

Called to Serve

TEXT: John 13:1-17 and Acts 6:1-7

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on October 19, 2025

The passage from Acts 6 that Bernadette read deals with a very practical problem in the weeks following Jesus' death and resurrection, which means this morning you're getting a very practical sermon along with a summary of the first eight chapters of the book of Acts.

It took less than two months after Jesus' ascension for his disciples to realize that Jesus had left them with an enormous task—in Matthew's words, "to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Jesus also gave them a clear set of core values that must not be violated in the process, but failed to provide an instruction manual on how exactly all that should be accomplished other than they should start in Jerusalem, move out to all of Judea, then to Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. Oh, well, sure. Okay. I'm sure it will all be fine.

The first issue the disciples hit almost immediately: the Twelve who had been with Jesus since the beginning were now only eleven, since Judas had taken his life. In Acts 1 they cast lots and chose a man named Matthias to bring the number back to the symbolic twelve.

They also had an immediate shift in their calling, which is reflected in their name going forward. They had been the twelve "disciples"—with the word "disciple" meaning one who learns from a master—that was learning the core values. But with Jesus gone, they have suddenly graduated from disciples to "apostles," meaning those who are sent out. They had been trained and equipped; and now it was time to get to work.

But the job was still overwhelming. Take the gospel message to the ends of the earth, but *also* continue to teach the new disciples who come in as a result, *while also* caring for the poor—especially the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner—healing the sick, casting out demons, and all the rest. The very last example Jesus set for them before his crucifixion was to take on a servant's role and wash their feet, telling them to do the same. They weren't sure they could do that even to the end of town, let alone to the ends of the earth.

But they had been told all things were possible with God, and, at least so far, the Twelve had been able to handle all that with those who had newly become disciples—both during Jesus' lifetime and immediately after his death and resurrection—a number Acts 1 pegs at 120 people. And they could stay put since they hadn't finished with Jerusalem yet. But then we turn the page.

At the start of Acts 2 we get Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on those in Jerusalem gathered for that festival. Pentecost is 50 days after Passover. So, they're not even two months into their new roles when the Holy Spirit drops at that Pentecost festival with rushing wind, tongues of flame, and such mayhem that the disciples were accused of being drunk.

People had questions; Peter preached to them; and by the end of that day, the number of disciples the Twelve had to teach and care for had jumped from 120 to over 3,000. I mean—good start, but also, Yikes! The ratio of apostles to disciples had jumped from one apostle for every 10 disciples to one apostle for every 250 disciples. And the end of Acts 2 says that number grew daily.

With the huge influx, even twelve of them couldn't personally meet the needs of 3,000 people and counting, so they immediately created what today might be called a kibbutz, with all the believers living together and caring for one another. Everyone put all they had into a common pot, and a loose distribution system was set up so that everyone had food, clothing, shelter, and care. All good.

Turn the page again. In Acts 3, Peter heals a man who couldn't walk. Someone that everyone had seen for ages begging at one of the temple gates is suddenly up running around and crediting Peter. That healing miracle gets everyone's attention, and pretty soon a large area of the outer temple courts, called Solomon's Portico, was full of people jockeying to get near Peter as he and John taught people there.

The temple officials soon get annoyed at the amount of attention Peter and John are getting, and at the start of Acts 4 the officials come into the Portico, arrest Peter and John, and toss them into jail overnight to get the crowd to disperse.

Their plan may have dispersed the crowd, but it did not dampen enthusiasm as Acts 4:4 tells us they added about five thousand new disciples that day. Five. Thousand. And, of course, once they're disciples, they have the option to move into the community and receive not just instruction, but care for all their needs.

So, now the ratio is roughly one apostle to 677 disciples. Meanwhile, Peter and John got a dressing down by the temple officials and were ordered not to speak about Jesus anymore. Spoiler alert: They don't obey.

Acts 4 closes with the reminder that they are all still living together, as they were at the end of Acts 2. Acts 4:32-35: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

"There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

Acts 5 begins with a rather disturbing story of a couple who tried to cheat the system and who then drop dead when Peter calls out their lies; but the importance of the incident for our purposes is that the system is strained and people are already trying to exploit it. It needs more careful oversight. The numbers are growing beyond what they can handle both in the community and in Jerusalem more generally, as now all twelve apostles are hanging out in Solomon's Portico, totally ignoring the orders not to speak about Jesus, and more believers join their ranks.

While the rich are trying to sneak into the community and get everything free while keeping their wealth, others are so desperate for care that they bring their sick out into the streets in the hopes that Peter's shadow might fall on them. The gospel spreads. "Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the hungry, for they shall be filled." People from towns outside of Jerusalem start coming in, and the temple officials are fuming. The high priest finally has all the apostles arrested and put in prison.

Acts 5 goes on to say that in the middle of the night an angel opens up the prison and lets them all out and they go right back to preaching in the Portico. Eventually the temple officials ask more politely for the apostles to go talk with the high priest, which they do; and the short version is that the high priest and other officials did not like what they hear. Acts 5:33 says, "When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them."

A Pharisee named Gamaliel, who had also served as the President of the Sanhedrin, and was widely respected in the group as the grandson of the great rabbi Hillel, steps forward and convinces them to back off. The apostles are flogged, again ordered not to speak about Jesus, and are then released.

This same group, who ran and hid when Jesus was arrested and crucified, now have found their courage. On their way back from the flogging, the last verse of Acts 5 says, "And every day in the temple and from house to house they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah."

Then comes our passage in Acts 6, which begins with reminding us that the number of disciples is still increasing in number. And, now the problems have moved from problems with individuals to problems in the system as a whole. It's still an entirely Jewish community at this point; but one of the tensions in Judaism

at the time was the remaining Greek influence from when Alexander the Great had ruled Judea a few centuries earlier.

There were Jews who had blended their culture with Greek practice and who often spoke Greek, and Jews who saw that as a betrayal and who spoke only Aramaic. In the text for this morning, those who spoke Greek were called Hellenists, and those who spoke Aramaic called Hebrews; but all in the community are Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah who had been foretold. Apparently, in whatever informal system they had for distributing food, the Greek-speaking widows were being neglected.

The complaints bubble up for the apostles to deal with, but it's not that easy. The community is now hovering somewhere around 10,000 people. That's a whole town. The apostles are out straight healing and preaching and teaching, not to mention getting arrested and flogged for their trouble.

On the one hand, they simply can't do any more without giving up their mandate to spread the Gospel; on the other, they still need to honor the core values of making sure everyone is fed and clothed; healed and housed. Jesus expected both from his followers, but the community has outgrown the honor system.

When the apostles say to the community, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait tables" (a phrase that can also mean to keep accounts) they are not trying to demean the work of getting everyone fed or doing as Jesus did in washing each other's feet. On the contrary, it's the importance of that work that drives them to find a solution.

What the apostles do mean to say is that their primary calling—the calling for the twelve of them who witnessed Jesus' life and ministry first-hand—is, and always has been, distinct; and, while they were also able to do the personal service work themselves when the ratio was one apostle to ten disciples; and while they could at least keep an eye on the honor system in the community when it was one apostle to every 250 disciples; now that the community is a town of about 10,000 and growing, it's just too much. The work is too important. They need help.

They don't need more than twelve preachers, since one person could as easily preach to ten or ten thousand. But, the distribution of care, the oversight of volunteers, and the careful accounting for what resources came in and making sure they were fairly distributed was a separate skill set and required focused attention.

So, for the first time since the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Twelve Apostles formally lay hands on seven men—which was, and is today, a sign of bestowing authority—to fulfill that new role in the community of believers. While they weren't called "deacons" in the text, this is the origin of that service role in today's church.

Notably, all seven of those chosen have Greek names. The apostles made sure the Greek-speaking disciples and the very people being neglected were fully represented in the new system and were given real authority to fix it. Paul would later say in his letter to the Galatians that in Christ there was no Jew nor Greek. That idea was lived out in this first community of believers before it was ever articulated by Paul.

So, who were they—these seven deacons who would see to the literal care and feeding of the community? While it's not certain, most scholars believe it's at least possible that one of the seven, Philip, was also the Philip who was one of the Twelve. It would certainly make sense to have one of the Twelve be in the group of seven, both to reinforce their authority to the community and to keep lines of communication and oversight clear.

That being said, the first to be named was not Philip but Stephen, who is unknown in the Bible before this passage. Philip is named second, and the other five appear nowhere else in the Bible—at least not by name. Presumably they just kept doing their new jobs. It's unclear whether Philip stops preaching for his time in this role, or whether he straddles both jobs. But once persecution scatters the believers in Jerusalem, Philip pops up again, preaching in Samaria and famously converting an Ethiopian eunuch on his travels.

Stephen appears to rise above his new role, likely becoming the leader of the seven deacons. He's the only one singled out for his faith, and the rest of the chapter describes him performing miracles, showing great wisdom, and having the face of an angel. The new system allowed the church to grow exponentially. Acts 6:7 tells us, "The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." Apparently more than just visitors to the Temple had been listening in at the Portico.

But back in the community, Stephen was such a force and the new system so successful that a community of over 10,000 people learning what it was like to be treated as equals and not beholden to the empire began to pose a threat to Rome's grip on the colony. As Stephen's popularity grew, so did his enemies, who made up so many charges against him that he ends up being brought before the high priest at the start of chapter 7.

When questioned, Stephen launches into a sermon, much as Peter did, only Stephen's goes on for 53 verses, the longest sermon recorded in the book of Acts. While it was longer, it had the same effect as Peter's much shorter speech did—the officials wanted to kill him. And this time no one intervened. They dragged Stephen out of the city then and there, stoning him to death, making him the first of Jesus' followers to be martyred.

Rabbi Amaliel's star pupil, Saul, was present at the stoning, watching over the coats of those who participated in Stephen's death with an approving nod.

The murder of Stephen by the authorities, broke everything wide open and the persecution of Jesus' followers escalated quickly thereafter, scattering all but the twelve apostles out into Judea and Samaria. Ironically for the persecutors, this helped to spread the Gospel beyond Jerusalem.

In Acts 9 Saul is converted and becomes Paul; and the rest of the book of Acts shows him transforming his once murderous zeal against Jesus' followers into becoming the strident determination to move the Gospel message out of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth—or at least to the far reaches of the Roman Empire. So what's all that got to do with us?

I've mentioned the apostle-to-disciple ratios across these first few chapters in Acts because they actually reflect the exact same dynamics at roughly the same tipping points in today's churches. Churches who survive today have to adapt structures and change both behaviors and expectations when crossing above about 30 members, again between 150-300 members, and again around 1,000. Each of those stages today are so well-established that they have names associated with them and general outlines of different structures and expectations that tend to work for each level.

The middle shift, which occurs somewhere between 150-300 members is so notoriously difficult for churches to navigate that while the official name given to it is the shift from "pastor-size" to "program-size" it is also called "the 200 barrier," because so many churches get stuck there. Move too far above that and people fall through the cracks, get mad, and leave, until the numbers drop to where the pastor can do it all again. Then the cycle repeats. For the record, Crawford has 257 members.

What I noticed for the first time this past week, that is the same ratio of apostles to disciples that broke that first system 2,000 years ago, when the apostles couldn't keep tabs on the growing number in the community and the Greek widows were being neglected.

Acts 6 reminds us that caring for others was not a calling unique to the apostles—it was the calling of every disciple; and the apostles knew it. So, they chose seven people, who were "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom" to make sure everyone got the care they needed. Stephen was the first to come to mind.

There is actually an international program now called Stephen Ministries that trains laity in congregations to do the things often known as "pastoral care," to help churches do what the apostles did and grow beyond that 200 barrier. There are other models, too; and when you get to very large churches, they typically have many overlapping systems of care and discipleship, with laity in the lead and the clergy fulfilling the more targeted callings of our ordination.

Every now and then, it helps to remember that while Methodism was named for its strict adherence to particular structures of spiritual growth and development, Jesus didn't leave his disciples a Book of Discipline. Instead, Jesus instilled in them the core values of care and compassion for the world, and the mandate to be stewards of God's resources in a way that would allow all the families of the earth to share in God's blessing.

The apostles understood that structure was needed to make such blessing possible at any kind of scale; but the structure itself had to shift and grow as the community did for God's blessings to flow freely. The church changed many, many times after that and now has multiple forms and structures across the globe. But the initial shift came when the apostles began to think beyond the needs of the new disciples and recognized that each person also brought unique skills that could contribute to the blessing of the whole. The apostles had a calling; but so did everyone else. And the job needed all of them. Still does. Amen.