

The Heart of the Leader

April 17, 2021 Scott Gunn

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.” —Acts 6:1-2

I’ve been a parish priest. There were always lots of expectations of my time. People expected me to come to meetings. Others expected that I would visit parishioners at home. One person used to drive by to check to see if my car was in our parking lot; he expected me to be sitting in my office ready to chat with those who stopped by. I don’t recall many times when anyone made sure I was being attentive to the word of God.

My experience isn’t unique, I think. And it’s even worse for our bishops. We’ve built up these jobs for our clergy that leave little time for attending to the word of God. There are institutions to run, people to please, and funds to raise. What if we returned to the view set forth in Acts? What if we said the most important thing for our priests and bishops as attending to the word of God—studying the Bible, leading classes, praying with the scriptures, and of course preaching?

What if we said that we’d find people to do all the other work? The disciples delegated caring for widows to deacons. Think about this. What’s more important than feeding people? Not much, if we think about our mortal bodies. We have a tendency to prioritize mortal, earthly concerns. Acts shows us that the earliest disciples had a different view. Their urgent priority was the feeding of souls, the eternal, heavenly realm.

Eugene Peterson gives excellent advice to clergy in his book, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*. He suggests that clergy block time out on their calendar for prayer and study. When someone wants to make an appointment then, the pastor is to say, “I’m sorry, my calendar will not permit it.” It’s a way to protect time for the most important things.

If you are reading this as a lay person, you can help! Encourage your pastor to make time for God’s word. Encourage the vestry or church board to support their pastor in carving out time for the most important things.

If you are reading this as a clergy person, ask yourself how you might implement the vision set forth in Acts 6 in your context. How can your church see that people receive the care they need while also ensuring that you have time to attend to God’s word?

[Forward Movement’s RenewalWorks](#) research shows that the heart of the leader is critical to a thriving congregation. Our hearts are best nourished by God’s word.