

STAY IN ONE PEACE

July 28, 2019

The Rev. Dr. Howard Chapman

(His final sermon at FPC)

First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa

Text: Acts 6:1-7

SCRIPTURE

Acts 6:1-7

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.' What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread and the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem.

The Word of the Lord Thanks be to God!

SERMON

Well, here we are. This is a moment I have been thinking about for quite a while now, and perhaps many of you have been doing the same. Someone said to me a few weeks ago, "You can say anything you want for your last sermon. There is nothing anyone can do about it." Yes, I suppose I can. If there was a hellfire and brimstone sermon boiling up inside of me about how God wants you to increase your pledge, and the punishment that awaits you if you don't, this is my chance to let it out. I suppose I could do that too. But the overwhelming feeling I have within me is one of gratitude, tremendous gratitude, and that takes me way beyond any feelings of taking one last shot before I go.

So, if you will indulge me a little, I do want to say thank you to some people. Which makes me very nervous because I am afraid of missing someone. First of all, thank you to our office staff and parish associate, Karen Greene and Barb Bjork, and Pastor Nancy Redman. These three have had my back over the years. Jesus may have had Peter, James and John. I have had Karen, Barb and Nancy. They have been with me through so much, the good and the bad, the tough and the easy, and I could not have done it without them. Many times I have had the thought, "I know you think you are talking to the guy who is in charge, but you really need to check with someone who really knows what is going on..." meaning one of those three. I would like them to stand for a moment and be recognized.

But to expand, we have a fantastic staff in this church, and I have been blessed to work with these wonderful people. Our music and worship staff, Paul Holstein, Judy Chapman, Marilyn Mark, Sam Raiche, Louise White, Isaac Langley, Dave Dehoff, and our youth director, Abbie Parker. I appreciate so much all you have done, would you stand and be recognized? Let's go even further... if you have ever worked on the staff of this church and received a paycheck for your efforts, would you please stand?

But I am not done yet. This congregation has some wonderful leaders, who are dedicated and hard working. You are in good hands, I assure you. Would the members of our current session please stand? But there are a lot more I need to thank. Would anyone who has been an elder, serving on session, would you please stand? We cannot forget the deacons and their ministry of compassion to those who are needy. Would the member of our current deacon board please stand? Would anyone who has ever been a deacon, please stand?

Now let's try to cover anyone I might have missed. If you have served this church in any way, if you have sung in the choir, worked with kids, or served on a committee, or volunteered for the food pantry or Helping Hands

or some other ministry; if you have helped with a funeral lunch, or the FLY program, or Family Promise or Marion Cares; if you have pitched in and helped out in some way, would you please stand? Because I do want to thank you.

Last but not least, I want to thank each and every one of you on behalf of my family. We arrived here 24 years ago, not knowing anyone, a long way away from any friends or relatives. We were far from perfect, and you accepted us and loved us anyway. For that I shall always be grateful.

So of course it is with mixed emotions that I stand here today. There is a lot of all this that I will miss very much, particularly all of you. I will miss you, the people who make up this weird and wonderful thing that is called First Presbyterian Church of Marion IA. But there is a lot that I honestly will not miss. I will not miss all the administrative stuff. Or let me put it this way... I love Charley Knudsen but I do not have to have another conversation with him about the deficit budget, ever again. Thank you, Jesus!!! I love Gary Zalesky, Wayne Seagren and Grant Dancey on the Building and Grounds committee, but I never have to call one of them up again and say, "One of the toilets in the downstairs ladies' room is really badly clogged." No one is going to be coming to me telling me that there is no one covering the nursery this morning, or that the information in the bulletin about some upcoming event is all wrong, or there is a bat flying around the social room. I will not miss any of that sort of thing.

Which brings me to the scripture I chose for this morning. It is the first story ever about church administrative stuff, something that happened when the early church was still in its infancy. It may have happened only a few months after our Savior rose from the grave and ascended back into heaven. You might remember that on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came and empowered the early disciples, and the church expanded at an incredible rate. Three thousand were baptized on that first day. Then it says in Acts 2:44 "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as had any need." Yes, the early church was communistic in its pure form. No one owned anything, but shared everything in common. It was beautiful and loving and nurturing and compassionate, and... an administrative nightmare.

Four pages later in Acts 6 we find our text for this morning. It begins with a problem. Acts 6:1 reads, "Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food." The Hellenists were Greek or probably all non-Jewish believers. The Hebrews were Jewish, of course. Somehow, there was an unfair distribution when the meals were being served and the non-Jewish widows getting shortchanged. From the very beginning of the church there have always been problems when it comes to administration.

I have told you before about a conversation I had with my son, Jonathan, a few years ago. I think I was talking about some committee or session or presbytery meeting that got all bogged down and went on and on, and nothing was accomplished. Jon asked me why we had to have all this church structure, all these rules and requirements, all these committees and votes and political games being played. He said, "Why can't a group of Christians just get together, pray, sing, read the Bible and worship God? Just keep it simple. Avoid all these meetings and rules."

I thought about it for a moment and I said, "Christians keep trying to do just that. And it works for a while until someone thinks it would be a good idea to serve coffee." Jon said, "What are you talking about, 'serve coffee'?"

I said, "Well, let's say we had a bunch of nice, decent, loving Christians who wanted to get together to worship. So they arrange for some kind of meeting room where they can do just that. But then someone decides that a cup of coffee would taste good after the service while they were standing around visiting. Others agree and so someone brings their Keurig coffee maker the following week. Well, then the question comes up should they use Styrofoam cups because they are convenient, or ceramic mugs because that is better for the environment? If they use mugs, should everyone bring their own or should they be provided? If they are provided, who is going

to wash them? Furthermore, who is going to pay for the coffee, the cream and sugar and the mugs? Speaking of cream, should they use that vile, work-of-the-devil, Cremora powdered stuff, or offer real milk? If they do use real milk, how are they going to store it? The questions keep going on and on, until someone says, 'Let's appoint a coffee committee to figure out what works!' Everyone thinks this is a great idea, but then the questions come up as to when this committee should meet and how often and how do we decide who should be on this committee and should we keep minutes and who should chair these meetings? And before you know it once again, you have church polity and structures and rules and requirements. All because of coffee."

As much as I dislike all this administrative stuff, I do realize it is necessary and important. No system is perfect, because no humans are perfect. We just try to do the best with what we have to work with. But you may be wondering why, I chose this scripture passage for this Sunday of all Sundays. Well, there are two key lessons that I see here that I think are important for you all as you turn the page and open a new chapter in the beautiful story that is First Presbyterian Church. The first comes from the 2nd verse of Acts 6, "And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables.'"

The first lesson is that your pastor cannot do everything. I know, I know, you are all praying that your next pastor is going to be absolutely perfect, this time around, a fabulous preacher, a compassionate counselor, able to stay up all night at a middle school lock-in, then be at the hospital at 6:00 a.m. to pray with someone before they go into surgery, then lead a morning Bible study at the nursing home, help at the food pantry in the afternoon, teach a confirmation class and then meet with the finance committee until midnight to launch a highly successful fall stewardship campaign. I know that is what you are hoping for, but you might want to keep some of those expectations a little more realistic. Now, your next pastor is going to be wonderful. I am absolutely confident of that. But pastors cannot do everything, nor should they.

"It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables." There are important duties and responsibilities that God does assign to pastors. Yes, there are things that a good pastor must do. But there is an awful lot that goes on in a church that anyone can do. You do not have to have the title of Reverend on your name to go visit someone in a nursing home, or to teach a confirmation class or to run a successful stewardship campaign. You don't have to be a pastor to pick up some trash that is blowing around the parking lot or to put some chairs back to where they belong or to turn out a light or make sure the doors are all locked. This is not my church, anymore, but it is still your church. It is something to treasure. My prayer as I leave you is that you will.

This leads right into my second point, that comes out of the next verse in our text. The apostles say, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task." Notice, they did not say, "Select some people who we will train... or people we will send off to a 12 week course of study... or people who might be ready in two or three years." No, these were individuals who were already filled with the Spirit and were wise and capable. They already had the people they needed, with the right skills to do the job that had to be done.

A while ago, I saw a cartoon in some church magazine. I wish now I had kept a copy of it. It showed two people, one with a clergy collar, and the other with a badge that said, "treasurer." They were looking at a graph entitled "weekly offerings" and it indicated that the offering had been dropping dramatically. The treasurer was saying, "I am no theologian, pastor. But I really think you ought to end your sermons with something besides, 'Then again, what do I know?'"

I was very tempted to title the message this morning, "Then again, what do I know?" Now, I know that is silly, but for me, as with a lot of humor, there is enough truth in that to make a point. Friends, I am not any different than any of you. I am not any smarter than you. I am not any wiser than you. I certainly am not any holier than any of you. So what do I know? The only thing I can think of that makes me a bit different from any of you, is that I am a huge Bible Geek. I have a genuine delight for digging into God's Word. And it has been my

absolute joy each week to share with you the precious gems I have discovered in that digging. I know I will miss being able to do that each week.

The apostles knew there were already people among the church who were leaders and competent, and, most important, filled with the Spirit, to sort out this administrative mess. You are about to go through a time of transition and change. It will be exhilarating at times, but it also will have its moments of frustration and chaos. But you can handle it. You can do this. There are good strong capable leaders in this church who are extremely competent, but more important, filled with the Spirit, and you will get through this with no trouble. You all know what you need to do. Pastor Nancy talked about it last week in her excellent sermon, how we must be both like Martha and Mary. We have been talking about it for years. Internally nurturing – within the walls of this building you encourage, nurture and strengthen each other. Externally serving – outside in the community, you serve others as Christ has served you. Keep on doing that and you will be just fine.

So I did not title this message, “What do I know?” but rather the way I have been signing my correspondence and reports for many years, “Stay in One Peace.” It is, of course, a play on words, of getting along in a world that seems to try to smash us up into little pieces, both as individuals and as a church. But it is also a recognition that we are united and one in the peace that the Bible says is beyond understanding. It is a cute little saying, but what do I really mean? What exactly am I asking you to do?

Well, since I talked about all the hassles surrounding having coffee at church maybe I can explain with a story about coffee. Many of you here remember May Wynia. For those of you who don't, May was born in January of 1906 and she passed away in September of 2014. Yes, she was 108 when she died. May joined our church in 1943, and a year or so after that someone asked her to be Sunday School superintendent. She agreed. No one ever said how long she was expected to be Sunday School superintendent, so May, being a woman of her word, assumed it was for as long as she could. It was probably 57 or 58 years before she couldn't do that anymore. She was always here at church. May was involved from the very beginning of our Helping Hands store room across the alley. She was just one of those people who was always here doing something that needed to be done.

But my favorite story about May happened when she was about 92 or 93, and still considered herself the Sunday School superintendent. One of the things May did every Sunday was during the first service when she would make a big urn of coffee in the kitchen, so it would be ready for the adult classes. On one particular Sunday, while I was preaching during the first service, I smelled smoke. I finished the sermon, and we started the hymn. Andy Rausch was the associate pastor, and I sent him off to investigate. He came back quickly and said the entire downstairs was full of smoke. When the hymn ended, we stopped the service, had everyone to leave the building, and called the fire department. We thought everyone was out, but when the firefighters arrived, and began to investigate, there was May Wynia, in the kitchen, making coffee. It was the motor of the ventilation fan in the rest room that had shorted out and was smoldering. The whole place was filled with smoke. May did not care. She was making the coffee. The firefighters had a hard time getting her to leave. She was determined to do her job and get that coffee made. She was not upset, rattled in any way or worried. She was as calm as she could be. That, my friends, is what I mean when I say “stay in one peace.”

Now, I am not saying that you should do anything foolish and dangerous. Yes, May should have left the building. But God is calling each and every one of you, and this congregation as a whole to do certain jobs. These are not overwhelming impossible tasks. These are things like making coffee, telling a story to a child, singing a song, yes, maybe attending some meetings, getting things organized. They are things like worshipping together, loving those who at times are not lovable, and holding on to the truth in a world that loves falsehood. And at times, when you look around it may seem like it is all chaos, the place is on fire and you are the only one on the job. When that happens, remember May Wynia. She knew what she was supposed to do and she was going to do it, no matter what. So, be like May, and stay in one peace. Thank you all. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.