

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Acts 6:1-8
“It’s Time...to Have a Purpose”
November 11, 2007
It’s Time...A Journey Towards Missional Faithfulness

Acts 6:1-8

“Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. [2] And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. [3] Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, [4] while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” [5] What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. [6] They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

[7] The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”

Like many of you, I have worked a variety of jobs when I was younger. During my all too brief months as an art student, I worked first at a clothing store, and then I landed the “sweet” job of loading UPS semis in Atlanta – hard work, but good pay! I worked one summer in a saw mill, which was as good of job as any, to encourage completing a college education. Without a doubt, my favorite job was waiting tables one summer in Daytona Beach. Serving tables was a great way to prepare me for life.

Today’s text, reinforces this observation. I have preached on this particular passage often, and including once here at First Baptist Church. It is the story we traditionally use, when we are either electing deacons or ordaining deacons. Even though the word “deacon,” is not used in this story, it is largely agreed that this is an important text regarding the essential function of a deacon – to wait tables, that is, to serve.

There is more to this story, however, than what applies to deacons. This is not simply a job description for church officers, but for life.

Let’s look at this story again. The church was very young – I mean *very* young. There were no denominations that emphasized distinctiveness. One could not choose among high steeple sanctuaries or warehouses for worship, because the Christians in this day met in houses. Indeed, this was the era before anyone knew about the so-called worship wars, pitting pipe organs against electric guitars. As a matter of fact, followers of Jesus continued to worship along with the Jews in the temple. This church was so young the believers in Jesus were not even yet called Christians. They really did not have a name for themselves, except for the general term, disciple. Later, they would be called followers of the Way, but right, now they were just a handful of men and women. They had no name, no church building, no budget, and no by-laws.

What they did have was passion, that gave them purpose. That is all that mattered for the moment. Out of their passion and purpose, they were on their way to becoming a mighty transformative movement of God. The very first verse of chapter six sets up the drama: *...the disciples were growing in number...but ...there was murmuring.*

Wouldn’t life be easier, more pleasant, if no one complained? For me, it is never the 99 people that are cheering and encouraging, that get most of my attention. It is always that one who through email, voice mail, or face to face, begins a conversation by saying, “I don’t mean to complain, *but...*”

The disciples were growing in number...but...there was murmuring. The New Living Translation uses the colorful phrase, “rumblings of discontent.” That is not all bad. When someone complains, it means that something is wrong, or at least the perception that something is wrong. I think that out of our own insecurities, we struggle at listening well to the complaints of others. When someone complains about an oversight made by another, maybe there is really more to it than neglect. As we look at this infant church, something was wrong and conflict was at hand. The unity of God’s people was at risk.

The Hellenists – they were more or less Greek speaking followers - felt as though their widows were being neglected in the food distribution. This was no petty complaint about how we serve communion. This complaint was a life or death issue. Widows were at the lowest rung of a shaky economic ladder. If there was no family to care for a widow, the widow would be utterly destitute, and so, the faith community was their lifeline. On an aside, this remains, I am convinced, the essential function of the church today – to provide for the least, the last, and the lost, those things that make for life.

The solution is pretty straight-forward. The twelve – those apostles who walked alongside Jesus during his earthly work - called a meeting and everybody was invited. There were no behind-the-scene decisions or parking lot conversations to pre-empt everyone else. Everybody was involved with the problem and the solution. These apostles call for a meeting and in effect said, “Listen, we believe our primary function is to devote our time to the prayer, teaching and preaching, and we cannot do that, if we are dealing with conflicts in food service. We have a job to do, but we need help.” Not even a living apostle of Jesus Christ can shoulder all the work of God’s people.

The community then chose seven, who were “full of the spirit,” prayed, and laid hands on them. This was a form of blessing and commissioning. Today, when we have a job that needs to be filled (paid or volunteer) we typically assess a candidate’s skill and make a decision based on the gifts and the abilities to meet the needs. The early believers, however, made their decision based on character. We certainly don’t have to be a scholar in New Testament studies to understand how this applies to church officers.

This is not simply a job description for church officers, but for life. This is a story of what God can do with the passion of the people and mobilize it for a life of purpose.

I can at this point, if you so desire, launch into a lengthy and turgid diatribe on the distinctions between Hellenists and Hebrews in the ancient near-eastern culture. We can outline and chart the nuanced theological distinctions of the day.

This is not really about all those things that potentially divided or disturbed the people. This really is a story about what unified the people and commissioned the people. These people had something, that is to say, someone that they believed in, a person whom they wanted to follow, even if it meant being jailed, being beaten, being humiliated, or being stripped of all security. Now that is passion.

What is it in your life that evokes passion? Last week, we honored Cason Bruker, and one of his passions is shared by many of you – Georgia Bulldogs. I have served churches throughout Georgia and I have always known that I can only draw a handful of folks, but if I wanted a “sell-out” crowd, I could do this easy by just inviting Vince Dooley, Hershel Walker, or Mark Richt. For some of you, your passion is politics. Just the mention of Bill Clinton or Newt Gingrich, Ronald Reagan or Jimmy Carter, will evoke visceral responses.

By now, you are thinking, “Okay, Greg I see what you are up to. You are going to say that we ought to have a passion for God.” Well, you are wrong. I am not going to assume that, because I don’t even know what that means. I am not sure that was what the early believers were passionate about. I have no doubt that they loved God. What I think, however, is that they saw something in Jesus and the movement he was inspiring.

One author wrote, that all the world religions and philosophers attempt to answer three essential questions: the question of existence, the question of significance, and the question of intention. (Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*) The invitation of Jesus was less about believing a certain set of doctrinal claims and more about connecting with people and issues that were revolutionary. Jesus said he came to fulfill the words of Isaiah: "...to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19). And those early followers actually believed Jesus and they became passionate.

I am not going to stand here this morning and say what we all need is to get passionate about God, and assume that will be a suitable motivation for us. I am, however, going to needle you a bit, to ask of yourself what is your passion? What is it in this life that you believe in so fiercely, that you want to give it your all?

Last week, I attended a breakfast for pastors sponsored by the Interfaith Hospitality Network, a ministry our church supports, and listened to the president, Dr. Billingsley, share his passion about the work for homeless families. Did you know, for example, that one out of every four homeless persons in Augusta is a child? Dr. Billingsley, a pediatrician, knows that and is passionate to do something about it, and so are many of you here today who volunteer for this ministry. Speaking of the homeless, last week on the cover of the Augusta Chronicle, it was noted that 25 percent of all the homeless in America are veterans. Some of you are passionate about working with youth, and can be found on any given weekend, on your time off carpooling, counseling, or just doing whatever it takes working for the well-being of a teenager's life. Some are passionate about global missions, and get excited about cross-cultural opportunities, such as providing clean drinking water in Indonesia, working for the human dignity of gypsies in Hungary, or rehabilitating the child soldier in Liberia. Through the years I have encountered the complaint against global missions, that we need to first take care of our own back yard. I want to ask them, well what are you doing besides complaining? Do it! Some are passionate about making a difference in your own neighborhood.

Passion, however, cannot be internalized. The early church existed not simply to survive. Passion turned inward is toxic – self-consuming and terminal. When we were little, we were all taught that it is wrong to be selfish, but, too many grow up and live for self. Passion turned inward will eat away at one's being. When their life is done, the poor soul will realize that their life had no purpose, and it will be too late to do anything about it. By the way, this especially applies to the church. Should we become internally focused and consumed with self-survival, self-preoccupation, and the like, we will lose our purpose and our reason for even existing as a community of believers. Instead, we become just another club or organization focused on maintenance instead of ministry.

Passion directed beyond our walls and our lives, fuels purpose. The early church understood that serving God is pretty basic – take care of others.

Jesus demonstrated this by washing feet. The early church fed the widows. If they could not be responsible for the "little" things like service to others, how on earth could they ever be an authentic part of God's movement? Some of you spend your free time on Tuesdays in the food pantry and counseling people who are having a difficult time financially.

Without passion, there is no purpose. With passion there is purpose.

I love how this story ends. Verse seven reads: *The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem...* The conflict is resolved. The passions of the people find a purpose, and the mission of God moves forward. What we have not read this morning, but can certainly do so for

ourselves in the chapters ahead, is that this local church in Jerusalem is about to bust open the boundaries and take the movement global!

It is not a growth campaign. It is life work. God is inviting us to discover our passion so that we can live out our purpose.