

“How to do...a case study”

(The spiritual gift of administration)

Feb. 19, 2017

Acts 6:1-7

This morning, we are going to be like Harvard Business School, and do a case study! Does everyone have their thinking caps on? Imagine with me that there was a church in Boston, a truly interracial church, a church where Latino people were in the majority, and where the pastors and most of the lay leaders are Latino, but where black and white people are a significant minority, perhaps 70% of the people are Latino and 30% are either white or black. Teaching in the church is done primarily in Spanish, but there was also an English language service. The church has really been growing due to its powerful preaching and teaching and ministry in the community, and there is on the whole a wonderful spirit in the church. It is in a poorer section of the city, and has a number of elderly people of all races. Due to government cutbacks, the local “Meals on Wheels” program was eliminated for the elderly, so the church decided to set up a “Meals on Wheels” program of its own, to care in a tangible way for their older people by providing food for them on a daily basis. Everyone in the church was so excited by this new initiative because it was a tangible expression of what the Christian faith is all about!

But then after the program got started, some grumbling in the church began! Can you believe that, can you believe that people would grumble or complain about something in a church? Well, I am told that it can happen. It turns out that some of the black and white English speaking people in the church felt that they were not being treated fairly. As they looked at this “Meals on Wheels” program, they felt like the Spanish speaking elderly were getting their food delivered first, and the English speaking elderly were getting their food delivered to them last, and it was getting cold in the process. What’s more, the people delivering the food to them couldn’t even speak English! Charges of racism began to float behind closed doors and over internet connections and telephone wires, and the leadership became aware of the situation. Now if you were one of the Latino preachers or leaders in the church, and you did happen to hear about all of this, how would you respond to the problem? You would know that it would have the potential to tear the whole church apart, so what action would you take?

Now this is not just a hypothetical situation, but one that was very similar to what actually happened in the first church ever, the church in Jerusalem described in the book of Acts in the passage we heard read this morning. This church had powerful preaching and teaching from the apostles who were disciples of Jesus, and it was growing rapidly. Jewish people were recognizing Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, and were joining the church left and right. The majority of these were Jews from Jerusalem and the surrounding areas of Israel, who spoke Hebrew as their primary language. The apostles as the leaders of the church were also in this group of Hebrew speaking Jews. A minority of people in the church though were Greek speaking Jews, people who had been born and raised in places away from Israel, so that they grew up speaking Greek instead of Hebrew. And yet they too, like the Hebrew speaking Jews, had come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, as the One sent from God for all the people. So like our fictional church that had Spanish and English speakers, both Hebrew and Greek speakers were in this church.

Now this wasn't just an interesting linguistic difference in the first century in Israel. Greek was the language, along with Latin, of the hated Roman Empire, the Empire that had conquered and was ruling Israel. To speak Greek was for many Jews from Israel an affront, a selling out to the ways of their oppressor, and so there was tension between the Hebrew and Greek speakers, much more even than the tension that can exist between English and Spanish speakers in our culture today. However, the church in Jerusalem had been able in its early life to move beyond these painful divisions that existed in society, and so both Hebrew and Greek speaking Jews were becoming followers of Jesus and working together as one body in the church, putting their linguistic and cultural differences aside, something that happened nowhere else in the culture of the time.

And as part of their ministry together, the early church did have a real heart for all of those in need, and they sought to share everything they had in common. One of the things that they did was to set up a food program for all the widows in the congregation, to make sure that they were taken care of during a time when there was no Social Security or any other government programs. Except a problem began to develop, just like the one in our case study. Those who spoke Greek were complaining that their widows were being discriminated against by the Hebrew speakers in the daily distribution of food, and there was the implication that there was racism or deliberate discrimination going on. However, nobody apparently went directly with their complaints to the leadership, but instead we are told that they grumbled and murmured among themselves-grumble, grumble, grumble, murmur, murmur, murmur!

But all this grumbling and murmuring did eventually reach the ears of the leadership of the church. And so they faced the same decision we faced in our case study-what should they do? How should they handle this so that it didn't tear the community of the early church apart, as it could have so easily have done? Well, fortunately, they acted upon the principle of spiritual gifts, which is what we have been looking at as a church in the sermon series we are going through. This is the biblical argument that every believer in Christ is given certain spiritual gifts that are to be used for the benefit of the whole body of Christ. These apostles recognized that while they did have the spiritual gifts of leadership and teaching, they did not necessarily have the spiritual gift of administration, which is what we are focusing on this morning. The spiritual gift of administration is the ability to understand what needs to be done in order for a ministry to happen, and the divine gift to develop procedures that accomplish the goals of the ministry. Now in our society sometimes, administrators are derided as paper pushers, but that is not true in the church, because those with this spiritual gift understand that people are always their primary focus, and helping people serve God. They seek to understand the goals of a particular ministry, and then use their gift to help people reach those goals. The early church in Jerusalem had the admirable goal of taking care of its widows by providing food, but up until this point, the program to do so was administered in a very haphazard way by people who were busy with a lot of other things.

So we are told in our Scripture passage that the first thing the apostles did was to call a meeting of all of the members of the church, both Hebrew and Greek speakers, which was a very wise decision that made sure that everyone knew that they were handling this transparently. They explained to everyone at the meeting that they needed to focus their time and energy on doing the things that they were gifted at, preaching and teaching the Word of God, and that they needed to find some others who had the gift of administering this food program. So they encouraged the membership of the church to appoint seven people who were well respected and full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom that could be put in charge. The church was pleased with that idea, and they ended up choosing seven Greek speaking

Jews for this role of administering the whole program for both the Greek and Hebrew speaking elderly. What a stroke of genius, because it was the Greek speaking elderly who were complaining about not being taken care of, and now they would have some Greek speaking administrators to speak to! The church trusted that these administrators would take good care of the Hebrew speaking elderly as well, as a sign of this new community that was being created in the church of Jesus Christ. This turned out to be a very wise administrative decision, and these Greek speaking Jewish were apparently good because the grumbling and murmuring stopped, the church got back on track, the Word of God continued to spread, and the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem.

And this spiritual gift continues to be a critical one for the church today. You know, it is not the most obvious of gifts-some of the other spiritual gifts like leadership, mercy and teaching get more of the attention. But it is a crucial gift to the Church, and just as crucial and important as all of the other spiritual gifts, as you quickly realize whenever some program or ministry in the church is not very well organized! That is why the early church came together to lay hands on those who were being called to administer this feeding program, because they knew what a crucial and important ministry and spiritual gift it was.

Now here are some signs of the spiritual gift of administration-if these things are true of you, you have this gift. So if you enjoy organizing people, tasks or events, or can create order out of organizational chaos, or can assist ministries to become more efficient and effective, than you have the spiritual gift of administration. As I look around our church, I see this gift being used in many different ways throughout our whole body. There are so many ministries in our midst that have a person who organizes and administers everything, whether it is a chair of a committee or team, or a mission ministry like the Interfaith Hospitality Network or Dismas House, or a ministry like Called to Care that visits people in the church. Each of these ministries and many more in our church have administrators who help them to happen, and we are all grateful to those of you who do that for us. One special place where the spiritual gift of administration is used on a regular basis is in our church office, where our church administrators Bonnie Rossi and Lisa Coffey serve all the rest of us by keeping things organized and on track as a church. Wendy Reardon offered to make up a little power point to show the rest of us all that they do on our behalf, so we would like to show that to you now.

So we give thanks today for this gift, and we pray for those who have it, that they will enable the rest of us to do the things God has called us to do, so that we will be a church that is Christ centered and people focused, to the glory of God. Praise be to God, Amen.