

**“A Few Good Men & Women”**  
**Acts 6:1-6; Deuteronomy 1:9-18**

I was a first semester freshman working my way through school. Attending the University of Kentucky’s two year branch in Ashland, Kentucky, my tuition was \$140 per semester, a figure which seems almost incomprehensible in today’s college financing. I had acquired a job with Ashland Oil and Refining Co. Founded in Ashland, where they maintained two oil refineries, the company spread all over the country, and world.

And one of their traditions, though now discarded, along with now being owned by Marathon Oil, was to throw a Christmas party for all their employees. Well, my dad worked for Ashland Oil, and this party was a highlight of the Christmas season. The company hired a professional circus to perform at the National Guard Armory. And remember, this was before Peace Centers and professional sports came south. We had three fuzzy channels on television and wrestling at the Armory on Friday night. College sports remain popular in the South because so many of us grew up gathered around the radio listening to our favorite team.

So, to have a circus, a real circus, come to town just for us was a major event. But that wasn’t even the best part. Up to the age of twelve, the company gave each child a present, a good, expensive present, as good or better than anything that showed up under the tree on Christmas Day. And that was my job that fall. I wrapped those Christmas presents to be mailed to the children of Ashland Oil employees all over the world. There were about ten of us working there, some full time, and some part time like me.

The woman in charge was large and forceful. Chain smoking and constantly giving her opinion she dressed and spoke as one educated and well to do. Her husband was “somebody” with the company, and she wore her authority with pride. And I can still remember the day the conversation turned to religion and the Church. “I don’t go to church,” she announced with disdain and intellectual arrogance, “because of all the hypocrites there.”

Fifty years later I can still see her saying it, almost smirking as if declaring an unknown truth. Well, this revelation wasn’t really unknown to me, I had virtually lived in the church growing up and had three pastors in my family. I had seen the good, bad, and ugly of church life. But I had never heard one be so crass about it. Where I came from even if you agreed with her, you still belonged to a church, and you certainly didn’t say those kinds of things.

Now, today, statements like this are increasingly acceptable and widespread. You can hear people say:

“I know some of the people who go to that church, and I don’t know how they could let them in the door.”

“The church is full of politics.”

“I don’t like the way they spend the money at church, I don’t want to give to administration, I want my money to go to missions.”

“We have too many staff people. I remember when Mr. Smith was the pastor. All we had was him and he did it all.”

“I’m not sending my child to the church’s week day school while that woman teaches there.”

You can hear criticisms like this about any church in any city or town in America or the world.

But it should comfort us to know it has been this way from the very beginning. In our scripture, a dispute erupts in the Early Church and a layer of bureaucracy is formed to deal with it. The theme of our sermon is that God works through a Church filled with human frailties in order to accomplish God’s will.

Our story takes place in the Early Christian Church in Jerusalem. The Church is growing and what was so simple with a handful of people becomes increasingly complex with larger numbers. In Jerusalem in the first century, those joining the Church are Jews, just like Jesus and the disciples. And they brought with them Jewish customs and traditions. One of these was a profound concern for widows and orphans. Both synagogue and Church maintained a duty to aid those who could not fend for themselves.

Now, we believe the Early Church followed the Jewish practice of taking up money for their widows and orphans and then distributing it. In fact, from Jewish records, we know there were two kinds of relief. Poor strangers, or those who were transient, received daily offerings of food and drink. But the local poor, such as the widows and orphans of the synagogues and Church, every Friday received enough money for fourteen meals, or one week’s worth.

Our scripture points out a dispute arising from this distribution to the widows. In honesty, we are not certain what some of the terms mean. But we think we know. Verse one says “the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.”

We believe the Hellenists were Greek speaking Jews who joined the Church. Not being native to Palestine, they had returned to live there, but spoke Greek instead of Aramaic or Hebrew, and undoubtedly brought different customs and norms with them. The Hebrews, on the other hand, were probably Jews native to Palestine. They spoke Aramaic and read the scriptures in Hebrew. They undoubtedly carried some repressed animosity toward these foreigners moving into their country, even if they were fellow Jews. I wouldn’t doubt some of them had stickers on their chariots reading: “We don’t care how you did it in Cleveland,” or Babylon, or Athens. Well, the Greek speaking Jewish Christians went to the apostles and said, “Look, the Hebrews are slighting our widows. Their widows are getting more than ours.”

So what do the apostles do? They call together the whole Church and declare: “We should not neglect preaching in order to take care of this administrative duty. Pick seven reputable men full of wisdom and the Spirit, and we will appoint them to perform this task.” So the Church chooses seven who are ordained to their work by the laying on of hands.

You may have heard the proverb: “When two elephants fight it is the grass that suffers.” The apostles wanted to be sure that from the conflict of these two groups, it was not the widows who suffered.

Now, on this Sunday when we will ordain and install our new class of elders, I want to highlight two elements of this story. First, there were disputes in the Church right from the start. In the beginning, someone was already complaining someone else was getting treated better than they were. The Church from the very first days right up to this moment has always been an imperfect, human institution filled with a perfect, divine purpose. We are a bunch of hypocrites, sinners, struggling, fallible, human beings attempting to live like God. Since the first century that has been the bane of the Church, and its glory. No, we don't live up to the standard of Christ; we fall backwards, sin, do stupid things. We are in constant need for forgiveness from God and one another.

Yet, when we have come together as the Body of Christ, we are and have been the greatest force for good in the history of the world. Movements for justice, fairness, and equality originate within the Church in obedience to the call of Christ. The world is populated by schools, hospitals, orphanages, and soup kitchens because of the Church.

Even our mental sinfulness becomes an invitation declaring that all are equal here, none better than another, sinners in need of the grace of God. The knowledge of our own sin enables, forces us, to open wide the doors and welcome all those desirous to experience the love and forgiveness of God. God has chosen to work through his fallible creation to accomplish His will. That has always been a rocky ride, but one whose purpose and value has never been in doubt.

One of the most powerful men on Wall Street fell in love with an actress and for many months squired her about in the fashionable circles of town. Deciding to marry her, he first prudently had an associate put a private detective to the job of looking into her background in order to guard himself against any rash mistake.

At last he received his agent's report. "Miss Rogers enjoys an excellent reputation. Her past is spotless. Her associates have been irreproachable. The only breath of scandal is that, in recent months, she has been in the company of a businessman of doubtful reputation."

Well, that sums up the Church. All of us here may be of doubtful reputation when it comes to our sin, but there is no question about the Christ we serve.

The Church mirrors our human interaction. And second, when in doubt, the Early Church formed a committee. Now you know it's true, since they formed a committee the early Christians must have been Presbyterians and obviously committee work is divinely inspired.

Often we decry structure, not just in the Church, but in any organization. The process moves slowly. Everyone has an opinion. Time and money are wasted when it is obvious what needs done. Yet, the Church created a committee, a group with a specific task for the same reason we do today. It was, and is, a method by which opinions are heard, leadership shared, and problems solved. Often, the purpose of structure is to guarantee fairness, in the scripture's case that the most needy received help.

You will note the Church selected these individuals, just as you elected those who will be ordained and installed today. They were chosen to handle the administrative and financial dealings of the Church, just as our elders are today. Here, we see a differentiation

of gifts. These were chosen for administration and finance. The apostles preached. Others would have prepared the Lord's Supper. Some collected the money for the widows. Others would have taught, kept the books, watched the children. From the very beginning the Church was organized to assure fairness, make certain necessary tasks were performed, and to use the variety of gifts that every single person brought to the community of faith – just like today.

William Carey was a cobbler who was converted in 1779 and founded the Baptist Missionary Society. He traveled to India in 1793 as the society's first missionary. He spent his life teaching and translating the Bible into Indian languages and dialects. One day he was asked about his great accomplishments, but replied, "I am not a genius, just a plodder." But in forty years of service, he translated all or portions of the Bible into thirty-four of the languages and dialects of India.

When we view the Church's organization, we can look like plodders. But our administration, our combining of our individual talents enables us to perform and advance the work and will of Almighty God.

#### "A Few Good Men and Women"

Like the marines, the Church is looking for a few good men and women. The New Testament tells us men and women were selected to fulfill the roles of elders and pastors, plus a multitude of other duties. And in the midst of this work, the scripture honestly depicts the human shortcomings readily discernible in the Church's work.

It is the same for us. The elders we will ordain and install this morning are not perfect, any more than we are. Yet, today, let us pledge our support to them as we fallible creatures join hands to offer our gifts, to forgive one another's shortcomings, together seeking to spread the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we march forward doing God's work and will.

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