

Serving Our Neighbor from the Center Outward

Sermon for the 13th Sunday after Trinity — Acts 6:1–7

1 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. 2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables." 3 Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them, 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. 5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. 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. (*Acts 6:1–7, NIV*)

The rose window of our Lukaskirche, with the exalted Christ at its center, is one of the most beautiful church windows I have ever seen. As you can see, this beautiful image is made up of many small individual pieces that the artist painstakingly fitted together. I imagine his work went something like this: at first he had a great pile of glass shards and pieces lying before him on the table. Then, with great concentration, he held each shard up to the light and laboriously fitted the individual pieces together. The whole time, he kept the finished image before his eyes — Christ at the center. To onlookers it was probably not always clear what he was doing, or what the whole thing was meant to depict. Only when the entire window blazed in the sunlight did it become clear to everyone what it was all about. With Christ at the center.

The spiritual building up of the church can be compared, in a way, to this artist's work. In the work of our church, too, there are many individual pieces. Some tasks have to do with everyday matters like cleaning the church, finances, or organizing the record cards. Some work must remain invisible and hidden, such as private prayer for members of the congregation or a conversation of confession. And there is other work about which people sometimes ask: does this even make sense? For instance, someone might ask whether it makes any sense at all to have such long conversations with this or that person if they have no interest in faith anyway.

It seems to me that these very questions were already present in the early church. The apostles, like the artist of our rose window, stood at first before a great pile of glass shards. The encouraging thing was that there was growth. Many new people were joining. But along with these new people came challenges as well. There were obstacles and problems that made the work harder. There was a danger that the whole picture would no longer be recognizable, because people were caught up in wrestling with various tasks and challenges. The church at that time was still in its infancy. And so, like the artist at his workbench, they stood at first before

an enormous task, one whose destination was not yet clear to those looking on from outside. Although this was the very first church, the problems it had to deal with were quite similar to those of our church today. They were a multicultural congregation. There were Jews among them, and there were Greeks among them. And so, in more than one respect, there was a linguistic and cultural problem. In those days there was no social welfare from the state. Naturally, the first Christian congregation took notice of people's physical need and made it their task to address it. But in doing so, the Greek widows were completely overlooked. Whether deliberately or not, they were simply passed over. The Greek word used here, *paratheōrein*, means to look past, to overlook. So, much like the artist sitting before a great pile of glass shards, an entire part of the picture simply went unseen or unheeded. As a result, the whole picture could no longer come together properly. And so the conflict did not concern only individual pieces, but the whole picture. This led to conflicts in the early congregation — so much so that even the proclamation of the word was neglected. The conflict distracted from the most important thing.

I find the response of the early congregation very interesting and helpful for us as a modern church. For there, the very first thing established and settled is what the goal is: namely, the proclamation of the word. So the early congregation decides: "It would not be right for us to neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables." This goal of the early congregation can really be compared to the Christ at the center of our rose window. It is about Christ being at the center. Sinners, in Jesus' name, need the word that absolves them of sin. Those who have no contact with God need God's address to them. The sorrowful need comfort. Those who go astray need his admonition. It would be reckless to neglect this task of the church, or to view the proclamation of the word merely as a means to a higher end — that is, practical diaconal help. And unfortunately, far and wide, I see precisely this kind of shift taking place in our modern church. People see the main purpose of the church as being that it should do something good. The church is then tolerated, at best, insofar as it is engaged diaconally or on behalf of the poor. This is a shift that is precisely the opposite of what the apostles decided back then. The apostles establish this: only when the center is rightly fixed on Christ can the radiance that flows outward — into diaconal service and love for people — also be rightly ordered. In this way the apostles truly recognized the most important problem, namely, that the word of God was being neglected. The center in Christ was no longer clearly in focus. The apostles therefore apply spiritual criteria to solve a practical problem. In doing so, they give us, as a modern church, a guide for how we can do the same.

The practical problem we face today as a modern church is this: on the one hand, there are the many evil things of this world, to which the church owes an answer. On the other hand, there are the many different people with their needs within the church. With so many construction sites at once, it is easy to lose sight of the forest for the trees. The apostles give us today an important pointer here: like the artist of a church window, we must once again keep our eyes on Christ. It must become clear again what this is really about — and looking to Jesus shows us. Jesus shows us: we human beings are separated from God, and without him we cannot come to God. This concerns all of us, without exception. If we no longer recognize this separation between ourselves and God, we no longer recognize Jesus rightly either — and then other

things can suddenly take his place in the church. Yet God has overcome this great separation between heaven and earth through Jesus. And this reconciliation between human beings and God has a dynamic influence on our life here and now.

The moment I become a Christian, I am united with the living God, and at the same time also with all Christians throughout the whole world. I am therefore no longer alone; God is with me. And here on earth, too, I am not alone, but united with many other Christians who, just like me, are sinful, yet holy through Christ. In Christ, therefore, I am not there for myself alone. I take up, just as Christ did, the servant's apron and seek out my neighbor, in order to wash their feet. I am no longer there for myself, but for God and for my fellow human beings!

Now we can ask, in the manner of a catechism question: How does this happen? First of all, it is important to set priorities. This means that we must put the most important things ahead of the less important things. The problem is that our eyes are so poorly focused on God's cause. We see only as through a clouded glass, as Paul would say. We cannot see God. It is much easier to see the problem we have today. And that is how it quickly happens that we end up quarreling over the individual pieces. There are all kinds of examples of this, and countless hours have already been wasted in the church discussing unimportant things — as though the whole church depended on them. And yet it is so simple: the proclamation of the word of God naturally leads to loving service of one's neighbor as well. For when God works on us through his word, then active love for our neighbor follows as a matter of course, something that does not need to be argued about.

In our sermon text from Acts, this focus on God and on our neighbor sets the congregation free. It makes them creative, and they are able to find solutions. It is not only the apostles who are allowed to work. There are others as well, who are allowed to be co-workers in God's work. There is a congregation in the background. And we are meant to be united not only with God, but also with these people. From our verses in Acts, this whole diversity of God's work becomes clear. The apostles choose seven deacons, all of whom came from the Greek congregation and not from the established Jewish congregation. This makes clear that they took these new Christians from a different culture very seriously, and received them into the congregation with full rights and responsibilities. They dealt vigorously with the problem that the Greeks had been overlooked. But the deacons were not merely practical helpers. They themselves were drawn into the proclamation. For this reason, one of them, Stephen, had to suffer a martyr's death. From this we learn that this work was certainly not always easy.

And yet we want to be part of it. We want to be part of it because we keep our eyes on Jesus. We have before us the picture in its finished form: the place where we, together with Christ, will be gathered as one great congregation in unity and love. At present we are like the artist who, from the very beginning, already holds this image of Jesus before his eyes. In doing so, we must again and again glance at the pattern that God gives us in his word — even though, now and then, we must stand before a heap of shards. And precisely when it seems so hopeless, the image of Christ is painted in our hearts, who not only gives us a task, but also equips us for it. God does not merely give us diaconal service and mission as important offices. We ourselves

become, through Christ's living radiance, an outshining of Christ himself. So we have not merely a mission and a diaconal service — we ourselves are God's mission to the world.

Amen