



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

## First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

### November 17, 2013

#### "A Call to Service" (Book of Act Series)

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**W**e continue our series in the Book of Acts, and as the curtains fall back, we find ourselves in chapter 6 beginning with verse 1.

*Acts 6:1 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.*

*Acts 6:2 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.*

*Acts 6:3 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,*

*Acts 6:4 while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."*

*Acts 6:5 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.*

*Acts 6:6 They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.*

Each verse is packed with meaning. So bear with me as we

unpack each verse and give some important historical background.

We know from earlier chapters that the early church was exploding. Three thousand people became Christians on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit fell on the Apostles, and the Bible says more and more believers were added to their number daily.

As you can imagine, whenever there is growth in a church or any organization there will be conflict and administrative challenges because growth means more people, more programs, more issues, more logistics, and more organization needed.

Back then there was no blueprint on how to start a church because up until then there was no church. They were the "First Church of All Time," so to speak. Out of nowhere – boom! 3,000 believers! What to do?

In addition to the explosive growth, there were two groups within the church mentioned in verse 1: one group was the Hellenist Jews, or Greek-speaking Jews, and the other group was the Hebraic Jews, those who spoke Hebrew and Aramaic. Both groups were at odds with each other. Let's see the social-historical background of what was going on.

History tells us that after Babylon captured Israel, the Jewish Diaspora happened—meaning the Jews were dispersed or scattered to outside of Palestine, the place the Jews had called home for over a millennium. The

Jews settled in neighboring countries until after the Babylonian exile when they were free to return to Palestine.

There were some Jews, however, who did not return to Palestine after the exile and chose to stay in the Mediterranean world. These were the Hellenists, or Greek-speaking Jews. They did not speak Hebrew or Aramaic, only Greek, because they had lived away from Palestine for generations. The Hebrew-speaking and Aramaic-speaking Jews looked down on them because of that. But these Hellenist Jews became followers of Jesus at Pentecost while they were in Jerusalem.

So on one side we have the Hellenist Jews and then on the other, the Hebraic Jews, those who spoke Hebrew and Aramaic to each other. The Hebraic Jews had returned to rebuild Jerusalem under the leadership of the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah. They were highly nationalistic and strictly observed the laws and traditions of Judaism.

So these two groups of Jewish believers were together but they could not converse with each other because of language differences. They were not friendly with each other either even though they were all Jewish and Christian! It was a powder keg ready to be ignited.

The Hellenists, or Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, began to complain that their widows and orphans were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

**S**o let me explain a bit about the widows. It was common in Jewish law that widows and orphans should be taken care of. In Jewish culture it was unrighteous, sacrilegious, and cold-hearted to not take care of widows and orphans.

The Temple normally took care of the widows because it had collected money just for this purpose. However, as the Christian community grew and took form, it strained its relationship with the Temple because the Temple didn't believe that Jesus was God. And so the Temple wasn't taking care of these Christian widows.

Widows back then were in a difficult spot. They not only grieved the loss of a spouse, they also lost whatever property they had to their sons. If the son did not take care of the widow, then there was no way for the widow to support herself unless she became a beggar or a prostitute.

And that's why the early church was really concerned about the widows and the orphans. So now you understand why the distribution of food to the Hellenist widows and orphans was really critical. It was their only meal.

But the daily distribution of this charity was in the hands of the Hebraic Jews. The Hellenist Jews were feeling discriminated against, and, hence, there was a lot of tension that needed to be resolved. It was like the Jets vs. the Sharks (Grease joke). Fortunately, the Apostles turned to God and His Holy Spirit that fell upon them to ask for guidance. And they decided to establish the office of the deacon.

The Greek word *diakonos* meant "household servant," from which we get the English word *deacon*.

In the first church, a deacon was not considered a mere server or waiter of food to the widows and orphans. He was to be an officer of the church.

The Apostles were serving the widows and orphans themselves. This was a really important task directed by the Scriptures in the Old Testament and in their Jewish culture. So when the Apostles gave up this task to the deacons, it was not like they felt they were giving up a lowly job. Rather, they were establishing a group of officers who had an incredibly important task of being fair and just in the distribution of what is needed and in keeping the peace between two different cultures. It was crucial that they could do this without causing a split in the church. So the deacons were much more than just table servers.

And even more to the credit of the Apostles and their wisdom in leaning on the Holy Spirit is that they chose seven deacons who were ALL Greek-speaking Jews even though the majority of this group was Hebraic Jews. What a radical solution! They had King-Solomon wisdom!

It would have been easy for them to say, "Hey, there are more of us Hebraic Jews, so at least half of the deacons should be Hebrew or Aramaic-speaking Jews." But no, they chose ALL Greek-speaking Jews as we can deduce from their Greek-sounding names of those chosen as mentioned in verse 5:

Acts 6:5 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.

So if these seven Greek-speaking Jews were in charge of the distribution of the food, how could the Greek-speaking people claim in the future that there was foul play in the

giving out of the meals? Seven was, by the way, the typical number of men who would have been chosen to handle any public business in Jewish culture.

Notice that the Apostles, as elders, made this decision. The Elders ruled the early church, and it was not fully democratic. But it was a blend of apostolic authority and congregational activity that enabled the early church to come to a unified decision. Similarly, our church operates with a blend of elders, who have the ultimate authority on church decisions including the church budget. Our elders are elected by the congregation.

Deacons were chosen because of their character and wisdom, and not so much about their natural abilities or training. That is how it should be in the church. We know this when we read of the qualities of a deacon not only in our Scripture passage for today but also in a letter from Paul to Timothy as recorded in 1 Timothy 3:

A deacon must be faithful to his wife, and he must manage his children and household well. Those who do well as deacons will be rewarded with respect from others and will have increased confidence in their faith in Christ Jesus. 1 Tim. 3:12-13 (NLB)

At First Prez, the Deacons are the front line of compassion as they take care of the sick, the widows, the grieving, the shut-ins, as well as helping with greeting, funerals, new members classes, and coffee on Sundays, while the Elders have the policy making-strategy-managing responsibilities of the church and lead each of our ministry teams. In our church, the elders are chosen based on character and not because they are accomplished in their jobs or are wealthy or are big donors.

We also see the qualities of Elders listed in 1 Timothy chapter 3:

**T**his is a trustworthy saying: “If someone aspires to be an elder, he desires an honorable position.”

So an elder must be a man whose life is above reproach. He must be faithful to his wife. He must exercise self-control, live wisely, and have a good reputation. He must enjoy having guests in his home, and he must be able to teach.

He must not be a heavy drinker or be violent. He must be gentle, not quarrelsome, and not love money.

He must manage his own family well, having children who respect and obey him.

For if a man cannot manage his own household, how can he take care of God’s church?

An elder must not be a new believer, because he might become proud, and the devil would cause him to fall.

Also, people outside the church must speak well of him so that he will not be disgraced and fall into the devil’s trap. 1 Tim. 3:1-7 (NLB)

Again, character rules, and it is more important than worldly accomplishments.

If I were to add another trait I like in leaders, it is being on time. When we are on time, we honor other people’s time. It does show we are organized and strategic. You know I like to start meetings on time and not punish those who are there and reward those who are not there. However, we know we are not perfect, and so we are always striving for these things.

Hence, let me tell you about one of the worst ministry faux pas in my life because of not being on time. As many of you know, Pam and I led a group of 33 people to Greece and

Turkey several days ago to literally walk where the apostle Paul walked in those places. It was an eleven-day tour.

Here we are at the library in the ancient city of Ephesus. (A picture of the group was shown.) It was billed as a tour led by Pam and me in celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Hawaiian Islands Ministries.

I am here to confess that on the day that our tour group left Honolulu for Athens, Greece, the group left without Pam and me, as Pam and I missed the first three flights because we were NOT ON TIME! It was my most embarrassing moment in my entire ministry of 33 years as a pastor.

You know how bad things happen to me on trips. Well, nothing else went wrong on the trip except for this, so this was like the bingo free space where this major mistake on my part sucked in all other things that could possibly go wrong. It was the perfect storm of four things going wrong.

Here’s what happened: Pam and I were supposed to be at the airport at 4:15 am to meet the tour group for our 6:10 am flight. We planned to be there way early.

At 4:30 am, Pam wakes me up sleeping in my bed, asking, “Dan what time were we supposed to be at the airport?”

With my iPhone and its spinning wheels for setting alarms, I had accidentally let the wheel spin to “pm” instead of “am” and so I had unknowingly set my wake-up alarm for 2:30 pm instead of 2:30 am!

When Pam woke me, sheer terror struck me. 4:30 am! We were supposed to be at the airport 15 minutes ago! I still had to shower, get dressed, and finish packing!

I bolted from bed in Olympic gold time and somehow I was packed and ready to go in 20 minutes, although Pam still needed more time. Josh McFeeley, who had spent the night at our house to get up early to take us to the airport, raced us to the airport.

We got there 50 minutes before the flight was going to take off. I went up to the airline kiosk to check in but the computers were down! The perfect storm.

So we waited 15 minutes before the computers came up, and the agent behind the counter told me that now we couldn’t get on the plane because we were now within 45 minutes of flight departure time and they don’t let passengers on board within 45 minutes, especially those who have not checked in their luggage. But I told him we couldn’t check in our luggage because the check-in kiosks weren’t working and that we had to wait for 15 minutes.

I told him that they had to let us on the flight because I was the tour leader. I pleaded saying these people on the tour need us. They won’t know what to do in San Francisco airport or in Frankfurt airport, or in Athens. They need me. There were minors on the tour so they have to have me. (Actually, it turned out they were young adults, but I thought they were minors.)

Then the guy behind the counter said, “Okay, I’ll call the gate on my walkie-talkie because my supervisor is there and she would have to be the one to let you on board.” So the guy told his supervisor my story.

I could hear them talking back and forth. The supervisor said, “No, we got a phone call from the tour leader who said he was not coming, and so he cancelled. His tour group of 50 is already on the plane. We know he’s not coming.”

**S**o I say, “Wait, no, there’s a mix up. First of all, I didn’t make the call. I am standing here. Why would I be standing here if I cancelled? And second my tour only has 30. I don’t have 50. You got me mixed up with the wrong guy.”

No, the supervisor said; he cancelled. That’s it. He is not coming. But I said, but my wife and I are here. We can still walk to the gate. But the guy behind the counter says, “But you have luggage. At this time, if we checked in your luggage it wouldn’t make it.”

So I said, “Then leave the luggage! Put it on the next flight, and we will get our luggage later. Just get us on the flight.”

“Sorry,” he said, “TSA won’t allow passengers to fly separately from their luggage. We’ll try and find you a later flight.”

So our plane took off without us, and I said to myself, “This is one of the worst days in my ministry.”

I learned later that most of the tour group members were wondering why they didn’t see me on the plane, at the Honolulu airport, at the San Francisco airport, nor at Frankfurt or Athens. They just figured I got bumped up to first class where they couldn’t see me. Yeah right.

So back at the airport I saw a friend of mine behind the counter who works for the airline and I said, “You won’t believe it, I missed my flight with a tour I was leading.”

And my friend said, “Oh, you’re the one. I had my earpiece in and could hear the chatter back and forth between the front counter and the gate. You see, I think there was a mix-up. That other tour leader who canceled, his name was Chin, and I think we got mixed up with you since your last name is Chun!”

Not again! How many times will there be a mix-up because of my name? I don’t get into hotels because of a mix-up with my name; I don’t get rental cars because of my name, and the last time I tried checking into a hotel room at midnight, I couldn’t because there was a woman in my bed, whose last name was Chen. They gave away my room to her thinking Chun was the same as Chen! And now this guy named Chin! It’s Chun, and I am not having fun! But if it were Chow, it would be chow fun. But it’s Chun. No fun!

From here on, I am going to change my name legally. And right now you can vote for my new name by applauding for your choice. How about this? Rumpelstiltskin. Calling Rumpelstiltskin, table for two? No? How about this?

Brad Pitt. I can hear my new name now at Starbucks. Brad Pitt for a soy-free iced sugar free latte! Brad Pitt. That would be a great name that people would pay attention to. No?

How about this: Angelina Jolie. That would make heads turn. They wouldn’t forget that. Or maybe I should go with Jet Li?

So Pam and I were stuck at the Honolulu airport because we were told to just wait for possibly another flight that day. I didn’t have trouble with United Airlines since I’m a million-mile flyer, but it was the connecting flights with Lufthansa and Aegean Airlines that I had no pull.

The trouble with Lufthansa was that when I called them for help, I found the agents very intimidating because they spoke with a heavy German accent: “No, you will not get those seats. No, you will not change your itinerary!”

I got scared and could only reply, “I know nutting!”

When you are stuck at the ticket counters, you are not even in the inner part of the airport where you can get food and drinks. Just you out near the kiosks. Pure boredom.

We waited for five hours on benches. I was pacing back and forth. Will we get on or not? Every hour I would call the tour travel agent in Florida: “You have anything? Nutting?”

It is at times like these I kept saying to myself, “Jerry Coffee. Jerry Coffee.” Jerry Coffee is our code here at our church to remind us to always wait to see how God brings good out of bad.

I coined the phrase last Christmas when Jerry Coffee shared with us how he had a long flight delay in Texas and was so frustrated about it. But then an hour later he had a heart attack at the airport. The great news is that he recovered well, but if he had made his flight on time and had the heart attack while in flight, it could have had tragically different results.

So I was saying Jerry Coffee to myself, waiting for God to show his goodness out of a mess that I helped create.

Then we got the word that we would not get on any flight that day and we would have to come back the next day to catch the 6:10 am flight and try the itinerary again.

So where was the Jerry Coffee in the story? When we got home I decided to walk our dog Max. While walking him, I noticed he had difficulty peeing. This was not good. So we rushed him to Dr. Scott Harada who had a cancellation right at that hour and could take Max. Lo and behold, after X-rays showed Max had a blockage, and that had we left that day for ten days and not taken care of it, Max could have been deathly sick.

**H**ow would you like to go ten days and you can't pee? It was good that we missed our flight. Jerry Coffee! Max lives! Max pees! (This is the first time I have ever used that word in the pulpit!)

As for the tour group, their itinerary was changed by the tour guides because Pam and I were not there yet. The group had the chance to sleep in after a long 24-hour trip, and the tour guides treated them without cost to the Athens Museum, which was not on the original itinerary. They also got to go to an additional authentic Greek restaurant and go shopping for five hours. Jerry Coffee!

On the day Pam and I finally got to fly out, we got bumped up to First Class on our first leg to San Francisco, and had aisle seats on the 12-hour trip to Frankfurt when we originally had middle seats. Jerry Coffee! The Holy Spirit was in control, just as He was in the early church.

The formation of the deacons serving in the church makes me want to conclude with these thoughts of service.

The essence of Church, whether in the first century or in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is service. We don't need to be ordained as a deacon to serve. If we are Christ-followers, service is to be our nature. Did not Jesus, our Lord Himself say,

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others (Mark 10:45)

In that sense we are all to be *diakonos*, household servants, servants of the house of God. And no task should be too low for us for we are serving God Himself.

We may not all be called to Deacons and Elders, but I believe we are all called to serve in the church of our Lord. We can serve in a variety of

ways and in various ministries. We serve in big and small ways. If anyone sees a bit of paper or trash on the floor, it is not beneath us to do the First Prez bend to pick it up. (Picture of Ron Mathieu picking up a piece of trash was shown.) See, even Captain Ron bends down to pick up a piece of paper.

When it comes to serving God, we are not talking about volunteerism. Whatever we do is about a mission and a passion to serve. When Aunt Karen says we need help in Children's Ministries especially during the 11:11 service, she is not looking for volunteerism. She is looking for people who want to be involved in a ministry that affects children and their parents. She's looking for people who can foresee the ripple effects of transformed lives of young ones learning that Jesus can be their friend for a lifetime; that God loves them, and that they can trust Jesus and the Holy Spirit to guide them, just as He guided the Apostles back then. Aunt Karen needs our service!

When one serves and becomes a part of a movement to knowing God better, we can see that God can be at the very core, the very center of our life in all that we do as a single, a married person, a parent, or an employee.

When we talk of stewardship, we don't mean just money. It is a stewardship of time. If we are encouraged to tithe or give 10% of our money to the Lord, should we not also be encouraged to give at least 10% of our time in service to God? A 40-hour week would mean being willing to give four hours a week to the Lord.

When we looked at the traits of what makes a deacon or an elder, we saw that it had a lot to do with character. But it also has to do with one other thing: availability. We may know of one's abilities, but what about one's availabilities to do whatever God asks us to do? Maybe for

some of us, it has been too long sitting in the bleachers, and we need to be on the field. It's time to stop being just a fan of Jesus but a follower of Jesus.

It doesn't take much to find an opportunity to serve. One phone call to the office can direct you to your area of interest. And during this Christmas season, there are a ton of entry-level opportunities, if you are not ready to do a long-term service.

There is a cleanup day coming up and days for setting up Christmas decorations around the campus. There are ushering opportunities and service opportunities with youth ministry, children's ministries and many other places.

No job is too small when seen from God's perspective. Were Deacons just household servants who waited on tables? No. Because of their wisdom, commitment and diplomacy, they averted a huge controversy and tension in the church. They got help to those in greatest need—widows and orphans.

Today, the Lord may be calling you to consider a new ministry opportunity. If you are at that place, look at the news bulletin to find areas of need and phone numbers to call. Read the email blasts of help needed. Or start with calling my office or the Front Desk, and we can help you start on a journey of life that will be an adventure.

One final thing: Stephen, the first deacon, was also the first martyr of the church. It meant that the deacons had courage, as you will see in next week's sermon. They had passion for God.

And for all of us, our passion will grow the more we serve God for the right reasons out of love, hope, and faith, but the greatest of these three is love.

Amen. Let's pray.