

Union Methodist Church

Sermon Outline: **The Acts of the Holy Spirit, Part 7: Serving (Ministering) the Word**

July 30th, 2023. Pastor Michael Larbi

Readings: **Acts 6:8-15, 7:51-56; Matt 13:31-33, 44-52**

1. **Recall: The Kingdom of God**

- **Kingdom:** Oxford Dictionary definitions
 - "a country that has a king or queen as head of state
 - the United Kingdom
 - the Kingdom of God (=heaven)"
 - "an area controlled by a particular person or where a particular thing or idea is important"
- **The Kingdom of God consists of**
 - **Heaven**
 - **Wherever God's will rules** - the Lord's prayer includes:
"thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."
 - **When and where God's righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit are dominant.**

"the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" Romans 14:17 NIV

- **A manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit is God's Kingdom come**

Jesus said,

"if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you." Matthew 12:28 NRSV

- **The Kingdom of God is both a present reality and a future reality**
We can experience the Kingdom of God now, when we get to heaven, and when Christ returns in the new Jerusalem.

2. **Parables of the Kingdom of Heaven/Kingdom of God**

Matthew 13 contains a number of parables (stories, allegories) that Jesus used to teach us about the kingdom of heaven. Three of these relate to sowing seeds and reaping a harvest. These are our focus in today's sermon.

○ **Lessons: Parable of the Sower**

- The seed is the word (message) of the Kingdom
"The Sower sows the word" Mark 4:14
"The word of the kingdom" Matthew 13:19 NRSV
- The human heart is the ground for the Word
- The seed will not bear fruit,
 - If there is no understanding of the word (seed on the path)
 - If it does not take root (rocky ground)
 - If a person is focused on the cares of the world and wealth (thorny ground)
- The word will bear fruit if it is understood and takes root (good soil).
Understanding is made possible by the Holy Spirit.

○ **Parable of Wheat and Weeds**

In this parable, Jesus gives us another perspective with important lessons about the work we are engaged in as the Church and the final harvest of the kingdom in the future.

- Jesus sows good seed (wheat - children of the kingdom) but the devil sows bad seed (weeds - children of the devil) in the field (the world).
- Final harvest involves the angels bringing the wheat out of the field and the weeds being thrown into a furnace.

○ **Parable of the Mustard Seed**

Jesus again explained the kingdom of heaven using sowing seed as the metaphor:

"He put before them another parable: **"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."** Matthew 13:31-32 NRSV

Jesus also used mustard seeds to teach us about the power of faith.

"Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." Matthew 17:20 NIV

"What is commonly referred to as the mustard plant are in fact three different species: brown mustard (*Brassica juncea*), white mustard (*Brassica alba*),

and [black mustard](#) (*Brassica nigra*). **The plant grows about 3 feet tall** with bright yellow pretty flowers, which are also edible.”¹

A Google search should give you references and pictures of wild mustard trees which can grow to at least 10ft in height.

3. Advancing the Kingdom of God: Serving the Word

o **Serving the Word**

The Word is the seed we are to sow constantly in our lives and in the lives of others. The story of the choosing of the first deacons of the church in Acts 6 is an important lesson for us on what we must focus on as disciples of Christ.

When a need arose in the church for some people to organize the serving of food to those in need, this is what Jesus’s apostles had to say:

‘So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, **“It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.** 3Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. **We will turn this responsibility over to them** 4and **will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.**” Acts 6:2-4 NIV

“ we, for our part, WILL DEVOTE OURSELVES TO PRAYER AND TO SERVING THE WORD.” Acts 6:3 NRSV

- **Division of Labor - no role is insignificant.**

“Brothers and sisters, **choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.** We will turn this responsibility over to them” Acts 6:3

- **The Outcome - the Mustard Seed Effect**

“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.” Acts 6:7 NRSV

¹ <https://www.thespruce.com/mustard-plant-growing-guide-7377609>

- **Stephen, one of the Seven, the first church martyr**
"Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people." Acts 6:8 NIV

Note that Stephen was not one of the twelve apostles. He was a deacon with responsibility for organising food supplies and distribution. But

- he was clearly recognized as a man full of God's grace and power.
- In addition to serving food, he was heavily engaged in serving the word!
- he demonstrated the power of the Holy Spirit ("performed great wonders and signs among the people")

Some people opposed Stephen and they began to argue with Stephen,
"but they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke." Acts 6:10 NIV

Eventually false accusations were made against Stephen.

"Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." Acts 6:11 NIV

He was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin (Jewish religious court of the day – led by the High Priest). But Stephen was clearly not alone, the glow of the life and light of God in and on him was visible:

"All who were sitting in **the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.**" Acts 6:15 NIV

Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?" Acts 7:1 NIV

This gave Stephen the opportunity to serve the word!

He preached from Genesis to the New Testament period, concluding ...

"51 "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: **You always resist the Holy Spirit!** 52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? **They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him...**"

They got so mad they couldn't see straight, to borrow a vivid American phrase. "When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. **55But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.**" Acts 7:54 NIV

Even at this time of great physical danger to Stephen, note the role of the Holy Spirit. Stephen received a supernatural revelation of God and Jesus through the Holy Spirit. No wonder that verse 59 says, "While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

- o **The Word and Message from the beginning of the Church**

The central message is that **Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God.** "**Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.**" Acts 5:42 NIV

What did the early apostles and disciples preach?

"God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39We are witnesses..." Acts 10:38 NRSV

Jesus himself stood up in the Synagogue and read this portion of scripture from Isaiah 61 about himself:

**"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

Luke 4:18-19 NRSV

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, then and now, Jesus is the Messiah who liberates people and destroy the works of the devil.