

## **All Plates Spinning—Witness, Mercy, and Life Together**

Easter 5; Series A

Acts 6:1-7

**“It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables”**

**Acts 6:2b**

As a boy I can remember watching a television show in which a number of performers presented various tricks. My siblings and I were of course very impressed and awe-struck by the illusions and stunts that were performed. The performer that captivated me the most, though, was the plate spinner. He spread twenty different wooden rods across the stage, sticking each rod straight up and down out of a platform. The performer then balanced spinning plates on all the rods at one time without any of them losing their momentum and crashing to the floor. What impressed me most about that trick was the ability of the performer to dash across the stage and give the right amount of attention to each plate at just the right time in order to keep it in concert with the rest.

Last week in our Gospel reading we read and heard a sermon based on a description of the identity of the early Christian Church. Shortly after Peter finished his Spirit-filled Pentecost Sermon just fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection, St. Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, gives us a snapshot of this Spirit-filled community of faith. We saw the early Christians *bearing witness* to Jesus Christ. They devoted themselves to prayer and to the teaching and preaching of the good news of Christ (Acts 2:42). We also saw the early Christians *showing mercy* to those who have not just spiritual needs but also physical, mental, and emotional needs (Acts 2:45). Finally, we saw the early Christians *sharing their life together* with one another by joining together for Worship, to eat the Lord’s Supper, and also to participate in other fellowship meals and events (Acts 2:42, 44, 46-7). We observe that the early Christians were a community of “*witness, mercy, and life together.*”

This is also a good Biblical answer to the question, “Who is the Church?” Regardless of time, place, and culture, local congregations and communities of the Christian faith are always a people of “*witness, mercy, and life together.*” Like a performer balancing dozens of plates while keeping them all in concert with one another and preventing each one from falling to the ground, the Church is called to keep in balance, at all times, its identity as a people who *bear witness, show mercy, and participate in fellowship and life together.*

Today in our reading from the Book of Acts we discover the early Christian Church facing a challenge to keep all the plates of *witness, mercy, and life together* spinning in concert without neglecting any particular one. The Church was faced with a problem that would put to test their ability to solve it without compromising their identity and who they are as a community of faith.

The problem was that people within the community of faith were in need of mercy and compassion and were not receiving it. Specifically, we read that “widows were being neglected in the daily distribution” of food and other resources (Acts 6:1). These widows were defined as “true widows”—those who had no other family members that could care for their needs. In his words to St. Timothy, the Apostle Paul makes it clear that the Church has an obligation to care

for these widows and their needs for the basic necessities of life since they are part of the community of faith (1 Timothy 5:3-8). The Church is called to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2) in this way. The Church is called to show mercy and compassion as we have all been shown mercy and compassion by God in Christ.

So the early Christians were presented with the challenge to be who they are *as a people of mercy* in such a way that they don’t neglect being a people of *witness*, and *life together*. We heard the Apostles or leaders of the early Christian Church describe the problem well in our reading, “It is not right that we (the Apostles) should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables” (Acts 6:2).

They began to pursue a solution to the problem that would allow the Church to keep all plates spinning at one time without any one plate crashing to the floor. The Apostles chose seven men of godly character that were in charge of keeping the *mercy* plate spinning while the Apostles continued to be the ones who were responsible for keeping the *witness* plate spinning. The fact that this solution was pleasing to the Lord is evidenced by the last verse of our reading— “And the Word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). By the grace of God the community of the early Christian Church was able to solve a problem while keeping their identity intact as a people of “*witness, mercy, and life together.*” And the Lord continued to bless his Word and work through the Church.

Today in our congregation we face the same challenge to keep the plates of *witness, mercy, and life together* spinning in concert with one another without neglecting any particular one. After our Worship Service we will have our annual Voters’ Meeting, part of our *life together* as a congregation. In that Voters’ Meeting, in addition to hearing reports from the Pastor and chairpersons of the various boards, we will also vote on the adoption of a strategic plan for Ministry in the next three years. In short, this strategic plan is a proposal of how we can be good stewards of our time, talents, and treasures in order to keep the plates of *witness, mercy, and life together* spinning in concert with one another. Today we will also vote on the adoption of our annual budget. It takes money to keep the plates spinning, doesn’t it? It also requires the proper allocation and organization of our financial resources. This is the purpose of a budget not only in our parish, but also in our businesses, and in our personal lives.

It is a challenge to be a people of *witness, mercy, and life together* both as individual Christians in our daily living, as well as together as a Church. This is one thing of which our reading from the book of Acts reminds us. It is all too easy to devote all our attention to keeping one plate spinning to the neglect of the other two. It is all too easy for us as individual Christians to keep the *life together* plate as the only one spinning. We might come regularly to receive the eternal gifts of God and his grace in the participation of Worship on Sunday morning but fail to consider what kind of *witness* we are when we don’t give a second thought to the hurtful words we might say or careless things we do. We might also show through our words and our actions that we are satisfied with wobbly plates. And so we may be very inconsistent in joining with the rest of our brothers and sisters in Christ on Sunday morning for Worship. Or we may come regularly for Worship but fail to join together with our fellow Christians to know our God more in Bible Studies. Or we may fail to participate in our *life together* as a congregation in other activities and events that we do together as a congregation. Or perhaps we might be really good at spinning the *mercy* plate by donating to food banks or helping out people who have other needs, but maybe we let the *witness* plate crash to the floor when we fail to seize those

opportunities to tell people why we are showing them mercy and compassion in the first place. Yes, it is a challenge to be a people of *witness, mercy, and life together* all at the same time not only in our vocations and stations in life every day, but also together as a congregation.

We read that in the early Church, the first Christians were able to keep the balance of being a people of *witness, mercy, and life together* because they saw themselves as stewards and managers. They did not see their time, talents, and treasures as their own possessions but as gifts and privileges from their God. This led them to trust God to also be the provider and sustainer of those gifts. This trust in their Triune God then led them to be generous with their time, talents, and treasures, and to use a portion of them to keep the plates of *witness, mercy, and life together* spinning within the Church.

The early Christians also knew how challenging it is to be the people of God that he wants them to be both individually, as well as corporately, together as a congregation. It seems to me that this is why they continued to gather together faithfully on the first day of the week, the same day Jesus rose from the dead, every Sunday. In this way Christ remained in the center as the “cornerstone of their faith” and community as we heard St. Peter say in our second reading this morning.

This is how we continue to live as individual Christians who are part of the community of faith here at Atonement. We let God forgive us, empower us and enable us to keep the plates spinning through the gift of his Spirit as we continue to gather together as a holy priesthood, as living stones being formed, shaped, and polished in order to be built up as a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5). Our repentant prayers of confessions of sins to God rise up to him as he hears them and then gives his Word of forgiveness in return for us to believe and trust in. Through our hearing, preaching, and teaching of the Word of God the Spirit works to shape and form us as baptized people of *witness, mercy, and life together*. Through our singing of songs and hymns we grow in faith and trust in the God who first swooned a song of salvation for us. Every time we kneel to receive the body and blood of our Lord we become joined more and more to our Lord, to one another, and to his plan to us *together as a community of faith* to do his work of *witness and mercy*. By the grace of God, all plates spinning! Amen.