



GROW

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Back in 1964, a med student named Don Altfeld had been studying for hours at Los Angeles County General Hospital. He took a break from his studies around midnight and hopped in his Corvette to go for a drive. When he got to Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena, a '32 Ford Coupe went wailing past him with what looked like a white-haired grandma behind the wheel. That encounter gave Don an idea for a song, the song recorded by Jan & Dean called, "The Little Old Lady From Pasadena".

*The little old lady from Pasadena
Has a pretty little flowerbed of white gardenias
But parked in a rickety old garage,
Is a brand-new, shiny red, super-stock Dodge!
And everybody's saying that there's nobody meaner,
Than the little old lady from Pasadena
She drives real fast and she drives real hard;
She's the terror of Colorado Boulevard.*

It instantly became a hit. The image of a grandma drag-racing through town struck a chord and the song rocketed up the charts. Dodge built a whole commercial campaign around it, the city of Pasadena used it for a Rose Parade theme, and twenty years later, a contest was held to find a woman who personified the song.

The moral of the story? Never underestimate the power of elderly women. That's not just true in Pasadena. The church in Jerusalem discovered that as well. It may seem surprising, but a group of little old ladies were the catalyst for some major changes in the early church that I'd like to talk about with you this morning.

Acts 6:1-7

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. 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. Brothers, 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 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

How many gardeners do we have here? How many of you grow tomatoes? We tried to grow tomatoes. Once. Apparently you have to water them or something. I'm not really sure, but it's something really high maintenance like that. Actually, vine tomato plants will grow really well around here if you give them enough sunlight. The trick is you have to stake them and train them to stay upright if you want them to be fruitful (and tomato is a fruit, after all). The tomato plants don't just naturally grow the way that is healthiest for them. Left to go wild, the vines will continue to spread out over the ground, but the tomatoes will be small and won't ripen. They need help to grow in a productive way.

That's what was going on in the church in Jerusalem. There was explosive growth, with people coming to Christ by the thousands. It was fantastic. But you can't have that much growth and leave it unmanaged growth. Pretty soon it will stop being fruitful. Just because the life of the church comes from the Holy Spirit doesn't mean it will automatically grow in the way that is healthiest, with the structure it needs. We have to place our stakes carefully to guide the growth in the way that will be the most productive.

This story is especially timely for us right now because New Day is in such a season of growth. We've got a lot more people here now than we had 6 months ago. And that's exciting. We want to take as much as we can from this story because growth needs structure to support it. What structures does New Day need in place to keep us healthy and producing fruit?

In the early church, things were starting to slip through the cracks because of all the good stuff going on. Their cup had runneth over and was beginning to spilloth on the floor. And it showed up in the form of little old ladies, these widows who were being overlooked.

We talked a bit last week about how the church was sharing everything in common. They were beginning to act like family and think like family, where what's mine is yours too. Possessions were shared as needed.

This was particularly important, because as people were baptized into the Christian faith, for many it meant a break from their biological families. You still find this true in many parts of the world. To choose Christianity can mean being disowned by your parents or

other relatives, because you are breaking away from the religion of your ancestors. So these new Christians came to depend on their new spiritual family for support, and sometimes that was financial.

For elderly widows, there was no other support network. They didn't have welfare and employment options for women were few and far between, so if their husbands had died, they were left to depend on the mercy of family. And when family has abandoned you, what's left? The church.

But the church was new at this, and there was a breakdown in the system. It revolved around culture. Although at this stage the church was made up of almost entirely Jewish people, there was still a degree of diversity. There was the local Jewish community, that spoke primarily Aramaic, and there were Jews from the surrounding countries who spoke primarily Greek. And what was happening was that the Greek speaking widows weren't being included in the food distribution. There's no indication that it was intentional. When you couple the language barrier with the sheer volume of people coming to faith on an almost daily basis, you can see how easy it would be, how natural it would be for one group to be overlooked.

But easy and natural aren't the same as right. The gospel regularly calls us to go against what comes easily and to do what we wouldn't naturally do.

Distributing food might seem like a boring, small topic. But what we have here is an issue of injustice, and that makes this a problem close to God's heart. If you read through the Bible, you'll find many verses like this one:

Psalm 33:5

The LORD loves righteousness and justice.

This isn't an argument over meal plans – it's a cry for the poor and the overlooked and the neglected to be treated the way Christ would treat them. This is a chance for the church to be the church, to care about righteousness and justice – even when it means stepping outside of what is easy or natural.

We can become so comfortable with what we know and who we know. But **the gospel is universal**. It wants to be unleashed, like we said at the beginning of this series. For us to be content with only serving people who are like us – whether in terms of language or race or age or economics – to be content with that is to reduce the work Jesus did on the cross.

We serve a big God, and that means constantly stretching our minds and hearts to better grasp and live out what his love means. Rodolpho Carrasco, who is now the Executive Director of Harambee Ministries, had a heart to reach Latinos. When he graduated from college, his goal was to move to East L.A. to help people in the barrio. He said, "I thought I was God's gift to Mexicans."

His plan was to rent a room, get a job in the local high school and just live for Jesus. Then he met John Perkins, founder of Harambee Ministries, who asked him to come work for him in a mostly African-American neighborhood. It didn't quite fit the plan, but Rodolpho figured it would be a good place to learn. So he took the job and immediately identified who he wanted to reach: Four young Mexican boys who came to the after school program. He thought – this is great. I'm living my call. I'm in my zone, ministering to the people I know God has called me to.

There was only one problem: Those boys weren't interested in him at all. The more he pursued them, the less effect it was having. One day he was standing outside Harambee, trying to figure out what to do next. He felt a tug on his shirt and just ignored it because he had to figure this out. He felt another tug and just wanted to go away. But he looked down and there was this little black boy pulling on him. "He Rudy, watch this."

Then he did a flip for him. Then he climbed up the fence, waved and said, "Rudy, watch me." And he says,

"In that moment, I had an epiphany: There's what you think you're supposed to be doing, and then there's who God sends you. I thought my holy mission was to reach Mexicans like myself. God showed me that He cares about everybody. He cherishes Mexicans, but he also loves little black boys, and so many others whom he calls his children."

Who's tugging at your heart right now? Have you been focused in one direction, when maybe God is trying to get your attention somewhere else? Who are we as a church neglecting or overlooking? We don't want to settle for what is easy – we want to minister in a way that shows the gospel is universal.

That's what the apostles wanted, and it's really refreshing to see how quickly they jumped into action. They saw right away that this had to be addressed.

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. Brothers, 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 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

What do we do when we need to make some adjustments? The apostles had several choices as to how to respond to this situation, and the one that they picked reveals many things about their philosophy of ministry. For example, they seemed to know how to **go for the gold**.

Luke tells us that the Grecian Jews began to complain against the Hebraic Jews. The word he uses there has really negative connotations. It refers to a subversive, underground murmuring or grumbling. These people were stirring the pot without helping bring the situation into the light.

It is human nature to grumble and complain to those around us about the things that concern us. But all that does is increase frustration. Let me just put in a plug here: If you ever see things happening at New Day and you feel something important is being overlooked or neglected, don't stir the pot – go to someone who can do something about it and don't go to five other people first to confirm your concern. Remember when you were a kid and all your friends would be really excited about a field trip or something until one person said “This is stupid.” It could kill the whole thing for everyone. There is so much power in words to poison someone else's experience.

I'm not saying to swallow your frustration. God may very well have put a dissatisfaction on your heart to help his church grow in the right direction. Speak up! Just channel that thought away from grumbling and into a productive conversation that can address it. Churches become less healthy when legitimate concerns deteriorate into sideways complaining.

But back to the disciples. They could have taken the opportunity to lecture the group on the dangers of complaining. They could have said Christians need to respect our authorities and have a cheerful attitude. But instead they listened past the grumbling to ask, “Is this a legitimate criticism?” That's what I call going for the gold.

I've mentioned Gordon and Gail MacDonald before. When they were in their early years of pastoring a church on the East Coast, they used to be crushed by the critiques and complaints they received from members of their congregation. Little anonymous notes about what someone didn't like. Second-hand reports of people being unhappy about something. Gordon and Gail would take them all so personally. But then they decided they were going to move past that and look for the nugget of truth in whatever someone said. They began to search for the positive action steps they could take, even if the complaint itself had been presented very negatively. They would ask each other, “What's the nugget?” and forget the rest. That takes a lot of strength and self control.

When I first started writing for a living, whenever I finished a draft of an article, it had kind of a mystique for me. I didn't even want to go back and edit it myself, because it seemed like it was purest just the way it came out, like I had given birth to an amazing work of art. But my first boss taught me that's not how writing works. If you want it to be better, you let yourself be edited. People with a little more objectivity can make valuable suggestions that improve the final product. But you have to get over the natural tendency to be defensive and protect your work as if it's sacred.

Do we want to be more fruitful, both as individuals and as a church? That will take getting past the negativity of criticism and going for the gold nugget of truth it contains. Where's the seed of an idea that is worth making changes to pursue?

The apostles had thick skin and were able to focus on the need behind the negative. But what's interesting is that although they agreed that something had to be done, they didn't

jump in to do it themselves. Here we have a justice issue, and justice is always close to God's heart. Why wouldn't the apostles be all over that?

It was very simple really: They knew what they were about. They demonstrated that they wanted to **major on the mission**.

God had given them an assignment, and it all revolved around his word. They were teaching and preaching, explaining what Jesus had said and done. Helping people understand the good news about the resurrection and the implications of it for their lives. And they were praying hard all the time.

Think about it: Thousands of brand new Christians with no written New Testament yet. The stories of Jesus hadn't been recorded and copied off for everyone to read. The apostles are the sole sources of information for this new church.

I can think of all kinds of responsibilities the apostles might get saddled with. How do we break people up into smaller groups? Who's going to go visit all the new families? What are we doing for the kids? It all needed to be done. But the apostles had the wisdom and discipline to say, "What we're about is the Word and prayer. That's it."

Business author Jim Collins wrote, "Good is the enemy of the great." Focus on what you know God wants you to do. There are any number of good things to do at any given time. Needs will pull at our hearts and seem like the most important thing, when maybe God has already put something on our plate and wants us to stay focused.

We can either get bounced around by everything that comes up or we can make the conscious decision that no matter how good or pressing the opportunities we'll be, we won't let them interfere with what we know God has asked us to be about.

Which brings up a question: Do we know what we're about? Not all of us are as clear about it as the apostles. Sometimes it is these types of crisis situations where we begin to catch a glimpse of what God might have in mind for us. That's what happened for seven guys in Jerusalem. Up until this point, as far as we know they hadn't had a sense of mission for themselves. But then they were entrusted with this new task.

The apostles shared a value with New Day, and that was to **Power up the People**. They believed like we do that every Christian is a minister. That showed up even in how they decided what to do about this situation. The disciples got the whole group involved in coming up with a solution. The church took ownership of the process.

Then they put forward these seven names – Steven, Philip and the rest. And here's what I'd like you to pay attention to in this: Every one of the names put forward was Greek – not Hebrew. The leadership chosen was from the same language background as the widows who were being overlooked. Isn't that beautiful?

Listen, there may be something in your God history that God is wanting to use in someone else's story. It may be a place of deep pain or forgiveness or brokenness. Sometimes that is where the best ministry happens – out of God's second chances. Why? Because you're speaking someone else's language.

Whose language do you speak? In Jerusalem, a passion for helping these women has arisen in their own community, and the need has surfaced a whole new crop of leaders who are about to discover a whole new way to serve God with who they are.

Wayne Cordeiro wrote, "The ministry of the Church is not the responsibility of a few professionals; it is the divine responsibility of every single one of us."

When he says the ministry of the church, he's not just talking about volunteering to roll up banners or teach Sunday School. The ministry of the Church is much bigger than what happens here on Sunday mornings. It's out there in your everyday life. The clients you work with during the week are the ministry of the Church. The kids you carpool with are the ministry of the Church.

When I was growing up, we would have guest speakers come through our church from time to time, retired preachers who would introduce themselves to the congregation and say proudly, "I'm happy to say that my children are both in full time ministry," meaning they worked for a church somewhere. Well my first problem with that statement was that it was a little bit braggy. But secondly, what does that make other people? Part-time Christians? We're all in full-time ministry.

Whether you work at a desk or in a hospital or behind a counter, or in a church -- it doesn't matter. You are a minister, put in place by God to serve people and his church.

Do you see yourself that way? Do you see your life situation that way? I remember at one point when I was in seminary, looking toward being a pastor some day and working full time at the ad agency. It struck me that my sense of calling really wasn't about who paid my check. And if I felt God was calling me to be a pastor, that the call was in effect while I was still at my day job. And I was the closest thing a lot of those people would ever get to a pastor. That changed the way I looked at my relationships with coworkers, because now I saw my interactions with them in a spiritual way. I began to be more conscious of opportunities to share my faith through what I said or did. And it brought home the importance of living with integrity, because they all knew what I claimed to believe.

What's so remarkable about this little story in Acts is that when the apostles suggested finding seven people, they had in mind a couple requirements:

Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.

They didn't say, "Look for people with a food service background," or "Try to find candidates with strong people skills," although those would be helpful characteristics. Instead they looked for men who had demonstrated wisdom and who were full of the Holy Spirit.

Serve through the Spirit

In my mind, this is seeing a task in a whole new light. The job was an administrative one – nothing that seemed especially spiritual. But the quality Peter and the other disciples wanted to see in those people was an ability to do the job in a spiritual way.

When I say every Christian is a minister, most people think that means talking about Jesus on your job. But what I'm saying is that the job itself can be the ministry. The very tasks you perform can be part of what God calls you to do – not just something to fill the time until you get a chance to speak up for him.

One of my favorite sections of Scripture comes in the middle of God giving instructions to Moses for how he wants the Tabernacle to be built, the traveling temple that went with the Israelites. Listen to this:

Exodus 31:1-5

Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts -- to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship."

God filled this man Bezalel with his Spirit – not to preach or teach or evangelize or heal people. He filled him with his Spirit to be a craftsman and artist. He filled him with his Spirit to do construction and finish carpentry. That was as much his purpose as it was Moses' purpose to lead the people. What is your skill, your art? Your boss is not your boss – you work for the Lord!

Colossians 3:23

Work hard and cheerfully at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.

We need to rethink our work and not dismiss it as unimportant or unspiritual. God can fill you up like Bezalel to do beautiful things.

The disciples used the word *diakonos* to refer to serving tables. And it was the exact same word *diakonos* they used to refer to their own ministry of serving in the Word and prayer. They made no distinction between the two. One wasn't more important than the other.

Author and pastor Rick Warren used to have a somewhat skewed view of what ministries were most important. Then he went back and discovered over 2,000 places in Scripture that talk about God's heart. He said,

"I went to Bible college and two seminaries – how did I miss God's compassion for the poor? The Church is the body of Christ. But the hands and feet have been amputated and now we're just a big mouth."

We need to be more than a mouth. We need to not only have Christians in all kinds of professions and places to TALK about Christ. We need to have Christians who are full of the Spirit and wisdom, who are skilled at what they DO -- stellar sales people and doctors, incredible programmers and construction workers, outstanding babysitters and hairdressers and landscapers and truck drivers and artists and writers and teachers.

In his book, *Taste & See*, Tim Dearborn tells of a woman in his church named Grace. For 40 years, Grace had an awe-inspiring ministry to street people in Seattle. When asked her secret, she replied, "If you want to have ministry on the streets, then walk slowly and it will happen to you. If you want to avoid it, then walk fast."

We can all do our jobs, go about our business and NOT have our work be ministry. We can barrel along with our eyes down and never even see the possibilities. But if we'll slow down and listen for God, he'll bring the ministry opportunities to us.

When all these pieces came together in Jerusalem: the apostles looking for the nugget in the criticism, recognizing their own priorities, empowering other people, and then seeing those people minister in new ways by the same Spirit, here's what happened:

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Christianity took off. The fire caught and grew. Although there were many different types of service going on, the church was all headed in the same direction with the same goal: seeing the word of God grow in influence and seeing more people put their faith in Jesus.

The gospel is universal. It doesn't want anyone left out or neglected. And there's a place for everyone in helping see it spread. Whether you're a preacher or a painter makes no difference. We're all serving the same Jesus, working toward the same goal.

In just a few minutes we're going to come to the Lord's Supper to celebrate the one who came to serve, who gave his life in ministry. As you think about what he did for you on the cross, this morning I'd like you to do two things.

First, ask him to show you who or what is being overlooked in your life. Where's the blind spot in your heart either toward a person or a sin or a need? There's what we think

we're supposed to do for God, and then there's the people and jobs he puts in our lives. Ask him to open your eyes to what's in front of you.

Secondly, ask him to fill you up with his Holy Spirit. If you've already put your faith in Christ, you have his Spirit living in you. But other things can crowd him to the fringes of our lives. All the service done in Acts was by people filled with the Holy Spirit. Ask him to make that room in your life for more of him. If that means confessing some sin and getting rid of it, do that right now. Maybe it means letting go of things that are good but not great. Even ministry can replace the Holy Spirit at the center of our hearts if we're not staying focused on the mission and purpose he has given us.

Ephesians 2 tells us that there are good works God has prepared for us to do. There are tables for us to wait on, words for us to speak, people for us to serve. As we do that in the power of the Spirit, God's kingdom will increase. What an awesome privilege to be a part of that.