

**Acts 6:1-11**

*6Now 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. <sup>2</sup>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.<sup>3</sup>Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, <sup>4</sup>while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."<sup>5</sup>What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup>They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. <sup>7</sup>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.*

*<sup>8</sup>Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup>Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. <sup>10</sup>But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. <sup>11</sup>Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God."*

Last week I talked about the power and magnitude of the ministry the early church was doing in the first chapters of Acts, and contrasted it with the story of Ananias and Saphira. When everyone else was sharing and showing generosity, giving any extra funds to those in need of them, Ananias and Saphira held back their funds and lied to the church leaders about the money they received from selling their land, and they fell down dead. It was a weird, cautionary tale in the acts of the early church. This week, we continue in the life of the early church, though not quite as wild and wacky. Sometimes we romanticize the early church for its generosity, for its authenticity and vigor. Many church leaders today have said, "if we could just get back to the practices of the early church..." But here we are in chapter 6 today, and as one scholar sums up this passage: "so much for romantic images of the earliest churches being harmonious and always at peace with themselves."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Skinner, *Acts: Catching Up with the Spirit*, 2020.

You see, as we heard, the Hellenists and Hebrews—both Jewish followers of Jesus—are at odds over an issue of compassionate ministry. The Hellenists were Jews, but spoke Greek and were culturally Greek from living in diaspora. They'd been through series after series of empires taking power over the regions where they'd lived, and as those conquerors took power, they also imposed customs, culture and languages, which is why the people referred to as Hellenists were Jews of Greek language and culture. The Hebrews were also Jews, probably spoke something like Aramaic, and had different cultural understandings. All the same, they were sharing communal meals, and living together in harmony, as we heard in previous chapters of Acts. The fact that they were from various backgrounds and cultures doing this was inspiring to people, and it contributed to the early church's identity and reputation, but as we see today, a problem develops. Somehow, widows from the Hellenist group were being neglected in food distribution. It seems unfair just hearing it, but imagine with me for a moment.

It might be like a situation in Northfield, MN, a two-college town. Here at First UCC, we have a little bit of both – some Ole's and Carls—as well as some of both and some of neither. It's a beautiful church community, vibrant, passionate, seeking to live out the love of God in the town.

Imagine if all of sudden, one Wednesday night at WFFF, John and Bill, who've worked at St. Olaf, and are serving up the WFFF meal, just started ignoring all the Carleton folks in line for sloppy joe sandwiches that night. What if they said, "Move it along, Chris. Don't be looking for food here, Elise. Nice try, Janet. Tonight's just not your night, I guess." What? What's going on? Why are all the Carleton folks not getting any food? Is that any way for the church to act?

That might be what's going on in our reading for today. Or it may have been an oversight. Christians from two different backgrounds and cultures – Hebrews and the Hellenists – are working together in ministry, when suddenly the Hellenist widows aren't getting any food. Though the issue may be as simple as a logistics problem, the reality is that "the wrinkles or offenses fall along ethnic or cultural lines,"<sup>2</sup> and that there may be prejudice happening. Are the widows not receiving food because they are Hellenists? It feels a too close and it feels pretty gross when we consider our world, as we are waking up to all of the racism and xenophobia that already exist in our community and nation.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Now most churches would agree that this isn't how things should be and this way of being together threatens the church's ability to thrive and be Christ's body in the world. So the early church in Acts sees that the problem of the widows not receiving food must be solved, or the church is in danger of devolving "into a collection of sniping factions."<sup>3</sup>

So the early church and 12 disciples solve the problem pragmatically. They called a congregational meeting (which I'm sure were just as beloved back then as they are now...). They raise the problem and figure out a solution. All in favor say "aye". Aye. Motion passed. Meeting adjourned.

Now, you might be asking yourself by this point, what does this have to do with God? God isn't telling them what to do, and no one makes these decisions by speaking on God's behalf, though it does say that the Holy Spirit was present in the seven men. It seems like an internal church issue that was for the most part, resolved. It seems really nitty gritty and kind of dull.

But one interesting thing does emerge. The apostles aren't the ones who do the food distribution. They call the community members to appoint leaders to lead the food distribution. We don't know why they choose 7 people to oversee the food distribution for the widows. We do know that the community lifts up 7 men, who all have Hellenistic names, as if to keep everyone accountable, to ensure that the widows were fed, and that those elevated and empowered to lead were people from the marginalized group. To shift the balance of power toward equity.

Meanwhile, the apostles were still busy doing signs and wonders, while the 7 men attend to the food distribution. And in case there's any sense of a perceived lesser role here, the author of Luke-Acts uses the same words Jesus did to describe the work of the 7. In Luke, Jesus declares that a leader among his followers must be "like one who serves," just as he, himself was "one who serves, or one who waits on tables." "To serve food to others as an expression of care and hospitality," the author of Luke-Acts wants us to know, "is to imitate Jesus."<sup>4</sup> Each in the early church had an important role to play.

The point is that the church needs to have a variety of folks doing a variety of things in order to live out Jesus' message. Because to live out God's love in the world, it will take all of us. God's spirit will prod us to find all sorts of tasks and will

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 22:24-7, and Acts 6:2. Same word is used in both. Also from Matt Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2015 Ebook edition, p 38-43.

accompany us on them, whether it is distributing food like the 7, or sharing good news, like the apostles. One preacher has joked that the seven men were the first kitchen dishwashers of the early church.<sup>5</sup> In our times, they might be the technology gurus, or the prayer shawl knitters, or the gardeners, or the Meals on Wheels coordinators, or you name it.

As we live into this moment in time, as we work to keep the movement for anti-racism moving, as we said at our ZFFF—our online version of WFFF, Wednesdays for food, fun, and faith discussion groups—it is important that we have lots of anti-racism efforts going according to our own gifts and skills. (I'm bringing this particular ministry up because it's become clear to me that we as a congregation have a fire lit within us for anti-racism efforts.) To that end, there is an open, working document that we will be sharing in The Chronicle this week. Council is talking about leadership, visioning, and local partnership efforts to unmask, interrupt, dismantle racism in our community. Pastor Wendy and I are working to decenter white preaching voices and will regularly invite folks of color to our Zoom pulpit. There have been book groups, revitalized looks into the white supremacy involved in our church's history. Our energy for this movement is big. I can feel it in conversations on our Zoom screens, it's so big. We don't even have to be in the same room together to feel the presence of the Spirit, to know that something is happening here, as we live further into who we are as a congregation.

And as we consider the Holy Spirit in our midst, just as the early church did, I want to suggest something unintuitive. I want to invite us into the nitty gritty work of anti-racism in our community. I had a conversation with a local leader about the work of justice in our city. I contacted this person to get my own sense of justice needs in the community, especially in terms of racism and equity.

The person told me, the work that really needs to happen here is the most nitty gritty, boring, unsexy work. It is showing up to City Council or School Board meetings asking the detail questions, like, "why are funds are going to a popular activity rather than to hungry elementary school children who need snacks?" Its sitting and listening and then raising awareness around issues of inequity in our city and schools. It is asking who's at the conversation table and who's missing. And then working hard to extend resources and networking, and sharing skills to elevate and empower leaders of color, for example in our own community, leaders from the non-dominant groups in town, so that the leaders of this town, of our boards, are

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Copenhaver, UCC Daily Devotional

**Lauren Baske Davis**  
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**Sermon for October 11, 2020**

5

representing the underrepresented, just like the 7 appointed to make sure the widows are fed.

You see, it's the nitty gritty details that slowly bend our world toward justice. It's the boring policies, it's the abiding alongside, and elevating leaders from behind, not from front and center. They may seem like small, nitty gritty changes, but they are infused with the agency of God, they are ways of showing up as Christ's body in the world in ways that may seem dull to some but make a world of difference in the system for others. That's why the ancient church community raised up leaders who would not just do the work but make the system more equitable. The activity of God in the world is always about the communities who have the most to lose. We each have a role to play to love and serve our neighbors, yes, but to work towards that day when none of God's beloved children are in need. May that day come soon. Amen.