

“Skin in the Game”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Third Sunday of Easter

Edina Morningside Community Church; April 30, 2017

Acts 6:1-7

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. 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. 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, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” 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. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

According to legend, the famous investor Warren Buffett started out with so little that the seed money for his first stock fund came from others. Eleven doctors put together just over a hundred thousand dollars for him to start investing with. But because Buffett wanted to show his own commitment as well, he contributed \$100 to the fund. It wasn’t nearly as much as others gave, just a thin little bit when stacked up to theirs. But still, it was his demonstration of willingness to be on the line with others. [He had “skin in the game”](#), as Buffett said.

Today in the book of Acts, we see new disciples getting their own skin in the game. Acts is the companion volume to the gospel of Luke. It was written by the same author, as a sequel. Whereas Luke is about the life of Jesus, Acts is about the life of the early church after the resurrection. In Acts, disciples draw on the same spirit and example of Jesus to do the sorts of things he did in the world.

One of those Christ-like things the first disciples did was to distribute food to the poor. The early church spread like wildfire because it cared for those who were not cared for by others. Turns out—this is a pretty popular thing! That’s why as we begin today’s reading, there are more people at the food distribution than twelve disciples can keep up with. The whole community is Jewish and Christian believers, but tensions arise along ethnic lines, between the Hellenists and the Hebrews. Those of Greek descent complain that their people are getting overlooked. But the original Hebrew disciples complain that they can’t keep up, especially since they want to keep preaching and teaching about Jesus.

A solution arises when the disciples call together the whole community. They acknowledge that twelve people aren’t enough to do all the good that needs doing, and they show the humility that’s required in asking for help. “Nominate from among you seven worthy people showing wisdom and the Holy Spirit,” they say, “and we will appoint them to this work while we continue to pray and preach.” The community agrees that this is a wise solution, so they choose people gifted for the work, then commission them with prayer and laying on of hands. According to Christian tradition, these seven men are the first deacons, called to service and recognized for their leadership among the people of God. Their example has been instrumental to the Body of Christ ever since, a reminder that the church relies on far more than just preachers and teachers alone. They put “skin in the game”, contributing their own skill and time for the good of the whole.

Notice two things about these first deacons. First, they’re listed out by name. Not everyone of importance in the Bible has a name listed—we don’t know the names of the shepherds who first announced Jesus’ birth, or of the woman at the Samaritan well who teaches Jesus about hospitality. But the fact that these seven are named emphasizes their public leadership. We can go to the roster—even two thousand years later!—and see who accepted responsibility for serving food in the first Christian community. This is how important their ministries and service are to the church.

The other thing about these deacons is found in the names themselves: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolaus. Besides being a great list of baby names, all of these are from Greek—not Hebrew—origin. They come from that part of the community whose widows have been neglected in the daily provision of food. In other words, those who are most able to see the need for change agree to help make the community better. To their credit, the Hebrew disciples have no problem working with and empowering the Greeks, even though this formal structure for food distribution is a new thing. The church needs both longtime and new leadership to adapt in changing times. It calls on every person—named or unnamed, Greek or Hebrew—to put their own “skin in the game” by answering the Spirit’s call to help.

By a happy accident of the calendar, this Scripture comes a week after we voted in new leaders for Edina Morningside Church, and a week before we receive three new families into membership. Last Sunday at the congregational meeting we considered a ballot of candidates, all of whom agreed to be nominated as the next leaders of Boards and Committees. We elected a new Church Moderator and new members of the Trustees, Music Committee, Board of Christian Education, Preschool Board, Membership Committee, and yes, the Deacons. Each of these people have stepped up to the honor and responsibility of guiding the church’s effort in these areas. They have put “skin in the game” in the form of time and talents especially. I have huge respect for those who thus enlist in our ministries, and will do my very best to help them succeed.

Thankfully, there are also dozens of other options for those not called or able to serve on committees. Today’s assembly highlights a great many already. We might sing or play an instrument, teach children or adults to better understand the faith, read Scripture, greet members and guests as an usher, volunteer in the nursery downstairs, serve refreshments after worship, speak up for and contribute to the capital campaign, hold those on our prayer list in the light of God’s love, count the Sunday offering, or donate items that will help someone start a new life. And if you’re one of those longtime saints who has done everything in the church at some point in the last fifty years, perhaps you’re called in this season of life NOT to do more, but to be a mentoring, encouraging, prayerful coach for those who pick up the mantle from you. There is no shortage of ways to put faith into action and be a visible example of Christ at work.

I’ve heard that only two things are necessary for people to feel like they belong in a community: a friend and a job. We all need someone (beyond the minister) who knows our name and cares how we are. We also need at least one way to make a difference. This is what helps form a “sticky” community, where those who participate keep doing so because we see that we matter and our gifts matter. My invitation to all our members—those who have been here forever and those who are just joining—takes essentially this form: show up, help out, and pitch in. Show up regularly on Sunday mornings or in other gatherings of the church—this is how we make ourselves known and get to know others. Help out in one mission or ministry. And pitch in some dollars—however much or little you can—to fund the activities of the church. It is certainly possible to skate along on the surface of a community, but being part of the church is more than a spectator sport. It’s about living as Christ’s body alive in the world, following the example of those first deacons, putting “skin in the game”, and improving the church by our willingness to be part of it.

Finally, even as we are “goosed” today for action in the church, the capital campaign, or other opportunities, remember also the presence of divine grace. God meets us exactly where we are, claims us as beloved children, and then from that space opens the door for us to be love in the world. This is the grace with which God holds and encourages us. This confidence is what helps us lean in and consider what is called for now. Gratitude for such divine love is the foundation for all that is yet to be.

Let us pray, [with lines of the poet R. Lee Sharpe](#): *Loving God, you have called “princes and kings, and clowns that caper in sawdust rings, and common people” like the church and me, to be “builders for eternity”. Give us wisdom with the rules and tools we have from you, that we may “fashion, ere life is flown, [not] a stumbling block, [but] a Stepping-Stone.” Amen.*