

Action Figures: The Deacons

Acts 6:1-7

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Growing up as a kid we spent our summers at a YMCA camp in the beautiful mountains of California, on a lake surrounded by Giant Sequoias and waterfalls and wildlife. It was a blessing to grow up as a Y Camp kid. And yet it has proven in some ways to be a curse. Every night we would have campfire. We would sing songs around the campfire. Some of those songs I have not sung in 50 years, and yet they are still rattling around in my brain. Like the one we used to sing that went, “Oh the Deacon went down...to the cellar to pray...and he found a jug...so he stayed all day.” Not a very flattering song about the Deacon is that one.

Deacons are on my mind today, and it has to do with this passage in Acts 6. Deacon “is a title, since apostolic times, of one of the major orders of ministers in the church. Its institution is commonly related to the account in Acts 6:1-7 of the selection and ordination of the **SEVEN**, to assist the **Twelve** in the distribution of charitable provisions to the Hellenist widows. But the author of Acts does not use the noun ‘deacon’ of these men, but rather the verb *diakonein* to describe their function of ‘serving tables.’”¹ The distinction between the noun we translate as deacon and the verb from the same root word that is translated “serving” is a distinction that we do well to remember. Nevertheless, it is amazing to think that out of this one episode revolving around some Grecian Jews whose widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food has grown the official office of Deacon. Deacons have made a lasting impact on the church and on the world.

In our constitution as a Presbyterian church we read these words about deacons:

“The ministry of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress. Persons of spiritual character, honest repute, exemplary lives, brotherly and sisterly love, sincere compassion, and sound judgment should be chosen for this ministry.”

How does that play out in our particular church, the Dunn’s Corners Community Church, Presbyterian? In our manual of operations we are told, “The office of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of sympathy, witness, and service after the example of Jesus Christ.” These are some of the many responsibilities of our Deacons here at Dunn’s Corners. The Deacons set up communion, they serve

¹ Article on Deacon in Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, A-D, p. 785.

communion with our elders, and they clean up after the serving of communion. Remember that when the tray comes your way. Just like in Acts 6 our deacons are still involved in the distribution of bread. Our Deacons oversee Coffee Fellowship (where food is served), the Diamond Lunch (where food is served), the Collations which follow the memorial services we host (where food is served), the dinner on the first Saturday of each month at the Warm Center (where food is served), the reverse offering for Jonnycake and the regular gathering of non-perishable food that is delivered to Jonnycake (again, the gathering and serving of food). Through these many ministries where food is distributed in sacred and secular contexts, our deacons are still involved in the distribution of bread.

As important as bread is, our Lord Jesus reminds us “Man does not live by bread alone.” So our Deacons write cards to people in times of need or simply to let people know they are remembered and prayed for. The Deacons make regular visitations to members of the church, particularly those who are unable to attend our regular worship services. They arrange rides to church. They organize the Mitten Tree and the Angel Tree. Acts 6 is a wonderful passage of scripture, a passage that not only allows us, but practically begs us to take a moment and give a big, a gigantic, a huge, a heartfelt thank you to the Deacons.

In fact, in recognition of the lasting impact, in recognition of the life-giving ministries, in recognition of the light and the love that our Deacons share every single day, I want to use that old camp song that does not really flatter the deacons and change it just a bit. I want to try to redeem that old camp song.

Oh the Deacons go out...every single day...and they share God’s love...in a thousand ways...Oh the Deacons know how to please our Lord, Oh the Deacons know how to please our Lord, Oh the Deacons know how...to please our Lord.

It is good to remember the faithful ministry carried out among us every single day by our Deacons. At the same time, I also want us to remember what was mentioned earlier. In Acts 6 it is not the noun “deacon” that is used, it is the verb of that root word that is used, and that has to do with “serving.” When the Twelve (referring to Peter, James, John, and the others who make up the twelve apostles) gathered everyone together to respond to the complaint that the widows of the Grecian Jews were being overlooked in the daily distribution of the bread, the Twelve make note that in addressing the problem, the solution is not for the Twelve to neglect their ministry of the word. That root word that has to do with deacons and serving is also the root word of ministry, so that the Twelve have a particular calling to be “servants of the word” you could say.

To assure that they, the Twelve, do not neglect the particular ministry they are given, the ministry of the word, they direct the believers to choose seven men who will have the responsibility of overseeing the daily distribution of food turned over to them. There is precedent for this. Good old Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, saw Moses running ragged trying to do everything in those first days of freedom for the Israelites. He counseled Moses “Get some help.” Don’t try to do it all yourself. Later the Apostle Paul will use the beautiful image of the Body of Christ, that no one part of the body has all the gifts. By dividing the responsibility, by sharing the responsibility, by working together as different members of one body, the whole body is built up. It was obvious to everyone that the early church needed the ministry of the word. And it became obvious to everyone that the early church needed the ministry of those who waited on the tables. We cannot ignore the fact that chapter six in Acts begins with complaining. Neither should we ignore the fact that when a proposal was made, it was pleasing to the whole group. And as we move from the events in Acts 6:1-6 we find this comment in the following verse (7), “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”

Because the work of serving is so important to the Body of Christ, and because Acts 6 is the genesis of what we now know as the office of Deacon, I think it is of great value to make note of the following.

- The seven who are selected are men. But by the time Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome he begins his exhaustive review of all the brothers and sisters who are dear to his heart with these words, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea.” (Romans 16:1) There is a footnote on the word translated as servant. The footnote says, “Or deaconess.” Nearly 2,000 years ago the office of Deacon was already one shared equally by men and women.
- When the Twelve instruct the group to choose seven who will oversee the waiting on the tables, they are not just delegating work they don’t want to do. There is no sense that “waiting on the tables” is beneath the dignity of the Twelve. Rather than delegation, it seems clear this is an act of differentiation. We have this ministry of the word that is vitally important. Now it has come to our attention that there is an equally important ministry that involves waiting on the tables. We need just the right people to carry out this important ministry. Choose seven who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. Don’t just grab whoever happens to be hanging around. Choose seven who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. Choose them. Give them this important ministry. Don’t let the head say to the foot, “I am more important than you.” All ministry, all serving in the kingdom of God, is important, and valuable, and not to be looked down on. This is not delegation. This is differentiation.

- And yet the differentiation is not definite. Those who are chosen to be the Seven are not put in a box. You wait on tables. That is your job. Stay in your own lane. Stephen accepts the responsibility of waiting on tables. As one who has been identified as being full of the Spirit and wisdom, we can assume he carried out his responsibility admirably. And then in the passage immediately following the choosing of the seven, Stephen stands up before an antagonistic crowd and preaches the word of God. Not only that, but in Acts 8 one of the Seven, one named Philip, goes to a Samaritan village first, and then meets an Ethiopian eunuch who is traveling the desert road, and in both cases Philip proclaims the word of the Lord. Yes, there is differentiation, but it is not definite. Deacons wait on tables, and deacons do more than wait on tables.

And guess what? The Twelve are not absolved of their responsibilities to be “deacons”, to serve and to wait on the needs of others. Every disciple, every follower, every believer, every one of the Twelve, live in the shadow of the one who said, “If you want to be great in my kingdom, learn to be the servant of all.” Every disciple, every follower, every believer, every one of the Twelve live in the shadow of the one who said, “Whenever you do it unto the least of these, you do it unto me.” Just as Stephen and Philip, two from among the seven chosen to wait on tables were also called on to preach, Peter and the others who make up the Twelve are not only given the responsibility to minister the word, they are called to be like Jesus, to take a towel, wrap it around their waist, and do some good old fashioned foot-washing.

All of which leads me to say that although Acts 6 is the genesis of what we now know as the official office of Deacon, it actually is the genesis of so much more. Acts 6 invites us all to share in the role of being deacons, ones who serve, ones who wait on tables, and ones who take our role as servants so seriously we spend our days watching and waiting for opportunities to serve. Friends, it is not only the “Deacons” who serve. We are all “deacons”, ones called to ministries of service.

If it is only the “Deacons” who serve, what do you do when you are not on the Board of Deacons? But if we all share in the calling to be “deacons” then wonderful things happen. Lois had been a “Deacon”, but she was no longer officially serving as a “Deacon” when she heard the call to be a “deacon”. That is how our sewing ministry began. Lois called another “deacon” who was not serving as an official “Deacon” and soon Lois and Yvette and Jane and so many others were making dresses to send around the world and quilts to comfort those in need.

“Oh the deacons went out, with some thread to sew, and that’s a ministry, that we pray will grow...”

Because we are all “deacons” a woman like Viv Johnson just naturally set up a variety of ministries in the senior housing complex where she lived. Viv watched out her window to keep an eye on people’s comings and goings. She made friends all throughout her complex. She prayed for those in need. She remembered birthdays. She listened to people’s joys and concerns. She found so many ways to live out her calling as a “deacon”. When Viv’s cancer got real bad and she spent more and more of her time in her apartment, another “deacon” who was not officially a “Deacon” at the time came to me and said, “Viv cannot make it to church. Do you think we could take church to her?” Thanks Pam. That was a great idea. Because “deacons” are not only those who are on the Board of Deacons, a group from this church went to Viv’s apartment. We took a cup and we took some bread, like good deacons who wait on tables...and we celebrated the Lord’s Supper with Viv. It was a beautiful day.

Along with us that day were Billy and Elmien Fritz and their three young men, William, Benjamin, and Samuel. Billy and Elmien had fallen in love with Viv through our church, and they took their boys there often to visit Viv at her apartment. The boys had all learned the Lord’s Prayer. Viv loved to hear those boys pray what she called “The Our Father.” That day when a whole group of “deacons” visited Viv Johnson, at one point she looked at William, and Benjamin, and Samuel, and she said, “Boys, will you lead us in the ‘Our Father.’” They did. Those little guys, so full of faith, were already learning they were deacons. They were servants. They are servants.

Today is our Dedication Sunday. Yes, we have dedicated our financial pledges. Let me be sure to tell you thank you for your financial commitment to the ministry of this church, and more importantly, to the kingdom of God. But friends, today is about more than dedicating financial pledges, as important as that is. We dedicate our lives to our Lord. This passage about being deacons is powerful. It is perfect for today. This morning we have the opportunity to dedicate ourselves to the service of the Lord. You might not have known it, but I was singing to all of you when I sang that little chorus about the deacons. Who are the deacons? As they say in Texas, “All y’all!” All y’all are deacons.

Oh the Deacons go out...every single day...and they share God’s love...in a thousand ways... Oh the Deacons go out...every single day...and they share God’s love...in a thousand ways...because we want to please our precious Lord.