

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

July 2, 2017, Pastor Jeff Harrison

What Community Needs

Acts 6:1-7

Introduction:

A. Jeff's basketball team illustrates challenges in community

Good morning friends, and an early Happy Fourth of July to all. Now as we continue our sermon series on the book of Acts, I think it's time for you to know that your Pastor of Family Ministries had quite the basketball career. In fact, I made it all the way to warming the bench on the 9th grade team. See the coach in the middle of the picture? Move two over to the right, and you'll see me.

Now you don't have to tell me how impressive an athletic specimen I was, I know. And if you're wondering, my arms were really that big. I was definitely not holding them out a bit from my side and flexing them. And did I mention yet that we won the championship? Well, we did, and I like to think those "garbage time" minutes I played in a few games whose outcome was long decided were pivotal to our success.

But despite the team's success, it wasn't all smooth sailing. We had challenges along the way. One point of conflict was that we had more players than were needed to play in each game. And coach did not have a Gregg Popovich philosophy of key players taking a night off for rest and for others to gain experience, so some were unhappy about hardly ever playing. And that wasn't the only thing putting community at risk. We had a lot of diversity as well, economic, ethnic, political, religious, personality, you name it. For instance, one of my teammates came from a home with loving Christian parents and a dad who was a wildly successful lawyer, while another guy had such a rough home life that he had to live with another family on the team.

Now we had good times as a team, and we won nearly every game we played. Yet along the way the team still struggled at times through hurt feelings, heated arguments, sarcasm, misunderstandings, selfishness. Our success as a team did not guarantee that we'd flourish in community.

B. What helps community to flourish?

Now I'm thinking I'm not the only one here who has experienced challenges in community. At school, in family, with neighbors, at work, on a team, with friends, even in the church. Maybe you've got a person or group in mind that really hurt you, or that you really hurt.

Or a relationship where you tried your best to salvage things but it still ended horribly. Perhaps you're even sitting next to someone with whom you had a heated argument on the way here, to church of all places. I've been there.

We long for good community, but it's hard, and we can wonder, "Can community really flourish?" The Bible book of Acts speaks to this subject. So if you've got a Bible, turn to Acts chapter 6. Here we'll see how the early church handled a conflict, observing along the way a vital choice we have that will shape our future together.

I. Orienting to Acts 6 (6:1)

A. Context of Acts 6

While you're turning to Acts 6, let me tell you about the book. Acts is about the early church, those first followers of Jesus after He died for our sins and rose from the dead. In Acts, God works through the church to spread the gospel despite great opposition. And in the first months of the church's existence, many thousands begin to follow Jesus.

So Satan opposes the flourishing church community. Now we're not talking about red colored, pitchfork Satan, but we are talking about a real spiritual being who opposes the church even to this day. And in Acts chapter 5 Satan tries to weaken the trust built up in the church community by tempting a couple named Ananias and Sapphira to lie to the whole church. Then later in Acts chapter 5 Satan uses another tactic to weaken the community, persecution. The apostles, who are the leaders of the church, are jailed, questioned, and beaten for their faith.

And now, here in Acts chapter 6, Satan threatens the church community again in another way, internal conflict. The very early church had two main groups, Hebraic Jews and Hellenistic Jews. Scholars estimate that the Hebraic Jews are about 85% of the early church.¹ They typically lived their entire lives in Israel, their main language was Aramaic, and they were not as influenced by Greek culture.

In contrast, the Hellenistic Jews came from families that had spent time living outside of Israel and Greek was their main language. They also identified as Jewish Christians, but their thinking and lifestyle was influenced more by Greek culture. They made up about 15% of the early church. And so with language, size, and cultural differences between the two groups, there was potential for conflict.

¹ Bock, Darrell, *Acts* (BECNT).

B. Conflict arises in good community

And in Acts chapter 6, verse 1, conflict arises. Please follow along with me as I read.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Back then there was no government assistance, and the opportunities for a woman to earn an income were very limited. So when a woman lost her husband, she was vulnerable, dependent on family or close friends to care for her. And when they were unable or unwilling to help, the church stepped in. For both the Old and New Testament make clear that God's people are to care for the vulnerable, especially within the church. So the early church set up a fund to purchase food and necessities to distribute to widows in need. And I'm thankful for the many here who continue that work of generosity through our food pantry, benevolence fund, and ministries like Bread & Water. Our church community and the community around us are richer for it.

But amid the early church's good deeds, a conflict arose. The minority Hellenistic Jews complain to the majority group that their widows aren't adequately supported. Now if there was any church you think wouldn't be vulnerable to conflict, it'd be the early church. They had apostolic leadership, men whose training was three years with Jesus Himself and were powerfully filled by the Holy Spirit. They had amazingly close relationships. And they saw amazing impact, serving the under-resourced and helping many thousands to have a life changing relationship with Jesus. Yet even the community of that church was vulnerable.

And it's the same at Northwest today. In fact, if you're really engaged here, there's a 100% chance that sooner or later you'll both be offended and offend others. And when disappointment occurs, we face a choice: "service or self." Pastor Ray Ortlund Jr. shows how quickly we can make a mess of things when we choose "self." It's in a blog post entitled *How to Wreck Your Church in Three Weeks*:

Week One: Walk into church today and think about how much you've sacrificed and how under-appreciated you are. Take note of every way you're dissatisfied and of every person who displeases you. Meet for coffee this week with another member and "share your heart." Discuss how your church is changing, how you are being left out. Ask your friend who else in the church has "concerns." Agree together to "pray about it."

Week Two: Email a few other "concerned" members. Inform them that a groundswell of grievance is surfacing. Ask them for now to keep the matter to themselves "for the sake of the body." As complaints come in, form them into a petition to demand an accounting from the leaders. Gathering support will be easy. Even happy members may be supportive if you appeal to their sense of fairness - that your side deserves a hearing.

Week Three: Confront the elders with your demands. Inform them of all the woundedness in the church, which leaves you with no choice but to put forward your petition and demand it be satisfied. Whatever happens from this point on, you've won. You've changed the subject in your church from gospel advance to your own grievances. To some degree, you'll get your way. Your church will need three or four years for recovery. But at any future time, you can do it again. It only takes three weeks.²

II. The leaders' community building response (6:2-4)

A. Humble service to all

Even when things are going well, community can take a turn for the worse quickly, and Satan knows this too. So what helps community to flourish? Well let's learn from how the apostles responded to this conflict over the widows. Please follow along as I read, starting in verse 2.

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. 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.

Now back then, the culture considered it inappropriate to complain to those providing charity. So the wider culture would have approved the apostles selfishly defending their challenged honor. Perhaps the apostles saying something to those complaining like, "Seriously? Jesus Himself appointed us as leaders and He brought you the message of eternal life through us. Yet rather than gratitude, you're complaining about how we're distributing food? I mean, we're leading a church that grew by thousands our first day, and has added thousands more. And

² From <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/thabitianyabwile/2010/01/24/how-to-wreck-your-church-in-three-weeks/> Accessed 6/27/17. I condensed the wording of the blog post.

we've been dealing with that Ananias and Sapphira situation and persecution, and yet we keep praying and teaching and caring for widows. And you've still got the gall to complain to us."

Thankfully, the apostles did not take that selfish path, for Jesus showed them that leadership is about humble service to all. So they freed the minority Hellenistic group to voice their complaint about how the community was not working for them. And the apostles didn't just allow the complaint to be voiced, they took it very seriously, bringing the entire church together to address the issue. The apostles were the servants of everyone in the church community and so they fought for the unity of the whole community, even when it was challenging and uncomfortable. And we must all serve our church community this way as well if we are to flourish at Northwest.

B. Empowering others to serve

Now there's no apology or repentance in this passage, so it doesn't seem anyone tried to marginalize the Hellenistic widows. Rather, as happens today, church leaders sometimes have too much on their plates. There's just not capacity to serve everyone as they'd like, and the community needs more servants to step up.

Now ministry to people with physical needs is an important aspect of healthy community, so the apostles suggest in verse 3 that people full of the Spirit be chosen to lead it. And by empowering others, the apostles help more believers experience the blessings of serving and multiply the community's impact. And it allows the apostles, as verses 2 and 4 show us, to play their role in enriching the community in the most beneficial way, by their prayer and preaching.

III. New leaders empowered to serve community (6:5-7)

A. Spirit filled leaders from disadvantaged group

Let's see now how the community responds to the apostles, starting in verse 5.

⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. 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.

Now Acts was originally written in the Greek language. And in the Greek you see that all seven men listed in verse 5 have Greek names, not Hebrew ones. So probably most, or even all of the seven are from the minority group, the Greek speakers.

And here we see the wisdom of the early church. In response to the complaint from the minority Hellenistic group that their widows are overlooked, the church empowers seven from that group to lead the service to all the widows. And not just any seven from the minority group, leaders filled with the Spirit and wisdom who could be trusted to care for all widows.

B. Churches (and other communities) flourish with servants

The conflict now resolved, verse 7 shows the results. Please follow along as I read, 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.

All communities experience relational challenges. And whether the challenge is at school, in family, with neighbors, at work, on a team, with friends, or in the church, the community needs the same thing to flourish, servants.

We've seen it in Acts 6. Conflict arose, and everyone faced the choice of "service or self". And as Spirit filled servants served, the conflict was quelled. The whole church serving by having a fund to care for widows and continuing to give generously to it even after there was complaining. The apostles serving by responding humbly to the complaint and seeking to unify and serve the whole community, and the seven new leaders stepping up to serve people in need in new ways.

Look back at verse 7 with me. Notice how God blesses this church of servants. They continue to see more people follow Jesus, including many priests. Perhaps the priests were drawn in as they observed this new church being a community where not just the leaders, but rather everyone served; everyone acting like a priest. For that's the kind of community that can really flourish.

And as we continue in Acts, we see that the servant choices made here in Acts 6 have an incredible impact. Take Philip, he started by saying yes to the opportunity to serve widows, and later on God uses him to lead the first Ethiopian to Christ and to spark a joyful revival among the people of Samaria and to multiply his impact as he raises four daughters who become amazing servants too. How might Philip's story, his family's story, and even the church's story been different if he didn't serve?

And there's Stephen, maybe he had a lot on his plate and serving would be inconvenient, yet he still says yes to serving widows. And then God used Stephen to do miracles and preach a powerful message before becoming the first Jesus follower to die for his faith. Stephen's heroic

story inspiring Christians to this day, and challenging us that service must not be limited to only the easy and convenient.

Now imagine instead if the apostles took the selfish path in Acts 6. What if in response to the complaint the apostles made it clear that they were not interested in working with believers with other languages or cultures? Perhaps Hellenistic Jews like Philip and Stephen walk away, deciding the church doesn't have a place for them.

And if they did, the early church would have lost not only their service to the widows, but their best missionaries. For the Greek speaking Christians were the ones best equipped to share the gospel in the language of the main culture and with understanding of that culture. Hellenistic Jewish believers like Philip and Steven, and as we'll see later in Acts, like the apostle Paul.

Conclusion:

A. Take a step to serve

All this amazing community impact started when at a point of conflict, the church community chose service over self. And I'm so thankful for the many of you following in their footsteps. Servants who do more than notice there's ministry undone, they do it. Servants who persevere even when things get difficult. So if you're blessing our church family with service, thank you so much, and please keep it up, we need you.

When I was on the 9th grade basketball team, it was no badge of honor to have a clean, sweat free jersey at the end of a game. It meant you weren't really contributing all that much. Now a basketball team may have more players than it really needs, but God does not save people just to sideline them. He has good works of service planned for all of us, and in this broken world we have unending opportunities to serve inside and outside the walls of this building.

So if you're currently on the sidelines, I am asking you this week to take a step to serve. This week, that's our application. On the church website, nwchurch.org, one of the headings on our homepage is "Serve" and it lists plenty of ideas of ways to serve inside and outside the church. Or come talk to me after this service about opportunities to serve.

B. The Taylors show the community impact of servants

Now as I've praised God this week for our many Spirit filled servants, David and Beth Taylor have been on my mind. The Taylors came to Northwest about five years ago for David's medical residency with the Air Force. It was not an easy transition. The residency had grueling hours and out of town travel and the Taylors had just left all their community behind. They had a toddler when they arrived, Maggie, and were pregnant with their second child. While at

Northwest they had Nora, and then got pregnant with baby Joe, and then had her, and are now pregnant with their fourth child.

In this challenging season, David and Beth faced that choice we all face in community, service or self. If in their situation, I think I would have justified self, thinking, “God has us in a really full season with pregnancies and young kids and residency and so we just can’t really serve others, we’ve got to focus only on our family.”

But David and Beth chose the narrow path of Spirit filled service. Soon after coming to Northwest, they joined my care group and became a tremendous blessing. And no matter how grueling their schedules got with residency and pregnancies and young kids, they stayed, saying that we were family, brothers and sisters in Jesus, and that you don’t leave family when life becomes full. And they didn’t just attend, they served.

To give a couple of the many service examples I could share, when we had our second child, Beth, unprompted, volunteered to watch our oldest multiple times to help us with the transition. And David was always glad to answer any medical questions we had about our kids, and on a rare day off he helped paint room my son’s room. It wasn’t like I asked him, “Hey David, you’re like the busiest person I know, so would you come over and paint for me?” It just came up in conversation and he really wanted to serve. And they did this kind of stuff not only for me as their pastor, but for everyone in the group and some outside it too. And the Taylors could set a boundary, so it’s not like their service came from an unhealthy place. They could say no.

Yet the Taylors also tremendously served children. Beth used to serve as the Children’s Ministry Assistant, and she and David taught the 3’s and 4’s class and led the preschool for Vacation Bible School. Beth even led the preschool at our Family Growth Gathering last month, even though they were packing and David was out of town and she wasn’t feeling her best from the pregnancy. The Taylors took joy in serving the kids who came to church, viewing each one as their kid since we’re all God’s family.

This week the Air Force sent the Taylors to Alaska, so last Sunday we had a going away party for them. We concluded the party with a time for people to share about the Taylors. I wish you all could have seen it. People shed tears as they expressed how much the Taylors meant to them. A couple of people just abruptly ended because they were filled with so much emotion that they couldn’t continue sharing.

The next evening, Steph and I went on a double date with the Taylors to say goodbye. And we talked about the sharing at their party. They told us that serving with their grueling schedule was often hard, that there were times they were not excited about Sunday School or care group or helping an individual, but how they were so thankful they still did.

They were filled with gratitude for how God blessed their service. How God often gave them joy in it. And how they started out lonely and overwhelmed in San Antonio and now had these dear friends shedding tears about them leaving. And the ways friends here served them. David talked about how meaningful it was that when he couldn't be there for his family because of the residency, he knew that friends here would help Beth and his girls when they needed it.

Now we've all got different gifts, vocations, capacities, family situations, energy levels, so being a Spirit filled servant will look different for all of us. But are you, like the Taylors, serving in a way that's leaving a mark on someone? If your schooling or job sent you elsewhere, might anyone shed tears? Those rich relationships, the life changing relationships we talk about here at Northwest, will never take place until we're committed to serving others even when it's hard.

While preparing to become a pastor, I learned a lot about us being the family of God. That we are brothers and sisters called to use what God has given us to serve each other and the world in love. But it's been at Northwest living life with people like the Taylors, and many more I won't embarrass by naming, where I've really learned what it means to be a servant.

And I've still got a long way to go, but I've seen the beauty God produces in the lives of Spirit filled servants. The level of flourishing that can take place as we all sacrificially serve others, God knitting our hearts together along the way.

And if you're open to serving where there's need, talk with me or Pam Jenness about our amazing Children's Ministry team. Each Sunday, over 20 teens and adults serve in our nursery and Sunday School classes. Now we're not that large of a church, so to take advantage of the amazing opportunities before us to make faith investments in our kids and the kids of this community, more of us need to serve. It can't be the same twenty something people every week. So if you're on the sidelines come join us in the game, take a step to serve. Start making investments in kids that make an impact for decades and decades to come, all the way into eternity. And start experiencing more of the life changing relationships with God and people that only really grow as you serve.

C. The Lord's Supper inspires us to serve

As we conclude our service, I can't think of a better way to be inspired to serve than to take the Lord's Supper. In a minute we'll distribute bread and juice. If you do not yet know Jesus as your Savior, please let the bread and the cup pass. Instead, come to Jesus, trusting that He died for your sins and rose from the dead. For we would love to see you join God's family this morning.

If you know Jesus as Savior and are pursuing Him, you are welcome to participate. Please wait until all have been served so that we can take the elements together, for we are God's family, in this together. Ushers, please come forward to distribute the bread. Let's pray...

Right before Jesus was betrayed and killed, He ate the Passover meal with His disciples. At Passover the Jews celebrate God delivering them from their Egyptian slave-masters through the death of a lamb. While celebrating His last Passover, Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper, where we celebrate our deliverance from sin through the death of Jesus, the lamb of God.

In John's gospel, at this first Lord's Supper, everyone's feet needed washing. Back then everyone wore sandals, and the streets were dusty and dirty. There was no trash truck, no indoor plumbing, no social pressure to scoop your animal's poop. And in that moment, everyone there had that choice that we keep facing in community, service or self.

John's gospel goes on to say, "So Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵ After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him... ¹² When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them."

What a profound question from Jesus, "Do you understand what I have done for you?" Do we understand what He has done for us? Jesus, God Himself, humbly becoming one of us and then washing animal poop off His disciple's dirty feet. And then in the ultimate expression of service, choosing the cross, where He suffered not only incredible physical anguish, but even deeper spiritual anguish as He took the wrath for all our sins. Do you understand what He has done for you? The more we do, the more we will serve in response to being served so well. This bread represents Christ's body, given for us. Eat it in joyful remembrance of Him. **Pray.** This cup represents Christ's blood, spilled for us. Drink it in joyful remembrance of Him. **Pray**
Dismissal – Go in peace to love and *serve* the Lord.