

So Deeply Do We Care:
A Charge to the Deacons and Congregation
Sermon 153 | Greystone Baptist Church | September 18, 2022
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

The book of Acts tells the story of the early church as it came to life following the life, death, resurrection of Jesus... and the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. With Jesus gone, and his movement continuing to grow, the disciples and emerging leaders organized themselves to make sure that everyone was cared for.

Over time and as the church grew, it began to incorporate Jews and Gentiles from regions outside of Jerusalem. Some spoke languages other than Hebrew. Some were Gentiles who had converted to the way of Jesus. Others were already Jewish, but had been in exile for multiple generations, during which they began to speak new languages and adopt new customs. What emerges in the 6th chapter of Acts is a picture of a growing church that is changing rapidly as it faces increasing diversity and multiculturalism, diversity and multiculturalism.

This is the context from which the need for deacons emerges.

The issue at hand in Acts is the distribution of food. The Greeks noticed that their widows were being overlooked, they were not being fed. They spoke up and the disciples responded. Upon hearing the grievances of the Greeks, the disciples chose not to get defensive, but to expand the leadership model to ensure care for those who had been ignored.

The word “deacon” comes from the Greek term, *diákonos*, meaning “servant” or “waiter”... A deacon is most literally and historically, someone who brings food.

I love this connection for us at Greystone, because here the deacons are (most often) the ones who carry the food from the communion table, out into the pews. Well, at least they were before the pandemic - a practice we hope to resume in the future. But even in this pandemic season, our deacons have embraced a model of ministry that names “Care” as one of their primary functions.

As caregivers, deacons have set up meal trains, organized bereavement visits, sent door dash gift cards, and tended to the needs of this congregation. Our deacons are “waiters of holy tables” both here in this sanctuary and out in our community.

In addition to this work of acute caregiving, Greystone deacons attend to the spiritual life of this congregation. Through intentional prayer practices and ongoing discernment, deacons help us - as individuals and as a church - navigate the turbulent waters of life in today's world.

In order to do this well, deacons have to nurture their relationship with God, seeking God's wisdom above all else. They nurture their relationships within the congregation paying close attention to the engagement of our members, trying their best to ensure that "no one falls through the cracks" - so to speak.

In short, deacons care. They care for you, they care for the church, they care for our neighbors.... They care for the Good News of the Gospel which has been entrusted to the church.

So what is the specific call of the deacons for this moment in time?

It should come as no surprise to say that the church is struggling with a perfect storm of conditions that threaten our relevance and viability in the post-COVID world. Statistics were not encouraging before the pandemic, but now as we begin to emerge, the writing is on the wall. We cannot continue to do things the way we always have.

In a recent article, Bill Leonard describes this challenge with the term: the changing sociology of Sunday. In his article, he states the obvious challenges, a growing list of competing events taking place on Sunday mornings, increasing busy-ness amongst families who are struggling to juggle school, extracurricular activities, and the demands of an economy where every adult in the household must work in order to pay the bills.

In addition, the rapid technological advancement that took place in March of 2020 opened up a new wave of on-demand worshippers who could stay at home and fast forward through anything they didn't like or didn't have time to deal with. And in the spirit of full disclosure, even I can see the appeal of enjoying a good sermon or beautiful anthem in my PJs with my coffee cup in hand.

All of these shifts and changes are causing us to wrestle with the questions and beg God for the answers:

As the world emerges from the pandemic and everyone makes choices about how they will spend their time, is the church a priority anymore?

Does the Gospel of Jesus still have a place in this world?

Is the church relevant anymore?

What does all this mean for how we are to live our days with faith and courage?

Here's where both the good news and the call come... As the whole world is stepping out from isolation and re-engaging in community, we are becoming aware that despite all of our differences, there are a few things we have in common.

First, we have all been incredibly lonely and we know that isn't good for us.

Second, we have all experienced loss and pain that cannot be fully understood by others whose experiences were different from our own.

Third, we are all suffering from what a colleague of mine calls catastrophic exhaustion as the weight of everything we've been holding alone sets in.

Knowing this, I am reminded of the words from the apostle Paul that appear in the oldest writing in the New Testament:

...like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves... What a beautiful model for the church and our leaders? The calling to be a deacon is different in every time and place. It is a unique response to the needs of the church and the world as they arise.

Today, the call to be a deacon is to respond to the needs of our lonely, grieving, and exhausted world. The call to be a deacon is deeply relational as it requires each one to become a tie that binds us all together EVEN AS we work to bring about New Life in this church and in our world.

This is no easy task.

These deacons ordained and installed today will need to learn new languages, new technological skills, and new strategies for engagement so they can speak with relevance to an ever-changing world. They will need to hone their listening skills so that they can hear the groans of our broken and hurting world.

They will need to build up their empathy muscles so that when the pain of a neighbor feels like criticism, they won't respond with defensiveness, but with care.

And they will need to set aside their own experiences and desires so that they can create a church that is a true sanctuary, a place of rest and renewal for all different kinds of folks. Hellenist and Greek, native and foreign, rich and poor, old and young, black and white, spiritual and non-religious, mainstream and marginalized sophisticated and simple... WE ALL need a place to rest and be renewed.

Maybe this is both the GOOD NEWS and the CALL for the post-COVID church:

To be a place that has set aside everything else, in order to become a true Sanctuary for anyone and for everyone.

Friends, if this is indeed our calling, and if we are going to respond to it, it's going to take more than just 6 deacons and their three-year term. If we want to be a sanctuary for all people, a place of rest, a place of welcome and belonging, a place where differences and divisions can grow into bridges and connections, a place where grief can be shared and not shouldered alone, a place where people can lay down their heavy burdens and experience the kind of renewal only God can provide... if we are going to be THAT kind of church, it is going to take us all, giving it all, sharing it all, showing up for it all, and sticking together through it all... Sharing in the Gospel and sharing our whole selves

In a concerted effort to show that we DO care so, SO deeply.

Amen.