous risks in spreading disease. We love Mountain View, Las Vegas and the world by social distancing. As restrictions begin to lift some of what that looks like will change, but we too are inconvenienced - not to the loss of life, perhaps, but still in no small way, by not physically gathering to worship with each other. I know some of you are starting to wonder, "When?" The truth is we don't know yet. There are a lot of factors to consider, not the least of which is when we are allowed legally. Truth be told, the point at which we're safely and legally allowed to assemble 50 or 100, much less the 8am service that was sometimes approaching 200 a week before everything changed - that may yet be always off. It is a burden, yes, but it is a burden of love. And whenever we can assemble, still with major sanitation protocols in place, wearing masks and having our temperature checked and keeping our distance and printing our own services instead of sharing hymnals and pews are blocked off and we see our friend in the flesh that we haven't seen for weeks and months and so desperately want to go do a big bear hug, we'll continue to assume that burden of responsibility - because it's the most loving thing we can do for our neighbor.

But through it all - streaming services, socially distanced services with masks and that day when large crowds are again allowed to safely assemble without thinking of six foot radii, we continue to be the priesthood of all believers, sent on God's mission, privileged as recipients of His Gifts of grace to freely love each other. We pray, that despite our situation the Word of God would continue to increase, that the number of disciples would multiply daily, that a great many of us become ever more obedient to the faith, and that we would see the opportunities to exercise the responsibilities around us to love others because of the great privilege we have to be the children of God! In Jesus' name, Amen.