

May 7, 2023: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ **Fifth Sunday of Easter** ~

“Be filled with the Holy Spirit and Wisdom.”

Our services can be found on our website at www.barrechurch.com

Scripture Reading: Acts 6 v 1-7 and 7 v 55 - 60

1. Introduction:

In my work as a mediator and facilitator in churches, and many other groups and institutions, I have seen, when faced with a difficult situation, how crucial it is to listen carefully to understand the different parties and their concerns. This is usually followed by a meeting, once, twice, or sometimes more often, exploring different options to solve the problems and then to come to an agreement that everyone is satisfied with. Sometimes an agreement will come quickly, because people are eager to solve the issues, and at other times it takes longer, because of the complexity of the problem. A mediation process can sometimes end too soon, because not everyone is willing to work things out. A good agreement involves good decisions, and leaves the group with a peaceful feeling, and a commitment to continue working on the issues that have been addressed and also on the healing of relationships. The twelve apostles here in our first passage found themselves in a situation of potential conflict and decided to meet with the congregation to address the issue brought to them. Let's have a look.

2. Finding our way together:

The disciples of Christ surely did not receive mediation training as we know it today, and it is not clear that Jesus instructed them to be mediators either. Their calling and purpose involved the preaching of the word of God, about Christ's ministry, His death and resurrection, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the followers of Christ. What they did not realize with the growing numbers, was the importance of getting to know everyone and their needs, and so they did not foresee the potential for misunderstandings about who does what and what they all brought to the congregation, with their various backgrounds and cultures.

In Chapter 6 v 1-7 the Greek-speaking Jews were not happy with the Aramaic speaking Jews about the neglect their widows experienced over the daily distribution of food to all widows. It was the practice during that time for the more well-to-do believers to sell their properties and to share their income from the sales with the needy in the congregation. Not everyone was honest in these practices, so there were those who did not feel treated well, such as these Greek-speaking widows. It was something the apostles needed to address, because they did not want any conflict among the disciples of Christ. In verses 2 – 4 we see them gather the congregation to discuss it. At the end of the discussion, they recommended that the congregation select a group of seven people charged with this responsibility of food distribution and handling of the money. In addition to being equipped with knowledge and experience, they needed to be filled with the Spirit and wisdom.

We read that the proposal pleased the whole congregation, and an agreement was reached. They presented the seven men to the apostles, who prayed over them and laid hands on them, an Old Testament practice, for example when Moses transferred his authority to Joshua. Our passage makes it a point of mentioning the selection of Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit to be part of the group of seven. In Chapter 7 we read more about Stephen, his powerful ministry of the word and performing miracles, the opposition from the Sanhedrin, and his ultimate demise as he gets stoned to death by those at the Sanhedrin who dragged him out, yelled at him, and closed their ears because they did not want to hear what he had to say.

3. Be filled with the Holy Spirit and Wisdom

Apart from using a good process that led to an agreement, they gave new structure to their community of faith, adding this group of people who would be responsible for the distribution of food, in an equitable manner. But more, at the core of the selection of the seven people, was their emphasis on them being filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom. As apostles they too would be examples of a life filled with prayer, and filled with the Spirit as they researched the word of God and ministered to others.

The outcome of a good and successful mediation is for everyone to be in a better place. Work improves, relationships improve, and much more. There may be setbacks and those involved would sometimes call the mediator back for additional help, and in time the feedback and reflection would be that things are much better. In mediation we do not necessarily ask people to be filled with the Spirit, which makes this intervention by the apostles even more powerful. They placed a strong emphasis on everyone to be filled with the Spirit and wisdom, and a strong focus on the ministry of the word. So, as an added and powerful outcome, we read in verse 7 how the word of God spread, and the numbers of the disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly. On the Day of Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit about 3000 people were added to the community of faith. Later we read 5000 more and so on.

4. Conclusion:

We have gone through Lent, the crucifixion, the Resurrection and now are approaching Pentecost, probably the most powerful remembrance in the life of the church, because it involves the Holy Spirit of God and Christ renewing and filling the lives of Christians so the power and glory of God can be seen in us, being transformed, and as we grow in strength and numbers. We are reminded that Christ is the Head of the church, and we all are stewards of the church. We too sometimes have issues that need to be addressed and mediated. We too come together and look for solutions for our concerns. Most important for us to remember though, is how God calls us, as ordinary and fallible human beings who need the Spirit of God to heal us from our own brokenness, and to fill us, so we can fulfil our roles as followers of Christ. We are reminded that we cannot be a church without the Spirit, and that the Spirit needs to fill every part of us, and the work we do. May God help us to answer to this call of Pentecost, to be open for a spiritual renewal in our lives and in our church. Amen.