

Clarifying Words for Our Work

Sermon for the 13 Sunday after Trinity

Text: Acts 6:1-7



Now in these days, when the disciples were increasing in numbers, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

When I got on a bike for the first time, I soon learned how important it is to always keep an eye on the road ahead. I couldn't just look nervously at the front tire, but I also had to see the curve ahead in time. And I remember that I landed in the brush at least once because I had lost sight of the path.

Our sermon text for today also deals with looking at the path ahead. In the church, we also can't just look anxiously at the present moment, but we must also look ahead. We must recognize where the path is leading. And we must recognize in good time where dangers lurk so that we can steer away from them. Likewise, we can't just get caught up in every little thing, but we need to keep our eyes on the actual goal. In Acts 6, we are told about the first church. This church was still in its infancy. And that's why they were like me on my children's bike. And the problems that preoccupied them, were very similar to ours in our church today. They were a multicultural community. There were Jews and there were Greeks. At that time, there was no social assistance from the government. Therefore, the first Christian church naturally took on this responsibility. But the Greek widows were completely overlooked. Either intentionally or unintentionally, they were neglected. The Greek word that is used here is "Paratheorein" means "to overlook" So, just like on the bike ride, an important thing was simply overlooked! And this oversight led to conflict in the congregation. So much so that the preaching of the Word was also neglected. The conflict distracted from the most important thing. I find the reaction of the first church very interesting and helpful for us.

When we come to the first reaction of the Apostles, we see that they really recognized the most important problem. Namely, that the Word of God was being neglected. Because that is exactly what we humans always do. When evil happens in the world, or when we are challenged, we look away. We hide ourselves from the problem. We are like the little cyclist who sees the threatening curve and looks away so that he no longer must see the threat. In our world, there is a lot of evil and so many people who don't believe in God. There is also a great deal of suffering. At the same time, the Church is God's

answer to this world. This is the view we dare to have today. Our Church and we Christians are God's answer to the world. When evil happens in the world, we owe the world an answer in word and active love. And Satan wants to build an obstacle in exactly that place so that we Christians no longer do what we are there for. We must not allow that! We must not be silent! Our Church doesn't just have a mission that occasionally sends lone workers to foreign lands. To be clear once again: The Church doesn't just have a mission... It is God's mission to the world. It is God's answer to evil. It is God's call to the lost. Here in this country, as well as in distant countries. God wants to respond to all the suffering that happens in the world with His Church. But He also wants that on a smaller scale. In your business, in your family, at the gas station, at the supermarket, in conversation with Aunt Katie from next door, and elsewhere, He wants to use you as His answer to the world. And if we neglect this answer from God, for whatever reason, then something is wrong... If we, as the Church, stop telling the Word of God to the world, we are on the wrong path.

Now we can approach all of this with the catechism question: How does this happen? First, it is important to set priorities. That means that we must place the most important things before the less important things. The problem is that our eyes are so poorly focused on the things of God. We only see as though through fogged glass, Paul would say. We cannot see God. It's much easier to see the problem that we have today. And then suddenly we're talking about the construction work on the church building, the cleaning volunteer list, and about many other practical things as if the church only revolves around that. Sometimes there is even a heated argument about completely inconsequential things.... The Apostles set priorities on the spot. It had to become clear again what everything is about. Looking at Jesus shows us what is important. Jesus shows us that we humans are separated from God. We cannot come to God without Jesus. And that applies to us all. When we can no longer recognize this separation between us and God, then we also no longer recognize Jesus and then suddenly other things in the church take the place of Jesus. God overcame the great division between heaven and earth through Jesus. Through Jesus, something impossible happened. Namely, through Jesus, God was connected with us humans. This binding of the distant God to us sinful humans was hard work and cost the precious blood of our Lord Jesus! Looking to God, who took the long path from heaven to us humans, the Apostles were also able to overcome the division in the church. In the moment I become a Christian, then I belong to it. Then I am bound to the living God through Jesus. At that moment, I am knit together with God and all my sins are forgiven. At that moment I am no longer alone because God is with me. I am also not alone here on the earth, but I am connected with many other Christians who, just like me, are sinful but are made holy through God. And so, I am, no matter who I am, also called and invited to the Church. I am not there for myself but for God! As the Church, we are not an entity to satisfy ourselves. As soon as we are in the Church, we are called to be witnesses of God's great love, which He also had for us. And while this preaching happens, the active support of the poor and needy naturally happens as well. In the first church the preaching of the Word and the active help of the poor belonged together like "brother and sister". If you preach the Word of God, then it goes without saying that you also support the people who are in need. It is also not right to discuss which of the two is more important: God's word or helping people. Because when God works in us through His Word, then active love for your neighbor is a matter of course, which doesn't have to be discussed.

Now we are connected to Jesus. In His death, as in His life. I'm not alone in this. So many people are knit together with me. So many people who connect me to God! In our sermon text from Acts, this view of God and the neighbor frees the Church. It makes them creative and they can find solutions. Not

only may the Apostles work. There are also others who may be co-workers in God's work. There is a congregation in the background. And we should not only be connected with God, we should also be connected with these people. From our verses in Acts, the great diversity of God's work is clear. The Apostles choose seven deacons, all of whom came from the Greek community. This makes clear that they take these new Christians from another culture seriously and received them into the church with all rights and obligations. Surely this work was not always easy. For one of the first deacon, Stephen, this work even meant death. This is still the case for some in our present day. Working for God's kingdom can mean death...

And yet, we want to be there. We want to be there because we have an eye on Jesus. He stands before us and shows us the way. There is no greater happiness than to be entirely in Jesus' workshop and to be and remain a single thread in His great big Church. Amen.