**Acts 6:1-9, 7:2a, 51-60 (ESV)**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. America has always been a nation made up volunteers. In many ways, it is what contributes to the uniqueness of this land unlike so many other places in the world. As noted,

“Across the country, 63.4 million Americans volunteered to help their communities in 2009, an additional 1.6 million volunteers when compared to 2008, contributing 8.1 billion hours of service, which has an estimated dollar value of nearly $169 billion.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Such a dedication goes unnoticed many times, but it is not for praise just a desire to help people. The government benefits greatly from this service offered by its citizens. Let alone, there is a personal character to it all unlike a business rendering a service by employees.

It only seems right that America benefits from a spirit of volunteering because freedom of religion allows room for Christ’s Church. Christianity has always had concerns for both the physical and spiritual life of people. It is because Jesus is Savior that sinners could see outside of themselves to serve others freely. There is a “natural” service built right into the Church. It flows out from the sacrifice made by God’s Son. Needs are met not from the outside, but by those on the inside. As the apostle Peter declared, “…you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Only the undying service of Christ gives life to the Church to serve in His Name.

Anyone bold enough to be in the guts of a Church knows complaining is common. Such a thing easily turns many away from their perfect little view of saintly people only to see sinners. Yet, Jesus never said He came for the best, but those who were sick and in need of a physician (Matthew 9:12). How much were the Savior’s own disciples shortsighted and quick to complain about everything. God’s own people in the Old Testament constantly grumbled no matter how good the conditions. The reason for complaining many times comes from the fact that things change in a sinful world. What the Church started out as did not remain sufficient. As we heard, “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.” Change happened. The Devil was trying to cause disruption. Something affected the balance. Neglect was not going to do good. It was more than a negative image like running a business, but a concern for the community of Christ.

Change has come again to the church. We still grumble, but unlike those early Christians in need who had no one else to rely on for help. God has blessed this country with numerous service organizations to meet the needs of people. Unfortunately, some have even go so far as to try to take the place of Christ’s Church. Yet, justification in Jesus’ Name is what still brings us together by the promise of our Baptism. As St. Peter said, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Christ has changed the relationship we have to one another by His saving work. Mercy now meets our lives with the undying service of Christ rendered by Word and Sacrament. It means God does not turn a blind eye to us so we will not overlook each other. As physical life changes so do physical needs. The baptized face these changes with mercy. Installing members for a particular service in the Church is not to keep doing what we always did. Instead, the purpose is to deal with needs as they arise so none suffers neglect or goes unnoticed.

As important as mercy is for physical life, it will never usurp the witness to Christ. The apostles said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables…But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” Sounds snooty by our standards today. Those touting the motto “deeds not creeds” will never understand these words. What makes mercy so unique in the Church is because it comes with a powerful message. It is a witness to what God alone gives by the Gospel. The apostles understood that preaching and study of God’s Word was at the heart and center of the Church’s service. Anything less would not proclaim Jesus as Savior, would not meet the eternal promise of salvation, and would not speak forgiveness to the sinful hearts of men. As much as mercy helps the physical needs of changing lives. A changeless witness throughout our day to give spiritual life to the soul. Jesus said, “The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.”

The Church faces change with acts of mercy for the needy. Yet, some things never change since we witness to what God does for us. The ministry of the Word takes precedence because there is Christ at work as Savior. Where there are great works to do in the world, a faithful witness to Jesus Christ is the greatest. It is to honor and praise Him by having the Word rightly taught, proclaimed, and administered. St. Paul says concerning all pastors, “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). There was complaining over neglect in the early church, but none complained about preserving the Word and prayer. Preaching and worship is God’s way of service to forgive, strengthen, and protect His precious sheep. Jesus uses His called ministers of the Word to keep the Church built on Him alone. Here is the key, “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly…” There is mercy for the needy, but not without everyone needing Christ as revealed by His Word.

The Church serves as needed because of the undying service of Christ. Mercy is for the moment, but the witness to salvation in Jesus is what makes our life together eternal. So promising is this victory from God that true faith triumphs over works. It takes no comfort in them nor needs them, but only looks to Christ as Savior. Stephan displayed this hopeful promise of the Gospel as the first martyr of the Church. He was neither an apostle nor pastor, but one elected to serve as a deacon also known today as an elder. Whatever our service has been, is, or will be for the sake of Christ’s Church. It is to serve with the same purpose because we receive the same justifying promise as made by Jesus’ death and life for all. Where times change, communities change, and when sinners just cannot handle true change. We pray with great hope to the Father who hears us by His Son saying, “O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what you commanded and desire what You promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed to where true joys are found…” Amen. The peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting, Amen.

1. http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/index.cfm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)