

## ***Acts 6:1-7: Community Life III***

### ***Preface:***

Last week we talked about how difficult it can be to figure out when we ourselves are meant to obey God rather than people in specific situations. We saw as Peter and the Apostles totally disobey the Jewish High Court, the Sanhedrin, and continue to preach and teach about Jesus, despite the beating and imprisonments it has already cost them.

The Church continues to grow, not just in spite of this, but as a result of it. And we pick up today.

Today's passage is great! It's a great passage, a powerful passage. It can read like this boring sort of moment where we're updated on basic administrative policy or something. It doesn't feel significant. But it's a challenge to us, or can be if we let it. Let's pray we can do that.

### ***Prayer:***

Lord...give us this passage in all its power.

### ***Problem & Answer:***

At its most basic, today's passage presents a problem

and an answer. Both problem and answer are internal to the Church. The Church has a problem, and then the Church comes up with a solution.

We see a number of virtues and can draw a number of principles out of the passage. These are the things I want to talk about. In order to do that well, we're going to move through this passage together, but slowly. I'm just going to read the thing, and interrupt it, interrupt the scene, as I read. So, you can follow along however you'd like.

### ***In Those Days:***

Here's what we read:

### ***In those days when the number of disciples was increasing,***

Luke lets us know that this is happening during the early days of the Church, but is unrelated to the specific events that we're reading about Peter and others getting up to. This is the background. What's going on in the life of the Church while Peter's making noise? This is great because it reminds us that there's always more going on than we're focused on; there's background and it's important to someone. So this is

going on, and Luke continues:

***Bias:***

***the Hellenistic Jews[a] among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.***

Remember that the Church was launched in a moment when Jerusalem was full of faithful Jews from all over the ancient world, who had traveled back to Jerusalem for the special religious pilgrimage festival of Pentecost. The Church is made up of Jews who were locals, shaped by Israel and Jerusalem and its ways, and Jews who were Hellenistic, which is a fancy way of saying Greek-influenced. They were culturally Greek, not Hebrew. They spoke Greek or other languages, not Aramaic; they were shaped by Greek culture. These two groups exist in the Church now.

And the Church is now more than five thousand people, spread throughout Jerusalem. It's become organized. The Apostles themselves seem responsible for managing this organization; we saw, earlier, how people are bringing them cash to distribute to those in

need, including the widows among the community.

But...somehow, somehow, the Hebrew-speaking, Hebraic Jewish Christians are being given less than the Hellenistic, Greek-speaking Jewish Christians.

We aren't given a reason why this is happening. It could be just, you know, a whoopsie that somehow keeps happening.

But of course it is more likely some sort of bias or prejudice on the part of those who are distributing the food. Remember that those who make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem were the most faithful Jews there were, the ones who made sure that they could pull off a pilgrimage, organized their lives around pilgrimage. And there was a continual undercurrent, one hundreds of years old by the time of Pentecost, in Judaism, in which those who were Greek were considered less faithful than those who were Hebrew. Hellenistic Jews were suspect, considered second-class, by those who lived in Jerusalem. This bias and prejudice was brought into the Church along with everything else believers brought with them.

My point is this: The Church is made up of early

converts who had incredibly strong opinions. Opinions about God, about themselves, and about those who didn't think like they thought. The most faithful pilgrimage-ready Jews had become convinced Jesus was the Lord and Savior, and a little bit of conversion doesn't automatically erase opinions, or bias and prejudice. We wish it would. It doesn't. That's why conversion is only ever a beginning, never a conclusion.

The Jewish Church--all Jewish at this point, right?--has become a place where sinful biases and prejudices are being promulgated, replicated. Widows are going hungry. Cultural favoritism is being practiced. There's no triumphalism here. And all we have to do is open the New Testament to see what happens when you toss even more cultures into the mix. But this community of promise for everyone has turned into a community of privilege for a few, for those who are special by virtue of their culture. It's interesting that it's the widows, the most defenseless, who are first to feel this bias, experience it. But thankfully, some Christians speak up for them.

Luke continues, and we read:

## **Calling:**

***2 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.***

I don't know how we hear this, but I hope we don't see a contrast between these two things. The Apostles lay out two things. The first is the “ministry of the word of God,” by which they seem to mean teaching and evangelizing about Jesus. The second is “waiting on tables,” as it's put here, by which they seem to mean this distribution of food. In saying it “wouldn't be right” for them to neglect evangelism for food distribution, they are in no way saying the food distribution is less valuable, less important, or degrading to them. They simply know what God means for them to do with themselves, and it's not that. To the widow who already is a part of the Church, there is nothing more important than food; to the widow who hasn't heard the news the Apostles tell, that's the most important thing they need. We read this and rate these things; but they aren't rated here, one isn't “more valuable” than the other. I've become convinced of this, anyway.

What we realize is what the Apostles realize. The Church is too big for them to manage everything. And beyond that, whatever ad-hoc management is happening, whether or not they are doing it, it's brought in the prejudices and biases that were meant to be left behind. When we have too much to do, we do the things we do negligently. When we have too much to do, we aren't careful in how we do what we do.

It's time to demarcate duties.

Luke continues the Apostles advice:

***3 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 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."***

The Apostles invite the Church--and it seems to be more than just the Greek Jewish Christians, but it's hard to say--invites them to choose seven people, "Full of the Spirit and wisdom" to be in charge of the food distribution. The Apostles can continue doing what

they have been called to do, and these appointees can take care of this important task.

Luke continues:

***5 This proposal pleased the whole group.***

This matters! This is important. This makes sense to the group. It makes so much sense that there's no need to debate or discuss it. They're on board. So the group acts. And again: Whether or not it's the cohort of complainers, widow-advocates who act, or some mixed group of Hellenistic and Hebraic Jewish Christians is kind of irrelevant at this point, because the organization that the Apostles help set up here becomes how the church organizes itself.

We read:

***Choosing:***

***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. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands***

***on them.***

We see Stephen for the first time. We'll meet him again, soon, in an unfortunate moment. We also hear about six others, one of them an adult Greek convert to Judaism, who has now converted to Christianity. But here's what we have to see: Every single one of these seven has a greek name. These are Hellenistic Jews, Greek-speaking, Greek-cultured, like the very widows who have been going hungry.

The church has appointed over this process members of the aggrieved party. They put in charge those who were like the ones experiencing bias and prejudice. This is the very opposite of victim-blaming; it's victim-affirming. It's a structural, organizational way to protect those who are most likely to be neglected and mistreated.

This is a radical thing to do. We tend to avoid giving power to people who have been abused or neglected by the system, because we're scared they're going to turn around and abuse us, somehow. Retaliate.

But this choice reveals that this community, the Church, is meant to be one of not only non-retaliation,

but belief in the best of what others have to offer it.

And the Apostles pray and lay their hands on the seven; they model of ordination, setting someone apart for a special task. These seven are our first deacons, in the Church, if we're familiar with the term. Deacon comes from the Greek word, well, "deacon," which means "service." Importantly, though, in this scene Luke talks about both the Apostles and these deacons "deaconing." The Apostles "deacon" the word of God, serve the word of God; these seven "deacon" the tables, "serve tables." And the phrase "serve tables" may itself be an idiom that means more like "run the business." So, again, this isn't a lesser task; just a different, important one.

### ***News Spreads:***

And this is the end result, Luke tells us:

***7 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.***

This organizational process helps the word of God

spread, the news about Jesus go out. Luke links the spread of the good news about what God has done through Jesus the Messiah to this organizational restructuring of the Church itself. Not only are the Church growing, as more and more people in Jerusalem decide to trust Jesus, Temple Priests are starting to trust God, wake to the truth of Jesus as the Law and the Temple's culmination, apex. Our last passage was about them raging to kill Peter and the other Apostles; now those same priests are becoming convinced of the truth of their message.

***Principles:***

And there are principles all over today's passage that the Church desperately needs to remember.

We need to remember that we're not free from our prejudice and our bias. We need to remember to listen to those who feel wronged. We need to ensure those who have experienced prejudice and bias are given real authority to protect against it in the future. We need to remember that governance matters in the Church. Things need managed. We need to remember that sometimes it is our governance itself that leads to the spread of the word of God.

***Not Free, Listen:***

We need to remember that we're not free from our prejudice and our bias. We need to remember to listen to those who feel wronged. The Apostles take the complaints of this wronged party seriously. They listen. They respond. They don't imagine that because the Spirit is among them, they'll be free from the worst ways of the world. And at this point, they don't even think Gentiles can be saved, enter the Church. They have their own biases. We have to take seriously the complaints of those who lament injustice and evil and sin in the Church. To ignore them is to fail. And that's true even when, like in today's scene, it's not the wronged who speak, but their allies. And of course allies have a stake in the wrong of those they care for; that's what it means to speak for someone who doesn't have a voice. We cannot blame or shame or defame victims; but support them in real, tangible, powerful ways. That's what listening and responding well looks like for the Church in today's passage.

***Real Authority:***

We need to ensure those who have experienced prejudice and bias are given real authority to protect against it in the future. Leaders must advocate for those who have the smallest voice in a group; they

become a sort of immune system against the selfishness of the world's prejudice and bias and sin. If they abuse that authority, well then...they are treated the same as anyone who abuses authority and power is treated, which is to say, good and with mercy, but they don't get to keep their power. Today's passage models for us a principle of leadership: The minority perspective matters. If it was in fact the Apostles themselves distributing the food in the first place, they themselves were blind to their own prejudice and bias. But they were sensible and strong enough to ensure that those they had prejudiced, the widows they were starving, would be able to protect themselves against the accidental bias the privileged majority had.

### ***Governance:***

We need to remember that governance matters in the Church. Things need managed. People are called to various tasks, set apart for various tasks, commissioned and appointed by the Church to do things. And it has to be this way. Not any one group of people can do everything; not any one individual can do everything. Peter may have stood up among the Apostles, but even the Apostles couldn't stand up among the Church and take care of all its needs. Good governance aligns with Jesus' character; it at least

takes into account the awareness of how power can be abused or misused that is present in today's scene. Simply put, today's passage reminds us that the Church will always need to organize itself well, in a way that responds to its own needs, problems, and situation.

***Spread:***

We need to remember that sometimes it is our governance itself that leads to the spread of the word of God. Sometimes how we structure ourselves enables us to be better or worse at communicating, by word and deed, who Jesus is. The first Church organized itself in a way that those who were being put down were able to be pulled up; that bore witness to Jesus' way of life. Its first leaders knew what they were called to do and what they weren't called to do, and were able to clarify between what was urgent, and what was important. That bore witness to the priorities Jesus sets for his people, and the gifts the Spirit gives individuals for the good of all.

As I've worked with a number of congregations nearby, sometimes even with their governance teams, I've come to appreciate one aspect of our structure over others, which is simply that we're nimble. We're

lean. I appreciate that the way we, as a congregation, have structured ourselves enables us to be responsive. We can respond to needs in our community quickly, to needs we have among one another quickly--as long as we know about them, of course. But I know congregations who have structured themselves in such a way that they cannot be responsive, and in fact, even though they move slow, they do it in a reactive, anxious way. I hope that our responsiveness does, at least, result in the "spread of the word of God," as Luke puts it. It's blessing God's reputation, at least.

### ***Toward Conclusion:***

In the end, we realize, I hope, that good feelings, goodwill, don't change broken systems. Only a new way of organizing can affect broken organizations. You can't like your way into program management that is more just and Christlike. The Apostles had to act, before the Church became a caricature of caring. They did; we were protected until next time.

We need to remember that the Church is not free from prejudice and bias. We cannot ignore the voice of those who feel they have been wronged, or the voice of their allies. We have to give them real authority to

protect against such bias in the future, because good governance matters; the Church needs managed, organized, and structured. And we can structure ourselves in ways that lead to God's word being spread, or in ways that invite abuse and neglect.

In today's passage, the Church takes the bold move of making sure its organizational structure, how it manages its programs, are good to everyone, not just some. They protect those who are most likely to experience prejudice by putting their advocates in charge. They are heard and empowered.

It's a radical thing to do, an anti-ways-of-the-world thing to do, and I think in the end the only way the Apostles were able to do it is because they knew what they were meant to be about. They weren't threatened with the loss of authority, no matter who it went to. They were empowered by giving it away. The only thing they had to protect were the tasks God had set them to. I hope we can all feel that freedom that comes when we know what we're about, and don't fear the loss of any power we might claim. We're at our best in those cases.

So, what do you think? As we go from here? What

stands out in the choices that the Church made for itself today? Can what mattered to them matter to you? To us? What difference does it make?