

February 25 2018  
National Presbyterian Church  
**Together In Faith 7:**  
**Can Love Be Organized?**  
Acts 6:1-7; 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 33-34; 13:1-7  
Dr. David Renwick

In our sermons in the early part of this year, we are looking together at the life of the early Christian church. We're doing so through the eyes of St. Luke in one of the two books that he wrote that we have in the pages of Holy Scripture.

- The first book that he wrote was our *Gospel According to St. Luke*. It's the story of Jesus his life and his death and what happened immediately after his resurrection.
- The second is *The Acts of the Apostles* from which we just read our First Scripture reading. *Acts* tells the tale of the life of those first Christians in the first 20-30 years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection.

So far in our series, we've thought together about the foundational beliefs and practices of the early Christian church, especially focusing on

1. The Resurrection of Jesus
2. Maintaining a relationship with Jesus – through Scripture and the Spirit
3. Maintaining relationships with fellow believers

So we've looked at these foundational beliefs and practices from the early days of the church. And we've also seen how the church grew rapidly, and began to face opposition

On the "Outside" – we saw how many people did not want to hear the message that was proclaimed, and stirred up trouble against this fledgling community. We've seen how God empowered the community, giving them boldness and courage to keep on going even when they were pressed back.

Then the troubles began to move to the "Inside" – last Sunday, as we moved to the fifth chapter of Acts, we saw how the problems which at first came from the outside began to manifest themselves on the inside of the church; we saw how Christian believers began to play games with God and with their faith, trying to impress one another instead of being open to the living God who sees us as we are.

We call those games deceit and hypocrisy. And what we see at the beginning of Acts Ch.5 is God's displeasure and swift judgment on that sin before it creeps in and becomes like a virus or cancer, destroying the whole community.

But having said that: the fact is that this swift act of judgment, on a couple called Ananias and Sapphira, isn't the big fix that ends all problems in the church forever! In fact, Jesus himself taught in a story called the "wheat and the weeds" (Matthew 13:24-43), that his followers and the church would be far from perfect until the end of time. Consequently the possibility is always there that Christ's followers will do things that are destructive not only to themselves, but to the church, so that it becomes or ineffective as a witness to the risen Christ

Sometimes of course, this bad or destructive behavior is intentional – we know what we are doing – and yet we do it anyway! But most of the time (for most of us, I hope), it's not outright evil that causes problems and that leads us on a spiral down, but rather the fact that we are weak! – bad

things happen when we are tired or frustrated, or when we are just short-sighted, dealing with something new or more complicated than we had thought like texting and driving and before we know it, things spin out of control, and we, and others, end up where we never wanted to be.

And this is what we see today in our passage of Scripture in Acts 6 – not intentional sin, but unintentional weakness, a sense of blindness which catches the church by surprise but which, if it is not caught or stopped, can be just as destructive as the kind of sin that is absolutely intentional.

So let me set the scene once again, as we think about our passage in Acts 6:1-7.

- This fledgling group of followers of Jesus had been in disarray.
- They fled when Jesus was crucified.
- They saw him alive and they begin to come back together.
- They dribbled back into Jerusalem and formed a community which becomes empowered by the Holy Spirit
- And this community grows very rapidly indeed. It takes only a few months to grow from 12 to a few hundred to a few thousand
- And with this rapid growth there are needs: enormous spiritual needs.
- Some of those in the church have been with Jesus for three years – they know his message, they've seen his life.
- There are others who are hearing about him for the first time – and they need to be fed spiritually in order to grow in grace.

But

- there are not only baby Christians, hundreds of baby Christians in this community
- there are also some who are hungry – quite literally – widows, and probably others with no means of support.

And those Christians in “First Church, Jerusalem” take the example and the message of Jesus very seriously: they remember what Jesus did – in feeding the 5000. Instead of saying, “*We cannot do this,*” they remembered Jesus turning to them and saying, “*You are the ones who need to do this*”; and they begin to feed the community physically (Matt. 14:16).

And they also remember Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25: to keep in mind those who are hungry; to keep in mind those who have no clothing; to keep in mind those who are sick or those who are imprisoned; to pay attention to the weakest ones in the community, because, says Jesus, “that's where I am that's where you'll find me.”

And they do this, they follow Jesus in this way, and decide that right there in Jerusalem, that they need a Meals-On-Wheels operation to feed the hungry.

So they set up a structure in which people are fed. Hundreds of people are fed day by day, every single day. And this is wonderful. This is marvelous.

*Everything is going along well until, all of a sudden, it doesn't! Then out of the blue something happens which stops them in their tracks.* It's not intentional. Nobody does anything wrong.

There's no scandal! It's just that there are some things they haven't thought about or seen before that begin to come to their attention and if they don't deal with them, then the disintegration and destruction of the fellowship of the church – will not be far off!

And What they cannot see is this, that in the rapid growth of the church, a significant 'divide' is emerging between those whose natural language is Greek (the people called “Hellenists”) and those whose natural language is Aramaic (similar to Hebrew).

And part of their blindness is caused by the fact that everyone in leadership belongs to one of the groups and not the other: *the first leaders of the church – are all Hebrew or Aramaic speakers.* And bit by bit (not on purpose, nobody intends this!), they begin to distribute more food to those who are like them, who they can understand easily, than to the others.

And they only realize this when the grumbling begins; the murmuring – and people finally begin to speak up and say, “Wait a minute! This is unfair.”

Listen to Acts 6:1 again:

“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 how easily this can happen! You set out to do something good. And to begin with your heart is filled with love and compassion, and then “wham”! – an unintended consequence or outcome hits you in the face.

**So fast-forward to the Greek city of Corinth**, 20 years later, and we see it again: *behavior that is not intentionally divisive – but which still had the power to break a community in two.* Remember the story we heard just a moment or two ago as we read from 1 Corinthians 11 about the church sharing in holy communion?

The divide in the Corinthian church – this time – is not a linguistic one: the Corinthians probably all speak Greek. But rather, the divide is a social one, an economic one.

The early church in Greece – and in the city of Corinth in particular – was filled with people from different strata of society, from different economic backgrounds and they came together united by Christ. Something wonderful was happening.

And yet those who were wealthier simply could not understand what it was like to be one of their Christian brothers or sisters who were poor, or were slaves.

So, for example, while they all agreed about what time the services of worship were, and where they would meet (in somebody’s house), what the wealthier folks didn’t realize was that the poorer ones were at the mercy of their owners or their employers.

- They couldn’t leave work when they wanted!
- They didn’t have transportation.
- They didn’t have servants who could help them tell the time of the day (or find a sun-dial!)

SO the poorer folk simply could not turn up at the right place at the right time for worship. And what was happening was that the wealthier ones simply said, “It’s time to get going! Let’s just do it. Whether they’re here or not.”

And with that simple decision – straight forward, rational, the community begins to split.

And perhaps you know how bad or humiliating this kind of thing feels! You turn up some place, you’re under-dressed, wearing the wrong clothes, and everything has begun, it’s the wrong time: and you scream to yourself,

*“Why didn’t anyone tell me? Have I got it wrong? I feel left out. I feel excluded. Everybody else seems to know what’s going on – but I don’t. I WISH SOMEONE HAD THOUGHT ABOUT ME AND TOLD ME!!”*

**Furthermore, deciding whether the neglect is intentional or not – is irrelevant!** Either way, it hurts! The lack of thoughtfulness and planning stings, and divides a community, just as the problems with the meals-on-wheels operation had done 20 years before, in the early church in Jerusalem.

SO FAST-REWIND! Back to the early church in Jerusalem in

Acts 6. When the grumbling begins the church leaders don't ignore it; sweep it under the carpet and turn away. But instead they pay attention to the new voices they've never heard before. They examine the situation, and find that the grumbling is just. That there really is a divide. And that the Hebrew speaking widows really were getting more than the Greek-speaking ones,

And when they realized that, they made a decision **that the church had to become organized in order to love effectively, and to sustain their love for the long haul.**

So, what we read is that, specifically:

- They added to the leadership team
- They established a board of deacons (they became very Presbyterian).
- They gave them a job description: "You're to take care of the needy and you're to do it with justice and with equity."
- They chose people to serve, **and made sure that they could relate to those who felt the injustice most keenly.**

This is really important! But you don't see this unless you read the story carefully: the names of all those selected as the first deacons were all Greek names. And while it wasn't mandated, there was certainly a sense of some kind of common sense affirmative action to correct what had happened before.

- And then they commissioned these new leaders, and sought God's blessing upon them.

This is how our passage reads (Acts 6:3-6).

The leaders of the church said to the whole group,

"Select from among yourselves seven men of good standing

*(Note that to begin with, they all were men; but by the time you get to end of Paul's letter to the Romans, in 16:1, there are women who are deacons as well)*

full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we – for our part – will devote ourselves to prayer and the serving of the word."

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**. They had these men stand before the Apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. And they began their work

And we've been called to ours too: ***not only to love with our hearts, but to love with our minds, and with our organizational abilities – both within the church and within the world.***

Or, to put it another way, if we DON'T think about love this way –

- in terms of using our minds clearly,
- and in terms of structures and organizations that can do good or do harm,
- and if we DON'T deliberately put ourselves in someone else's shoes, and listen before we rush to judgment,
- and if we DON'T ask – who's on the team, and who's left out

Then in both the church and the world the evidence of Scripture is that

- Love will disappear or backfire
- and Good Intentions will inevitably go wrong

I certainly don't think it would have solved all the problems in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, but as a math guy, I cannot help but think that, intentionally or unintentionally, the fact that nobody took into account the rapid changes in demographics in the community over a period of 20 years was a significant omission, leading up to tragic events that followed!

That is:

- While Ferguson's white population decreased by **40%**,
- and it's black population increased by **250%**
- the demographics in the police force and community leadership, *more or less stayed the same.*
- So no one was really able to hear what the other side was saying!

And life was lost, and people were torn apart.

As Christians living our lives in a world with so much injustice, and pain, and illness, it's precisely because we've been called by Jesus to love; it's precisely because we're the spiritual descendants of those first Christians, that we need to be on the lookout for such divides –

- Not just for situations that break our hearts,
- But for systems and structures and organizations that are broken or weak or non-existent, not just in the church, but in our families, our daily work, our society.

And wherever we can, we need to muster the insight and courage to

- shuffle the organizational deck, to create a love that is not just emotional but practical, and that can bring God's blessing for the long haul!!

Here at the church, this is something I've watched with so many of you, involved with our refugee family: dozens of volunteers *organized to love*, so that a previously unknown family from Syria is now loved and embraced and on the road to financial independence

- growing in proficiency in English
- being educated in school
- learning to maneuver a new culture
- and finding a new home with a future

That's how it worked when the Holy Spirit stirred the hearts of the first Christians when they met a bump on the road:

**THEY GOT THEMSELVES ORGANIZED TO LOVE!**

And that's how God surely wants it to work with us today.

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**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800