

NEW RELATIONSHIPS

Acts 6:1-8

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(online worship only)

I've begun thinking about life after the pandemic. I predict it's something we're going to be talking about often over the next several months. Conversations are taking place in all sectors - education, business, urban planning, health care. I'm hearing people say things like, "After the pandemic, more people will continue to work from home." Not as many as do now, but more than before. And some people may find themselves going into the office a few days a week, rather than every day. Because businesses have discovered that some people are more productive working from home, and some employees are happier.

I've read speculation that perhaps the dense population of big cities will lessen somewhat. It may be a while - or never - before people want to live as closely together as they did before...at least people who have the choice to move.

We're going to have these kinds of conversations about many aspects of our lives as we reflect on what we've learned during the pandemic. We were all forced to hit the pause button on life as we knew it ten months ago. What has this time taught us?

These are questions I plan to come back to during the spring. This morning, I want to focus on one question. What have we learned about ourselves as people who are in relationship with each other?

From some people, I hear comments like this, “I love my children, I love my spouse, but we’re not used to being together 24/7!” Too much togetherness is challenging.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are people who live alone, who haven’t been hugged, who go days without interacting with another human being. With too much isolation, it’s challenging to keep from becoming depressed.

One thing I’ve learned is how resilient some relationships are, and I’m happy to say this truth extends to relationships within the church.

In my Annual Report, as I reflected on this past year, I wrote about the little parable Jesus tells us of the house that’s built on the rock. Some of Jesus’ parables have layers of meaning and aren’t meant to be simplified. This one has a straightforward message. If you build your house on a solid foundation, your house will withstand many storms. By contrast, if you build your house on sand, the first time a major storm rolls in, your house collapses. In many ways, as I will talk about next Sunday, our church has survived the storm of the pandemic, thanks to the foundation that many people have built here over many generations.

I’ve been overjoyed to see how many of our church members have stayed in touch with each other over these past ten months. Despite the fact that we have not seen each other, we have maintained our connections.

Some relationships have even grown. I have re-connected with some people. Because our schedules are more flexible these days and because we’re more aware of how easily we can connect via Zoom, I’ve had online conversations with a few friends that I haven’t seen since college.

But here's what I've mostly noticed. People who are ordinarily self-sufficient are admitting that they could use some help. An email arrives, "Kelly, I've never reached out to you before, but I really need someone to talk to." A text pops up, "Is it ok to ask for prayers for myself?" Someone who never would have considered it before tells me they have an appointment with a counselor. It's not only that living through this crisis is stressful; it's also that somehow this crisis has made it ok to be vulnerable, to be more open. In this regard, I hope we never go back. I hope we never go back to putting on a brave front, lying to ourselves and others about how tough we are. Don't you think that if we learn to be more gentle with ourselves, more patient and understanding of our own weaknesses, that we will then learn to act with more grace towards others? When we look at ourselves honestly, aware of both our shortcomings and our good intentions, we are then a step closer to realizing that everyone else is a mixed bag too. I would love for that to be one of the takeaways from this experience. That because we've had more time to think, because we've had fewer distractions, we've learned to accept ourselves rather than judging ourselves, and then we will live in the post-pandemic world as people who are more accepting and less judgmental. What a profound difference that would make.

Our scripture passage for this morning is from the book of Acts, the book that tells us more than any other about the nitty-gritty life of the early church. Here's the first verse: "About that time, while the number of disciples continued to increase, a complaint arose. (Acts 6:1)" The good news is, the church is growing. But there are disagreements, there are factions. There are Christians who are Greek-speaking, who read Scripture in Greek and pray in Greek, and who know little or none of the Aramaic

language, the language of the Palestinians. Then there are those who speak Aramaic, who worship and pray using Aramaic or Hebrew. The church faces the first test of its unity at this moment. Should there be one church for those who speak Greek and another church for those who speak Aramaic, or should they all try to figure out how to live together?

It's not just a matter of which language they should speak. Like all conflicts, it has many facets. The actual issue is this. The church operated an extensive sort of internal welfare ministry - they made sure that everyone had what they needed, clothing, food and other necessities, especially widows who had no other means of support. You can imagine this program became more complicated as the church was growing quickly. Well, the Greek speakers believe that their widows aren't being treated fairly. They complain to the Aramaic speakers.

The leaders of the church call a congregational meeting!

"The Twelve called a meeting of all the disciples and said, "It isn't right for us to set aside proclamation of God's word in order to serve tables. Brothers and sisters, carefully choose seven well-respected men from among you. They must be well-respected and endowed by the Spirit with exceptional wisdom. We will put them in charge of this concern. As for us, we will devote ourselves to prayer and the service of proclaiming the word." This proposal pleased the entire community. They selected Stephen, a man endowed by the Holy Spirit with exceptional faith..." (Acts 6:2-5).

It appears that they are very transparent and straightforward. This is the problem, they say. We have too few people trying to do too many tasks. The church's leaders are trying to run the Thrift Shop and the food pantry and the soup kitchen while

at the same time preparing for worship and teaching Bible Study. Let's decide who's best at which tasks and let's split up the duties. Makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Not unlike the way we operate our church today. Next week, at our annual meeting, we'll approve a group of elected leaders to serve in various capacities, because we know we're not all interested in the same way of serving, and we want the church's ministry and mission to thrive.

The book of Acts tells us that this system worked! The church continued to grow. One of the leaders, who is set aside because of his faith and prayer life, is Stephen. The Stephen Ministry program is named after him.

Stephen Ministry has been a gift in this church for 30 years! Our first Stephen Ministers were trained in 1990. Since then it has been a part of the fabric of caring that has led to our church's internal strength, helping people grow more healthy so that we can serve others from a place of wholeness.

When the church is at its best, we are following the pattern laid out for us in the book of Acts, but...I have to add...we are of course including the gifts of women and not just men! In this pattern, this rhythm, we focus on our internal relationships, getting to know one another on deeper levels, bringing out one another's gifts and strengths, matching people who want to serve with the right opportunities for service, and then we move outward, connecting with the work of mission and justice in the world; the life of discipleship is always an inward journey and an outward journey, both working together in harmony. Stephen Ministry helps us become a stronger church, both internally and externally.

I will admit that I am not much of a football fan. But one of our members has recently called to my attention a practice initiated by the new Cleveland Browns coach, Kevin Stefanski - who was just named the NFL Coach of the Year.

He was named the Browns coach on January 13, 2020, so he was barely two months on the job when the pandemic hit. He realized he was going to have to find a way to build community among the team with none of them being in each other's physical presence. All of the ideas he had when he was hired about what he wanted to teach, the way he wanted to transform the team culture - none of it was going to work. He had to completely pivot. In a conversation with an old high school friend, who works for Virginia Commonwealth University, he learned about what that school's coach does, something he in turn picked up from a college coach in Texas.

So Stefanski began asking players, one at a time, on Zoom, to share their life stories, based on these four areas - four "H"'s. Talk about your History, your Heartbreak, your Heroes and your Hopes. One by one, the Browns' players have been sharing their stories, sharing details of their lives that aren't always easy to talk about. Many commentators attribute the Browns' success this year to Stefanski's leadership and to the culture of trust he was able to build. Running back Kareem Hunt says, "I was able to learn things about people I probably would not otherwise have talked to. It brought us closer as a team. I have those guys' backs." Players talk about their relationships with their fathers, and about the kind of fathers they're trying to be. They share concerns about ill family members. They share stories of mistakes and failures in their pasts, and a lot of heads shake in agreement. They begin to see the ways their

stories are similar. They begin to care about each other, not just as teammates but as people.

I asked the team physician and our church member Rob Flannery if he had been a part of any of these 4H conversations. He said he thinks the most important “H” is “History”; thinking about our history requires us to reflect on what we’ve learned both from our highs and our lows.

The Cleveland Browns players have been vulnerable with each other as never before.

During this pandemic year, these players have actually been, metaphorically speaking, unmasked with each other.

Once we finally are able to take our physical masks off and hug each other again, how do we want our relationships with one another to be? Will we be more real, more honest, more vulnerable? More accepting and less judgmental? May it be so.