

*In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.<sup>2</sup> So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.<sup>3</sup> Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them<sup>4</sup> and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."*

*<sup>5</sup>This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.<sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.*

*<sup>7</sup>So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.*

*<sup>8</sup>Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. (Acts 6:1-8)*

### What's Wrong with Our Church?

My last congregation had a troubled history. In the ten years before I got there, they had four pastors. Two resigned when their marriages broke up. They had to force a third to retire because he couldn't do the work anymore but he refused to see it. During that same ten years, financial problems closed their school and almost closed the church. At one point, they were hanging unpaid bills on the bulletin board and asking people to take one home and pay it. There was a lot of hurt and upheaval. Shortly after I got there, one of the members asked me, "Is there something wrong with our congregation?" I think that we might understand how she felt. There's been a lot of turmoil here over the last few years, too. I know some people are asking, "**What's wrong with our church?**" This morning, I want to look at another congregation and the difficulties it faced to help us understand better what is happening here.

#### I.

**What's wrong with our church?** Our church has the same problem every church has: we live in a sinful world. **Even healthy churches face difficulties.** During the Easter season this year, I've been preaching from the readings in the book of Acts. We've been focusing on the first Christian congregation, the one in Jerusalem. So far, we've seen a healthy, spiritual, growing congregation. In one day, it grew from around 120 members to more than 3,000. We heard last week that new members came in every day. And we heard the reason for its growth: dedication to the word and sacraments that led to growth in faith and love for each other.

But our text says, "**In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.**" At that time, there was no social security. There were no pensions. If a woman's husband died, she had to depend on her children to support her or she would starve. But not every widow had a son or daughter who was able to support her or who was willing to do so. So the congregation in Jerusalem took over support for the widows in their congregation who didn't have anyone else. There were many of them. And some of them were being overlooked.

That problem happened because the church was growing so fast! Even when a congregation grows, even when its members are generous with their offerings, congregations can have real problems. Luke tells us that the widows being overlooked were the ones who spoke Greek rather than Hebrew, like most of the congregation did. It certainly seems like the minority group felt that it wasn't experiencing the same love and concern that the majority was feeling. How could this happen in a congregation whose pastors were the apostles? How could this happen in a church that was dedicated to the apostles' teaching and that was an example of love? This congregation was made up of sinners. And sometimes, Christian people who love the Lord and love each other sin against each other and hurt each other.

The devil hates the preaching of the gospel. He knows that if we waste our time and effort fighting each other instead of spreading the gospel, then we're not doing the work Jesus called us to do. And in a church that cares about the truth, the devil rarely makes a frontal assault on doctrine. He's smart enough to distract us with side issues. At a time when people were pouring in to hear the gospel, he brought the work to standstill over

waiting on tables. The devil looks for preexisting conditions he can exploit. We sinners are naturally suspicious of people who are different from us. The devil uses language barriers and differences in background to sow anger and strife.

Does any of this sound at all familiar? We aren't the church in Jerusalem. Our pastor isn't an apostle. We haven't had a Sunday when 3,000 people were baptized and we don't add new members every day – yet. But we did have an adult confirmation last week. We do have several adults in membership classes right now. Our church has had more baptisms than funerals in the last year. We have people inquiring about our church and school and we have transfers pending from other congregations. We have been blessed with a deeply spiritual faculty that puts the preaching of the word of God first and that bends over backwards to address the difficulties our congregation faces. Our support staff, too, has done an outstanding job of rising to hard and unexpected situations, often putting in many extra hours with very little notice. God has been very good to us.

But we have faced serious difficulties. Our last voters meeting illustrated that. The ongoing financial struggles have been demoralizing – even though we have been making gains in that area. Perhaps the biggest difficulty we've faced is similar to what must have been going on in that dispute over the widows in the Jerusalem congregation. People there were complaining about what was happening. They were talking in their little cliques and building up hard feelings. My friends, gossip and hard feelings have run rampant in this congregation. Now, have some people hurt other people's feelings? Sure. That was sin and God would have us work out those issues with repentance and forgiveness. But the fact remains that we sinners are really good at gossip and arguing and holding grudges. We're really good at taking our attention off of the preaching of the gospel and focusing instead on me and how I want things and on how I feel that I have been wronged. When we focus so much attention on me, we're easy prey for the devil, because love doesn't focus on me. Love focuses on God and on the needs of others.

Each of us needs to ask ourselves: how have I made this situation worse? Have I been grumbling and gossiping? Have I been reliving the slights I've suffered over and over again? Have I made it easy for the devil to distract our congregation from its real work? The sinner in us always wants to talk about what everybody else has done. But each of us needs to ask, "What have I done?" If you're one of those people who stays out of everything, does that mean you're off the hook? No. It's not enough just to stay out of the way. You have to be part of overcoming the inevitable sin that we commit against each other. If you aren't working to heal and move this congregation forward, you're just as guilty of a lack of love. And we pastors are just as guilty of causing these kinds of problems as members are.

It's hard to admit that our sin has contributed to these kinds of problems. So let me be the first to state publicly that my sin certainly has contributed to these problems. Let me assure you that Jesus gives us the solution for that sin. Jesus came down to this earth to be the perfect church member in our place. He never slandered or gossiped. He never ignored problems and let somebody else figure out what to do about them. He never interfered with things that weren't his business. He always acted in perfect love. He did that in our place. In God's mind, when Jesus did all those things for his congregation, we did them for ours.

Jesus died because we sinners don't love each other perfectly. He died because we don't love God enough to put the preaching of the gospel ahead of our personal hurt and pride. He died because we aren't willing to get our hands dirty and make our congregation a more united place. He died because we were born sinners and that sin comes out and damages the things we love most, like our churches and our families. He died and paid for all that we're guilty of. Then he rose to assure us that God has wiped away our sins, totally and completely.

In that healing, God promises healing for our church as well. Having problems is not what makes our church healthy or not. Every congregation in a sinful world has problems. Every group of sinners has conflict. The devil attacks every attempt to spread the good news and to grow in faith. But what makes us healthy is applying God's promises to promote healing. The power for us to forgive each other lies in the forgiveness God has given us. God's grace teaches us to look at people who have hurt us as people Jesus loved and died for, too. It teaches us to let go and forgive just as Jesus let go of all that we had done wrong and he forgave us. My friends, live that gospel of Jesus Christ!

## II.

How do we do that? We have to recognize the challenges before us and come up with solutions that put the gospel first. **What's wrong with our church?** It's made up of sinners in a sinful world. Since that is true, **all healthy churches are committed to ministry**, which means proclaiming Jesus' love to each other.

When sin disrupted the preaching of the gospel in Jerusalem, the apostles called the members together. We don't have the minutes of that meeting, but the words do have make it clear that the problem was stated in way that everyone could understand and appreciate. Then the apostles proposed a solution: seven men would make sure that the food was distributed to the widows in a fair and Christian manner.

That was a practical solution. But it was also very spiritual. Notice the qualifications for the job. If you or I were going to choose seven guys to make sure that hundreds of people who spoke different languages would all receive an equal measure of support, what qualifications would we look for? Someone who was highly motivated? Someone who was well organized and who kept good records? Someone with good people skills to smooth out any problems that might come up? All those things would be helpful. But what qualifications did the apostles look for? **“Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.”**

Certainly, wisdom does imply the practical ability to do all that things that needed to be done. But the Bible says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Even in practical things, the number one requirement is that we approach our work from the perspective of faith. It's God's work that we do here.

The apostles said, **“It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.”** Taking care of those widows was important. But the primary work of the congregation is to preach the word. My job is not to be an administrator. My call is to proclaim the gospel to you, to preach and teach and administer the sacraments. It would not be right for me to neglect preaching and teaching to write budgets or go to meetings. I think that is fairly obvious to most of us. But what may be less clear is the fact that our teachers, too, are a part of the ministry of the word. Peace Lutheran School exists to train our children in the faith and then to educate them in other things. We are blessed with teachers who do a wonderful job in teaching academics. But it would not be right for them to neglect teaching the Bible to teach math or social studies. Thank God that our teachers wouldn't! It would not be right for our congregation to put test scores ahead of the faith of the children in our school.

All that we do here at Peace, we do for the sake of ministry – not the person, but the work. When we create support positions in our church, we do it to advance our mission of proclaiming the word. Support positions are not “called” in the same way that a pastor or teacher is. We hire them and that's perfectly acceptable. But in any position we create – everything from an office manager to a charity coordinator to a secretary or custodian – the first requirement should be that the person be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Certainly, in all our volunteer positions – our council, our boards, our committees – we should be seeking people of faith to do the work God gives us to do.

Those people will serve out of love for God, whether they're paid staff or volunteers. That service will pay benefits in ways that never show up on budget or a financial report. Stephen, the most famous of these seven men, found himself witnessing over and over again. God did miracles through him to advance the ministry. In the end, Stephen gave his life for the gospel. Now, we would never ask our council or our secretaries to give their lives, but God might. God asks all of us to dedicate our lives to him. And when we do the work he gives us out of faith, then God uses us to advance the gospel. Even if we never do anything that seems miraculous, every time God uses us to preach the word to give faith or to build someone up in the faith, he has done a miracle and he did it through us.

That is the solution to our church's problem. It's the solution to every congregation's problem. We need to put the ministry first – the proclaiming of God's love to each other, to our children, to the people around us. We need to live in love toward each other, a love that comes from God's love for us. We need to forgive and be forgiven. We need to understand that every person sitting around us is a sinner and that the devil wants to disrupt our ministry. And we need to cling to God's promises to overcome the devil and to drown our sinful flesh so that we lead lives of repentance. If that is our attitude, then my friends, this is a healthy congregation, no matter what the devil does to us. Amen.