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WEDNESDAY, JULY 19, 2006

Specialized Ministry with Eyes Wide Open: A Sermon on Acts 6:1-10

Just this morning I preached the following sermon at Princeton Seminary Chapel.

Scripture Reading: Acts 6:1-10

Apparently this summer is not the first time Hebrews and Greeks have been found in competition with each other. Although this summer's competition [Ultimate Frisbee tourney between Hebrew and Greek summer class] is significant as a Herculean clash for the honor of victory, the clash in our text is a matter of life and death. As this early chapter in the story of the church shows, cultural favoritism endangered the very livelihood of certain Jewish widows who had the unfortunate position of being Hellenized. And since Luke has an irenic tendency - telling the story of the early church in the best light possible - we can only imagine how bad the conflict got before the apostles stepped in to defend the needy. This is a serious problem that demands a serious solution.

What was their solution? They did what any administrative body would do: delegate. They took the problem seriously yet realized that they could not fix it by themselves. The problem required special attention from specially appointed leaders. So the community elected its first deacons - those set apart for the specialized ministry of helping the poor and needy. **Thus begins the great churchly tradition of specialized ministry.**

This notion of different ministers being called to different tasks is so often taken for granted by us ministers that we might miss its significance. God has gifted us in different ways. To announce to your family and friends that you are "called to the ministry" and "going to seminary" could mean all sorts of things today. I remember the first time I told an old friend from high school that I was going to seminary. "What? You in seminary? I just don't see it." Some of you

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have received the same reaction from your friends or even your family. We try to explain that we have been called to something specific: youth ministry, pastoral counseling, the mission field, academic research, religious art. But sometimes it is hard to convince them that ministry is more than lofty pulpits, big black bibles, gray hair and dark suits. Today's text has a liberating message: **ministry takes on all kinds of forms, and being called to the ministry looks different for each of us.**

But wait. There's a little twist in the story that we must be careful not to miss. Luke takes great care to list the names of each of the seven deacons chosen by the community and blessed by the apostles. Now, on the surface, Luke wants you to notice their Greek names. These Hellenized Jews are perfectly fit for the diaconal care of Hellenized widows. But Luke, the master story-teller, is also foreshadowing later events by introducing a number of key characters. Immediately following this story is the story of Stephen. This man, who was called to the specialized ministry of the diaconate so that the apostles can focus on their preaching, is found in the synagogue ... preaching. **Apparently the Holy Spirit is not constrained by the boundaries of specialized ministries.**

This little twist ought to serve as a warning against treating our specialized callings as absolute. **The same Holy Spirit who gifts us for our current ministry has the freedom and power to gift us for a radically different form of ministry.** Our responsibility is to be open to these other forms while we train for our specialization. What does this look like? Well, it certainly places a moratorium on lines like these: "I don't need to learn Hebrew verb forms; I'm going to be a chaplain;" "I don't need systematic theology; I'm going to be a youth pastor;" "I don't need to pay attention in preaching class; I am going to be a professor."

I know that I came here with blinders on, trying to turn my M.Div. into an M.A. in Theology. I am so thankful for that lunchtime acquaintance who said to me, "Oh, you will make a great pastor." Those affirming words late in my Junior year opened my eyes to the pastoral training I was trying to avoid. As it turns out, I am going to be ordained this Sunday. I am still training for my specialized calling; but I am trying to be open to whatever kind of ministry the Spirit may call me.

Many other stories can be added to mine: Ron came here to study Hebrew Bible and is now a pastor in Trenton. Sarah had her sights on an academic career until a CPE transformed her and led her into chaplaincy. Mike came here to train for youth ministry, got a Ph.D. in theology along the way, and is now a full-time youth pastor. So, as we hear the liberating message of specialized ministry from Acts 6, let's make sure we **keep our eyes and hearts open to wherever**

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the Spirit leads. For “there are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all.” (I Corinthians 12:4-6). Amen.

Any thoughts?

Do you have any stories of the Spirit's freedom to add?
 Any insights on the passage that I've not mentioned?
 How can we best hold in tension a confidence in our call and openness to new leadings?

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posted by JohnLDrury @ 2:09 PM

[5 comments](#)

5 Comments:

At [2:45 PM, July 19, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

Thanks man, I needed to hear that.

At [2:58 PM, July 19, 2006](#), [Eric](#) said...

I think you pick up on a vital part of this crucial juncture in Acts. Given a specific set of tasks, the deacons of Acts 6 were not given a "lofty" mission but a rather humble purpose: to wait tables. On the one hand, the controversy was of enough significance to gain a place in Luke's narrative; that is, servers were needed, no matter how ordinary the task may seem to us today. On the other hand, we find two of these same individuals finding new avenues for the gospel, living out the paradigmatic orientation of Acts 1:8. Philip and Steven are the ones who first bring the gospel beyond the confines of the holy city, not the apostolic core who originally received the global mandate.

To me, this narrative both sacralizes the seeming quotidian tasks of life as church and emboldens those same servants of God to give heed to the stirring of the holy spirit.

I wish I could have been there to hear it.

At [1:05 PM, July 20, 2006](#), [Samuel Bills](#) said...

Thanks be to God!

At [12:55 PM, July 21, 2006](#), [coach_d](#) said...

Your sermon itself illustrates its own point. John, you are a great scholar & theologian yet at the same time an easy-to-read practical preacher & pastor.

Thanks for pointing out to me the preaching-deacon Stephen..somehow I never have thought of that. It fits me.. in

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seminary I announced to all "I'm called to run a summer camp" yet wound up doing all kinds of things except run a summer camp. Now I just say "I'm called" and let God lead me into whatever... Thanks for the sermon today!

At [10:27 AM, July 23, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Amen... good sermon.

Bummed that I'm here with 5 services to do instead of your ordination this afternoon.

Continue with your walking in the light.

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