



THE REORIENTATION OF VOCATION V MINISTRY OF MERCY IN OUR MIDST

In honor of the Super Bowl, we begin this morning with a football trivia question: What were Doc Blanchard and Glenn Davis known as when they played football for Army in the 1940's? (Mr. Inside and Mr. Outside). In our sermon series on the Reorientation of Vocation, we have talked much about focusing on the outside, but this morning the focus is given to the inside. The church must always maintain that dual focus, or what we called in our stewardship campaign, "Double Vision: Internally Strong – Externally Focused."

The church in Acts is growing, in equal measure to its enthusiastic faithfulness to Jesus Christ. In the midst of that growth new and unanticipated need occurs. The church in Jerusalem was committed to caring for its own, and in particular caring for those who were not in a position to care for themselves. This would include widows, who were very vulnerable in the time of the first church. There was no Social Security system, there were no opportunities to re-enter the work-force. Widows were dependent on their families, and in the absence of families, on others.

In this church it appears that the Hebrew widows were getting first crack at the food, and that the Hellenistic widows sometimes had to go without. There was a need for the church to reorient its sense of call, and its sense of internal mission. In order to fulfill the love command of Jesus, a new way of thinking needed to be called for.

As that need occurs something happens that

will never happen again in the church for, lo, these many years! The church experiences complaining members. In the New Living Translation, it says this in verse 1: "There were rumblings of discontent." Rumblings of Discontent? In the church? I don't believe it.

Even though we would never experience those rumblings of discontent in our church; let's honor the text and see how the church in Acts dealt with this.

The first thing that they did is that they dealt with it. They raised it up to the surface. There was no whispering in the parking lot; they let the leadership know what was going on.

The second thing that occurred is that the leadership responded without getting defensive. They accepted what was said and sought a solution.

The third thing that they did was to gather the Body. And the fourth thing that they did was delineate in the body those that were gifted by the Holy Spirit for this particular need within the church. The apostles did not take this on as an additional duty for it would have taken them away from what the Spirit had given them and gifted them to do. Instead the Apostles/Disciples celebrated the gifts that were there in their midst and sought out some spiritually mature and wise leaders to take this role on.

In doing so, there was no distinction made in terms of which gifts were better, the gifts of teaching and preaching versus the gifts of

wisdom and care. The leaders of the church recognized that the gifts were equally valuable because they were equally given by the Holy Spirit. There is in this passage a wonderful spiritual egalitarianism that takes the sin of competition away and reminds us of the church of how the Lord wants us to work in concert.

The other principle of reorientation to note in this passage is the way in which it appears that those who raised the problem were given the task of accomplishing the solution. Every preacher's least favorite phrase is, "You know what you ought to do..." or "You know what this church ought to do..." When faced with that phrase Rick Warren answers by telling the one who asked that he "releases them to their ministry." If they see the challenge then they should see the solution. In our story, the Hellenists see the problem, and the Hellenists are assigned the solution.

That solution begins a ministry of the church that continues to this day. One of the marks of the church, and one of the reasons for its growth, is that church is a place where we care for each other. Here we see the needs in each others' lives and we meet those needs. We are cared for by Christ, which mandates the holy and joyful privilege of caring for each other. We have in our midst, Deacons, and Stephen's Ministers, and an Associate Pastor for Congregational Care. Moreover, we have so many others of you who fill the gaps of the literal and metaphorical widows in our midst. Certainly, the Holy Spirit has gifted us with enough of you to care for our needs in our Body. Certainly, we are blessed by the ways in which you exercise those gifts.

Did you notice that in our last verse the priests were beginning to join the church? I

can't help but wonder if the reason for that is that they were seeing a new kind of faith; a way in which the love they had for God would be manifested in the love they had for each other. What a witness to Jesus!