**Placed for a Purpose – Sermon 2**

**“Living as God’s Child in the Church”**

**Acts 6:1-7**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus:

 In Acts chapter two, shortly after the Day of Pentecost, we learn what matters most in the church. There in verse 42, St. Luke gives us a profound summary of the center of life for the very first Christians: “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*” Here you can almost feel the beating heart of the church, which still beats among us today and every Lord’s Day. For we still gather around the apostles’ teaching (which we have in the New Testament). We still gather around the breaking of the bread (in the Lord’s Supper). We still recognize God’s gift of fellowship (koinonia) as we share our blessings and care for one another. And we still join together in the prayers (at the Lord’s altar). The Lord’s plan and purpose for you begins with these gifts—gifts from Him to you—in the Divine Service. Through these gifts He draws you closer in faith toward Him and in fervent love toward one another.

 Fervent love toward one another. Love toward one another is a defining characteristic of life in the church. Or is it? Guess what? Even in those idyllic, early days of the New Testament, there were problems in the church. Love wasn’t always “fervent.” That first congregation in Jerusalem was not comprised of perfect people with halos hovering over their heads. Nope, it was made up people who were frail and fragile, people who were sometimes grumpy and thin-skinned and insecure, people who were often quick to *assign* blame, and sometimes slow to *accept* it, people like us—sinners in need of a Savior.

 The specific issue that erupted is exactly the kind of issue that eventually erupts in almost *every* Christian congregation. We hear about it in Acts chapter six:

*1Now 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. 2And 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. 3Therefore, 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. 4But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” 5And 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. 6These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. 7And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly …*

This was a congregation that cared for its members—especially for the widows who, in those days, had no Social Security, no Medicare, no Individual Retirement Account to sustain them in their senior years. So the church started up a kind of “meals on wheels” program, distributing food to these widows on a daily basis—just the kind of care and mercy that you would expect from the followers of Jesus.

 But then something happened—maybe nothing more than an oversight or a miscommunication. Some didn’t see it that way, though. No, some chose to see it as a coordinated effort to deprive the Greek widows of what the Hebrew widows were getting. Phone calls were made, complaints were lodged, and emails were fired off. Before long, the entire congregation was engulfed in angry accusations, reprisals and recriminations.

 It happens all the time in the church. The details and the cast of characters change; but the plot stays oh, so familiar. An innocent mistake, a perceived slight, a misinterpreted comment, a simple oversight is seized upon by someone—is ramped-up, exaggerated, magnified, and gossiped about. Like gasoline thrown on a tiny flame, the congregation is engulfed in conflict. People pick sides, tempers flare, the body of Christ suffers, and the mission of the church is weakened.

 When this happens in **your** church, don’t be surprised. Rather, take your cue from the seven magnificent men whom God raised up to rescue that first Christian congregation. They’re not among the most famous characters in the New Testament: Nicanor and Nicolaus, Philip, Prochorus and Parmenas, Timon and Stephen. These seven men—laymen no less—specialized in shrinking mountains into molehills. The apostles had wisely and quickly concluded that *their* vocation was to preach and teach the Word of God. The fair distribution of food would be handled by other servants. So seven men were chosen by the church—laypeople not so different from you—men full of faith and the Holy Spirit who were unafraid to step up and do what needed to be done. They were chosen to be peacemakers—chosen to be part of the solution—to demonstrate fervent love toward one another.

 These seven were the very first lay leaders of the New Testament. If you’ve ever served on a church board or committee, if you’ve ever served as an officer or an elder, if you’ve taught Sunday school or sung in the choir or helped with the altar guild or organized a Lenten Supper or helped count the offering or done any other unsung task that someone absolutely has to do—well then, you are to be numbered with these seven servants of the church. For without your willingness to step up—without your Spirit-led stewardship of money and energy and time—this congregation would quickly grind its way into gridlock. The solutions you help craft, the conflicts you help defuse, the hard work you joyfully offer our life together—it matters today and it matters for all eternity.

 No one may stand up and applaud for you. No one may even say thank you. No one may long remember how you tactfully defused a brewing conflict, how you always put the best construction on the motives of your fellow members. Practically no one will ever know about the generous gifts and offerings you have given to the Lord. In fact, when you step up and make a difference in the church, you’ll probably wind up getting asked to do even more, to take on more responsibility, to attend more meetings and volunteer more hours.

 So why bother? You hear that sentiment sometimes from people who’ve gotten burned in the life of a congregation, people who have tried to do the right thing only to have things backfire. These are the walking wounded, the disillusioned, people who distance themselves from the “institutional church” because of all the problems and conflicts. They sometimes float around from church to church, looking for the perfect church, or else they give up all together.

 But the magnificent seven of Acts chapter six teach us that there is no perfect church (no perfect apostles, and no perfect pastors, either). There is only a perfect Savior. There have always been, and there will always be, problems in the church.

 So why bother? Why press on together through thick and thin? Because one day we will see what Stephen saw. Stephen was one of those seven selected servants—not an apostle, not a called and ordained preacher. But Stephen knew the apostles’ doctrine as well as the apostles themselves. And Stephen was unafraid to bear witness to that doctrine about Jesus anywhere, anytime, with anyone. This is what got Stephen into terrible trouble. Time doesn’t allow us to dig deeper into Acts 6 and 7—to take a detailed look at Stephen’s speech before the Sanhedrin, before they killed him. But the truth for which Stephen was willing to die had everything to do with Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the life—that no one comes to the Father except through Him. He could have watered down His witness, but He didn’t. What Stephen believed about Jesus mattered too much. At his words, 70 furious men of the Sanhedrin gnashed their teeth and dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him. But before he died, this magnificent man said, “Behold! I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56).

 Beloved in the Lord, one day you will see what Stephen saw. You will see heaven open and the Lord Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father almighty. You will one day take your place in the Father’s house—a place that Jesus Himself has prepared for you by His dying and rising. For you are just like every other member of Christ’s church—frail, fragile, thin-skinned and sinful to the core. But to that list we must also add that you are forgiven of all sin, loved by God in Christ, and equipped by Him to be a steward like Stephen—to carry out **your** vocations and callings in this life with integrity and courage. Stephen was the first of many martyrs. But as the stones rained down upon him, Stephen could pray with confidence, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59).

 That same confidence can be yours. For in Jesus your guilt is taken away. Your sin is atoned for. You will live forever with Jesus. Meanwhile, you are not alone. You are a part of the holy Christian church. Your baptism has made you a member of Christ Himself. You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Pet. 2:9). Through faith in Jesus Christ you stand shoulder to shoulder with Stephen, with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolaus. Like them, you are more than magnificent. You are holy, forgiven, and loved by the Lord Jesus.

 In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.