

Focusing Our Faith – Session 3 Script

Growing Pains and Leadership – Acts Chapters 6 and 7

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Hello, I am Deacon Brian and it is my pleasure to be with you on this third session of Focusing Our Faith. I hope you are finding these sessions interesting and that they prompting your small group to discussion that leads to increased understanding and more importantly greater faith and love of Christ and His Church. Recall, we are using the Book of Acts and as we see the growth of the early church we consider then our own time and even the future of the church and our living out the teachings and challenges given to us by Christ. In the first session Deacon Paul had us look at the first two chapters of Acts and we saw the Birth of the Church after Jesus ascended into heaven. We considered the importance of the communal nature of the early church and we were reminded of how that communal nature and the guidance of the Holy Spirit is so necessary for us today in our own perseverance of the faith. In the second session, Deacon Butch helped us reflect on chapters 3,4 and 5 of the Book of Acts. In these events of the growing church we saw the wonderful signs and wonders that accompanied the Apostles in their boldness of preaching and serving in Jesus' name and again considered how we are called to do the same. In this session, we will look at chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Acts. In Chapter 6, Stephen and six other men are chosen as the first deacons of the church. We will take special note of why they were chosen. In chapter 7, we will see that St. Stephen was martyred and reflect on the similarities of his and Jesus' death.

Let us begin with prayer. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Heavenly Father, open our hearts and minds to the breaking open of Your Holy Word for which we are gathered here. Feed and nourish us with the Spirit of Your love. We make this prayer in faith through Christ our Lord. Amen. St. Jude... Pray for us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

The Book of Acts which of course, the full name of the book is the Book of Acts of the Apostles, is my favorite book of the Bible. If you have not read it from beginning to end, I want to encourage you to do so. Sometimes I think it should have been titled "Action of the Apostles" for that is what it is. As we have said, it is about what the apostles did after Jesus left them with His ascension into heaven. Unlike some of the other books of the Bible, the Book of Acts is very easy to understand and the events hold your attention as it is one thing after another that draws you in and keeps you reading. To tell you the truth...these two chapters (6 and 7) are my favorite chapters. Perhaps I am a little biased as again, we see the selection of the first deacons of the church. Let's look more closely at what happened and especially the "why". We read in chapter 6 verse 2 and following...*So the Twelve called together the community of the disciples and said, It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table. Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, where as we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. The proposal was acceptable to the whole community, so they chose Stephen, a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit, also Phillip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They*

presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them. The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly; even a large group of priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

What they realized was that they were so busy tending to the spiritual needs of the community they were neglecting the physical needs of those that needed assistance (namely “widows and orphans”). While the word “deacon” is not used here (it is used later in the Book of Timothy) the role of the deacon can be clearly seen. The word “deacon” means to serve. We see in this chapter the establishment of the office for the purpose of serving. This event should remind us of how in the Gospel of John at the Last Supper, Jesus charged His disciples to wash the feet of others. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke in their Last Supper accounts tell us of how Jesus gives Himself to us in the Breaking of the Bread, whereas the Gospel of John gives us the event of the washing of feet. Together we see that Jesus wants us to see that it is a two-fold missioning He is giving us... the spiritual nurturing through receiving Him in the Eucharist and then caring for the physical needs of others. Another passage of Scripture which might come to mind as you read or hear of this event in the Book of Acts might be James 2:15. Here we read, *If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day and one of you says to them, Go in peace, keep warm and eat well, but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?* We are members of a beautiful church with many wonderful traditions, rituals and liturgies. It is very easy for us to get caught up in the beauty of church and enjoy the liturgical aspects of the faith while sometimes forgetting the charity we are **all** called to and the

living out our faith in our homes, our communities, our workplaces and social gatherings. I would like this concept to be the focus of your small group discussion in this session as I feel certain each of us can think of many ways we see this two-fold missioning we have being lived out in some cases and neglected at other times. Before we begin the discussion part of this session, I would be remiss if I didn't talk a little about the death (the martyrdom) of St. Stephen which is covered in chapter 7. As St. Stephen began to live out his ministry (like Jesus) he was questioned by the so-called religious leaders who were intimidated by his faith and wisdom. They brought him before the Sanhedrin (again like Jesus) and was testified against with false accusations. He spoke to them of the history of salvation beginning with Abraham and continuing through to Moses and God's love of His people but then he concluded by pointing out to them that they were like their ancestors that killed the prophets and would not allow God to guide them. He told them that they too were murderers as they did not accept Jesus. This accusation put them over the top and they sought to have him killed. He was ordered to be stoned to death and as he was dying, he (once again like Jesus) asked God to not hold this sin against them. Wow... what an amazing story.

(You see what I mean how the Book of Acts of the Apostles is so interesting)

I would like to circle back now and talk a little more about the diaconate. I believe some still don't understand the role of the deacon in the Church. The most visible role is seeing the deacon assisting at the celebration of Mass. The fact is, the ministry of the deacon is multi-fold. There is ministry of the Word, (proclaiming the Gospel and preaching occasionally), minister of the altar (assisting the priest at Mass) and ministry of charity (serving a physical need

of the community...feeding the poor, visiting the sick or imprisoned and so on). The word ordained generally refers to the laying on of hands. Like the original deacons (Stephen and the others we mentioned from Acts chapter 6), the Apostles laid hands on them and at a deacon's ordination, a bishop lays hands on us and we promise obedience to him and his successors. Deacons are ordained to the diocese and we are assigned to a parish where we support the priests as we are able. We have spiritual and physical roles. Deacons can baptize babies, witness weddings, preside at funerals, teach classes and generally help out. A very important role of the deacon which can often be overlooked is the ordained deacon models the diaconia we are all called to. Service to others is something all the faithful should be living out. The role we deacons have at the celebration of Mass is actually very small and of course the Mass can be celebrated easily without a deacon present. I want to encourage all of you however, to when you see a deacon present in the Mass think of all those who are not there. Let our presence (the deacon's presence) represent all those that aren't there but should be. (the homeless, the sick, the elderly, the imprisoned, the young people that think they graduated church when they graduated high school, the homebound etc) and recall that we are to minister to their needs. Each of us as we are able and as part of the Church (the Body of Christ) do our part to care for the spiritual and physical needs of the "widows and orphans" and those marginalized or burdened.

As we looked at the Book of Acts of the Apostles and consider what they did and how they did what they could to grow the Kingdom of God, something we can do as a reflection is think about what if a Bible was being written today. What if scripture was being written today about the Church and what we were

doing as ministering to the spiritual and physical needs of others? What would be written? Perhaps it could be called The Book of Acts of the Christians or Acts of the Roman Catholics. What could be written? As I conclude here, I would like all of you to consider and discuss ministries we can participate in. Not to put thoughts in your head or words into your mouth, but your facilitators have a copy of the St. Jude Church Ministries. I would encourage you to look and discuss some of the things listed there.

Let us also consider the future of the Church where are we headed as a society and the role of the church in forming that society. May the Holy Spirit guide you in your discussion and may each us as we share and as we listen to others, grow in faith, understanding and zeal in living out the faith life we are called to. May God bless each of you.