



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

**Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter**  
May 7, 2023

## Keeping Focused

### Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60

<sup>1</sup> Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. <sup>2</sup> And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” <sup>5</sup> And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

<sup>7</sup> And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. <sup>8</sup> And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.

<sup>2</sup> And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. <sup>51</sup> “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. <sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, <sup>53</sup> you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

<sup>54</sup> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” <sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. <sup>58</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup> And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

The Apostolic church in Jerusalem had seen tremendous growth in spite of opposition and persecution by the Jewish ruling council. The Apostles and members of



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the church covered the city of Jerusalem with the story of the crucified and risen Christ. They were enthusiastic missionaries and the church was growing rapidly.

It didn't take long for the congregation to become quite a diverse bunch. There were Gentile and Jewish Christians, but even among the Jews there was diversity. Contrary to popular belief (and perhaps our Gentilian ignorance), not all Jews are alike. In Jerusalem there were native Jews, known as the Hebrews, and there were many alien Jews, known as Grecians, or Hellenists. These Hellenists not only spoke a different language, they followed different customs and practices which were frowned on by the Hebrews, so they lived in separate communities, which only helped to promote feelings of prejudice. The Christian Church, however, made no such distinctions; it embraced people from every facet of society, which is one of the reasons the church grew so rapidly.

The congregation in Jerusalem, while sharing some of the same problems we face in terms of opposition from without and struggle from within, had also assumed a tremendous obligation. Besides doing mission work, they had committed themselves to providing for the needs of the destitute members of the congregation. The principle recipients of this aid were widows. In those days a woman did not take an active role in public life. A woman couldn't go out and get a job, so there were very few opportunities for women to support themselves, and widows, to a large extent, had to rely on public charity. This is why the church considered it a divine obligation to provide for its widows and other destitute members of the congregation. As you might suspect, this involved rather large sums of money. Many members, even among the wealthy, gave everything they had for the support of this work.

At first the Apostles themselves had taken charge of the work and personally carried it out. They were the ones who took food and clothing to the different homes and saw to it that everyone was taken care of. Therein lies the rub. Their regular ministry of preaching the Word, teaching old and young, visiting the sick, and doing the work of missions required so much time that there simply was not enough time to make a proper distribution of food and clothing to the poor and needy. Something had to slip through the cracks; it was physically impossible to do everything.

This gave rise to a very serious situation in the church. Since the Apostles could no longer take care of the matter adequately, there were some who felt they were being neglected intentionally. We can say all we want about how wrong they were, how they should have felt, or how understanding they should have been, but that would deny human nature and ignore the very real problem that one group in particular seemed to be receiving the short end of the stick. Which one was it? Not the Hebrew widows, but the Hellenistic ones. First there was suspicion, then came the ugly charge that the Apostles were showing partiality and prejudice. Of course they didn't understand. Of course they were focusing on the wrong thing. Of course they had a spiritual problem. But, if something hadn't been done quickly, the church could have split over this issue.



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The Apostles took immediate action. A special meeting of the congregation was called, and the whole situation was explained. They told the people that they could not carry on the ministry of the Word and at the same time administer the charitable work of the congregation. Having been faced with a choice between the two, the Apostles told the assembly, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables." No, they did not believe that this work was beneath their dignity, but there was more important work which demanded their time. They had been ordained into the ministry of the Word, so their first duty was to preach and teach the Word of God.

How did the church at Jerusalem solve its problem? The suggestion was made and met with wholehearted approval that the congregation select seven men "full of the Spirit," that is, men who were firmly grounded in the Faith, men who were devout, sincere Christians. They were also to be men of "wisdom," that is, men who had a good measure of common sense. These men were to be installed and placed in charge of administering the benevolent work of the congregation. Because this was done, and the ministers of the Word were freed to carry on the ministry of the Word, our text tells us that "the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the Faith."

Now, how does this situation compare to ours? When a church is first established, the pastor is compelled to do everything from being the preacher to being the janitor. As the congregation grows, the pastor is relieved of certain responsibilities, not because they're beneath his dignity, but because they're time-consuming and he's been called to a different task. I'm sure that, in the early years, the pastors worked very hard at organizing Trinity, to the point that, by the time later pastors arrived, they could focus their attention on pastoral care. Eventually, boards of elders, trustees, finance, and so on, were formed. And over the years an active Ladies' Aid was established, as well as other organizations. It was clear that the members of Trinity were ready, willing, and able to help shoulder the burden of an active, thriving congregation. What a beautiful example of a church that listens to the Word of God and puts into practice what it learns.

But, how does Trinity today compare to Trinity in its heyday? It doesn't take an archeologist to discover that things are not as they once were. To be fair, the changes we've experienced are not much different than what's happening in most congregations in the country. But, what does it mean?

Well, it can mean a number of things. First of all, it can mean that we live in a world in which people are busier than ever and they don't have as much time for church activities. Secondly, it can mean that there just aren't as many people to get involved.

But it could also mean that somewhere along the way things have gotten a little out of focus, that people have lost sight of who they are as children of God and how they're to live out their identity day by day. Certainly this is true of society as a whole, where fewer and fewer people even claim to be children of God, but it becomes especially obvious when we consider life among those who still claim this of themselves. Maybe it's time for



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you and I to ask ourselves: Has my perspective of life as a Christian become clouded? Have I been neglecting the spiritual dimension of my life? What has become of my Christian identity? Have I forgotten what Christ has saved me from? Have I forgotten that the Christian life is a life of service, both to God and my neighbor? Have I succumbed to our culture's pressure to treat the reality of the cross like a fairy tale, so that Jesus, Santa Claus, and the tooth fairy are all lumped in the same category?

After all, isn't that the pattern of history? The events of today become the events of yesterday, the clear facts of yesterday become the fuzzy facts of years ago, and on and on it continues until we're not even sure these things ever happened at all.

But even having the facts straight doesn't guarantee anything. A knowledge of facts doesn't make a person a Christian. The devil knows the facts better than we do. I'm becoming more and more convinced that service in the church isn't based on, nor will it ever be inspired by, simply focusing on a job that needs to be done, or by trying to convince people of what they're supposed to do. We're not blind; we can see what needs to be done. Anyone with half a brain can take a look at the spread sheet and see the imbalance. But that's not motivational. It's certainly not motivation enough . . . for most people, anyway.

Participation in the church is a relational thing. We Christians are motivated by our understanding of who we are. The early Church Christians got involved because they were convinced of who they were. Of course, the events of Christ's death and resurrection were still fresh for them. Many of them were there when He died, saw Him after He rose again, and some of them actually witnessed His ascension into heaven. There was no question regarding the facts of what God had done for them. But the unbelieving Jews were confronted with the very same facts. What motivated the early Christians was the relationship they had with their Savior – and with each other. So, when their pastors needed help, they clamored for a space in line and jumped at every opportunity to serve their God and their church. Some, like St. Stephen, even gave up their lives in witness to the Truth.

When we comprehend on a spiritual level who we are and what God has done for us in Christ, a change occurs in us. Some are led to serve Christ and His people as leaders in the church, the people in the pews become known for their thirst for the Word of God, the over-riding sense of apathy plaguing our generation starts to be interrupted by sparks of godly concern, and the result is that God's church begins to experience new life and renewed vigor.

Where are you in all of this? There's not one of us here who couldn't benefit from new life and renewed vigor. Some of us are tired. We've been doing this a long time. And there's no pep talk in the world that's going to do us any lasting good. What we need is a renewed focus on the love of God for us in Christ. The only place to find that is in the Means God has provided us all along – His Holy Word and Sacraments. Maybe we need to be a little less like Martha – serving, serving, serving – and a little more like Mary –



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listening, listening, listening.

But maybe you've been content to sit on the sideline and watch the life of the church from a distance. No mere motivational speech is going to change that. What you need is for the grace of God to so fill your heart that you're compelled to get involved on a more personal level. Listen: Don't be afraid of that. Not everyone has to be a St. Stephen. Yes, preachers are needed. But so are table servers . . . and cooks and dishwashers, to continue the analogy. The point is: Whatever gifts God has given you – they're needed in God's house. You're needed in God's house. And you need to be here, too.

May God clarify our vision, beloved, to see the great mercy and grace He's lavished on us and to understand how He wants us to respond to that in loving service to Him and our neighbor. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen