

Scripture Lesson: Acts 6:1-15

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 116

¹ 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. ² So 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 tables. ³ Therefore, brothers and sisters, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴ while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." ⁵ 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. ⁶ They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ 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. ⁸ Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) – Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others from Cilicia and Asia – stood up and argued with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. ¹³ They set up false witnesses who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us." ¹⁵ And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Acts 6:1-15

4/21/2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"Service Please"

Rev. Amy Terhune

Not long ago, I came across a list of the top ten things you won't hear said in church. I thought I'd share them with you:

10. Nothing inspires me and strengthens my commitment quite like our annual stewardship campaign!
9. Since we're all here, let's start the service early.
8. I am felling called to be the permanent teacher for the Junior High Sunday School class.
7. I love it when we sing hymns I've never heard before!
6. I've decided to give our church the \$500 a month I used to send to TV evangelists.
5. Personally I find witnessing much more enjoyable than golf.
4. I read all the announcements in the bulletin, and I'd like to sign up now to be part of the crew cleaning the kitchen next month.
3. I was so enthralled, I never noticed your sermon ran 20 minutes over time.
2. Pastor, we'd like to send you to this Church Leadership Seminar in the Bahamas.
1. Hey! It's my turn to sit in the front pew.

[adapted from Michael Dudit, <https://www.preaching.com/humor/what-you-wont-hear/>]

We chuckle at this list, but what it really highlights is the fact that living our faith is not always easy or comfortable. It requires things of us – giving, service, change, growth, devotion. Thankfully,

you all are better than most when it comes to giving, serving, changing, growing, and living devotedly, and I'm very grateful to be here in service among you. You want to make a difference in your community. So do I. You want the gospel of Jesus Christ, the love of God, to touch hearts and lives. So do I. That's why we're here. We're not called to be consumers. We're servants, and sharing Christ's love is why we serve.

If we turn to our scripture this morning, we find a lesson from the 6th chapter of Acts.

Before I go further, let me offer a small bit of education. In the United Methodist Church, as well as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of American, the Presbyterian Church, the Episcopal Church, the Roman Catholic Church and probably a few others that I'm forgetting, preachers are encouraged to follow a three-year rotation of prescribed scriptures. It's called the Lectionary, and it ensure that we cover a wide array of lessons, topics, and scriptural resources. Now, as I said, it's 3 years – so there's year A, year B, and year C. Years A and C are great. By and large, I follow them faithfully. But we're in year B, and I don't quite know what happened with year B. Whoever was in charge of quality control for year B dropped the ball. There are a couple of seasons in year B where it's so repetitive that it would be cruel to follow the lectionary and subject you to four or five weeks of sermons on the same thing. So we take a little stroll a few times in year B, and we wander away from the stuff you're used to hearing, which is how we come to land on Acts 6.

I've never preached on it before. Not many have, apparently. There aren't a whole lot of resources for Acts 6 out there. Most of what is out there speaks to the theology and ministry of a Deacon in the United Methodist Church. I wrote about that in the church newsletter and I encourage you to read it and educate yourself more fully about ordination in the church.

I chose this passage because it highlights a curious time in the life of the early church, and because it serves as lynchpin, of sorts, in the book of Acts, when the ministry grows beyond Jerusalem, beyond what they've known before.

When the passage opens, we're given two important facts right away. First, the church in Jerusalem is growing. Remember that when Pentecost comes in Acts 2, the Apostles speak in a bunch of different languages, and visitors from all over the Roman empire here the good news of Jesus Christ in their own language. More on that in a month. But we're told that several thousand people come to Christ that day. Then, Peter gets arrested, makes a big speech to the Sanhedrin, which is the ruling council of Jewish Elders, and several more thousand are converted. Then Peter does some signs and wonders around town, healing and helping people, and several more thousand come to Christ. So the church is literally bursting at the seams. Moreover, remember that Jerusalem is not some Podunk little village in the middle of nowhere. It's a major cosmopolitan center on the crossroads between Europe and Africa. There is every nationality imaginable passing through Jerusalem. And because the Jews had been exiled around the Babylonian empire 600 years earlier, there are Jews that have returned to the holy city across the centuries with diverse language and cultural adaptations. And naturally, word about Jesus spreads through these various enclaves. So the church isn't just growing, it's exploding. The growth is huge! And these new Christians are as diverse as the city that hosts them.

So the second fact we're given is that the Hebrew widows are getting what they need, but the Hellenist widows are being neglected. We don't know for sure what's happening there. "Maybe it was greed or racial prejudice on the part of the Hebrews. Maybe it was grabbing on the part of the Hellenists. Maybe it was neglect on the part of the apostles. Maybe it was just a faulty method of distribution due to language and cultural barriers. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be the last time the church would have to deal with the tension between different groups". [from "What a Serve!" by John E. Harnish, www.Sermons.com.]

The story is told that around 8:00pm on the night of January 30, 1973, Democratic Senator John Stennis of Mississippi was mugged coming home from a long day at the capital. He was attacked outside his home and shot twice. His wife heard the shots, called 911, and Senator Stennis was rushed to Walter Reed medical center, where he was in surgery for at least 6-7 hours. An article published in the Washington Post years later (Dec. 1986) records this recollection from one of Stennis' aids: "The hospital switchboard was overwhelmed with calls until an outsider, unknown to the hospital, sat down and manned the phones all through the night. Only in the morning did the hospital staff discover that the volunteer phone operator was none other than the senior senator from Oregon..." – Mark Hatfield – a republican. It turns out that Senator Hatfield had been driving home himself when he heard on the radio the news of Stennis' mugging. He drove over to the hospital concerned about his mentor, saw the empty switchboard, and figured maybe he could be helpful. [from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1986/12/23/john-c-stennis-appropriations/ebe1c70a-8fa3-4e9c-acd3-be58636c9bae/>].

Neither Stennis nor Hatfield were saints, but I love that story. There have always been those who could straddle the divides in order to forge friendships and do the work that needed doing.

The Apostles paved the way for that to happen long ago. What interests me is that they're not afraid to recognize that things have to change. I notice right off that they are crystal clear about their own calling. They're evangelists. That's the calling Jesus placed on their lives. They are called to pray and preach. Yet for all, they recognize that they're calling isn't the only one that matter. As soon as the problem arises, they can see the vital importance of caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the powerless. This has been the prophetic call on God's people for centuries. The Apostles know full well that when Jesus commanded them to feed his sheep and tend his flock, it wasn't metaphorical. Feeding is just as important as preaching. The church sometimes perceives tension between faith and works, between labor and witness, between private service and public recognition, but the early Apostles would not have ranked one above the other. They were clear about their calling, but believed absolutely that God must be calling others to step up and fill new ministries. So in an epic move, they gather Hellenist disciples together, instruct them to select leaders who can do organize mission well, and lay hands on them. This is the first recorded ordination in scripture, and it isn't traditional Jews like themselves that the Apostles ordain. It's Hellenists. Six, we never hear any more about. But we can be sure they handled the task before them faithfully because the church continues to grow and thrive.

One of those first ordinands is unique. Like the others, Stephen is called to the work of compassion and justice in Jerusalem. He's a gifted administrator and a follower of Christ. In fact, several commentators point out how similar to Jesus he is in many ways. He's not only a deacon responsible for food. He's also filled with the Spirit and wise with words – a trait that wins many more to Jesus, but also gets him in trouble with Hellenistic Jews who have not converted to Christianity. The Scripture calls them members of the Synagogue of the Freedman. It's hard to tell from this exactly why they despise him so. Clearly, he outsmarts them when they debate theology. But I think he also outshines them in loving others. He's popular because he gives himself in all he does.

Timothy Stackpole was a New York Firefighter, who was severely burned in a 1998 fire. After he recovered, he returned to the force despite the advice from friends and family, and despite the fact that he could retire comfortably. Why? Because he cared about helping people. He felt called to save lives. He was a great fire fighter and passionate about his work. In the summer of 2001, Timothy was promoted to captain. It was in that capacity that he ran into the second tower at the WTC on Sept. 11. He was in the stairwell when the building collapsed and took his life. But Timothy knew his calling—to save people. [from <https://ministry127.com/resources/illustrations/service/>]. Stephen was called to that work as well. He saved bodies and souls.

And when they can't get Stephen by honest means, they resort to dishonest means. Now if all this sounds familiar, it's meant to. The author of Acts is drawing a parallel. Followers of Jesus will imitate him. They will have similar gifts. They will tap into the same Spirit, the same Love flowing from the throne. And they will face the same persecution.

As they bring him for trial, they accuse Stephen of blasphemy and of forsaking the faith of Moses. But Robert W. Wall writes that "Stephen's transfiguration before his accusers, who 'saw his face was like the face of an angel,' echoes the Old Testament story of Moses's descent from Mount Sinai, tablets in hand, when 'his face shown because he'd been talking with God.' This intertextual echo glosses Stephen's trial with irony that it is Stephen, accused of blasphemy against Moses, and not the Sanhedrin, who is now Israel's authorized interpreter of Moses." [from Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. X (L.E. Keck et al, eds; Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN) pg. 123.]

They never see the connection or the irony, and Stephen becomes the first martyr for the faith. At the end of Ch. 7, Stephen looks up to see Jesus waiting for him, and even in death, he emulates his Lord by praying for the forgiveness of those who are stoning him. He gives his life in service to Christ. And all these centuries later, we still study Stephen, for he understood that servanthood is essential to following Christ, and he truly lived it.

This lesson reveals that we're not all called to serve the same way. That's not a news flash. But it also shows how the church must change and adapt as we engage ministry. In the April edition of *Atlantic Magazine*, there was an article by Derek Thompson entitled "The True Cost of the Churchgoing Bust". It was written by an agnostic, who found himself surprised to lament the fact that as the church shrinks, the opportunities for real community shrink with it [see <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/04/america-religion-decline-non-affiliated/677951/>]. I don't disagree. Looking forward, the church may, in fact, have a viable ministry in simply offering food and fellowship and community in ways it hasn't really done since its earliest days. On the other hand, we have options to build community in ways I could never have imagined even five years ago. We started with things you never hear in church. Let me close with things you may hear in church 50 years from now. Like what? Well, we have a young man in this congregation who is doing an online ministry on Tiktok. And it's working. People connect. I have a colleague initiating online ministries full time – it's his appointment. And we're not just talking about online blogs or prayer chains, but actual discussion rooms. He uses google translate all the time because there are Christians from all over the world coming together in there to talk and he has to figure out what they're saying. He has a worship service for Trekkies online. And he also has a unique ministry to gamers in MMORPGs (or massive multiplayer online role-playing games). I'm not sure how it works when you get elves and wizards and minitours and mermaids and avatars and all these virtual characters together in a worship event in an online game. I certainly can't explain it, but it's working. They give. They support mission around the world. They grow. They connect. They're sharing the love of God on another dimension, but who knows what good may come, what hearts may be touched, what souls might be saved for Christ. And that's the mission.

The church of the future may not look like anything we've ever seen. Some of it may be virtual, yet real as real can be. I won't knock it. I won't limit what God can do. Because when all is said and done, it's not enough for me to simply worship Jesus and go home. I want to serve Jesus. I want Jesus to use us. I don't want to merely put my faith in Jesus. I want to channel the faith of Jesus in my life; in our ministry. That's what Stephen did. The early church was far from perfect, but it was open to Spirit moving. It imitated Jesus in service, in sacrifice, in practical problem-solving, in trust in God. And it changed the world. We can do the same, my friends. Thanks be to God! Amen.