

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Jesus' Faithful Witnesses...** **...bearing witness to Jesus' life-changing message.** (Studies in the book of Acts)

#### **Management Matters** (Acts 6:1-7)

Study #9

#### **Introduction: Roller coasters...**

Roller-coasters rise and fall, which brings delight to some people, and nausea to others.

If you're one of those people for whom the ups and downs produce nausea, you can choose to not get in line for the Iron Rattler.

But roller coasters aren't the only things that go up and down, and most of them are unavoidable.

We can't avoid the ups and downs of the weather. Nor can we avoid the ups and downs of an economy's inflations and recessions, the stock market's rallies and corrections, or the sweet and the bitter seasons of life in most any family.

Life is a roller-coaster.

There are ups. There are downs...and so it is for Jesus' church.

This morning, we'll see the eternal impact that follows the wise and God-honoring management of ministry as the first church rides its own inevitable roller-coaster.

Last Sunday, we covered a lot of biblical ground. There was a lot of action.

Next Sunday will be more of the same as we move through the second half of Acts 6, all of chapter 7, and the beginning of chapter 8. That whole section serves as a perfect backdrop for us to observe the annual International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.<sup>1</sup>

Today's time in the Bible is not so sweeping in scope. We'll focus on one episode in the life of the early church. Luke tells the whole story in seven verses.

Last week, our time in Acts gave us quite a roller-coaster ride.

The downside saw the twelve apostles spending a night in jail and then facing a public trial. They endured a brutal beating and a vicious tongue-lashing.

But the story ended with an upward climb.

They left the presence of the Sanhedrin, ***[5:41]...rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. [42] And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not stop teaching and preaching the good news of Jesus as the Christ.***

Here is the church triumphant, riding off in victory to live happily ever after. And just when we thought there was momentum for a continuing upward trajectory, the roller coaster raced downhill again.

The downhill, the challenge, we'll see today is different than those we have seen so far in Acts.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 7 includes the story of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian to be killed for his faith.

To this point, the followers of Jesus have needed to trust God and to exercise their courage and boldness muscles to fight serious persecution.

Today, we'll see a challenge that doesn't come from enemies who want to stamp out the Jesus movement. It comes from within. And, it was a predictable challenge, given the church's explosive expansion.

### **The Rise of a Complaint in an Expanding Church (Acts 6:1)**

#### **An Expanding Church**

Just to review, Jesus' church started out with about one hundred and twenty believers. (Acts 1:15; 2:1) It grew to three thousand on the Day of Pentecost after Peter's first message in Jerusalem. (Acts 2:41)

The numbers swelled to well over five thousand after Peter's second message. (Acts 4:4) And Luke tells us that more and more people were being added to the church (Acts 5:14) as God continued to perform wonders and the disciples continued to boldly proclaim Jesus.

When we turn to this morning's story, we read, again, that ***"the disciples were increasing in number."*** (Acts 6:1) The church was still growing. And the church was changing because of that growth.

#### **A "Non-Homogenized" Church**

##### *Locals*

Residents of Jerusalem would have made up a big part of the church.

These were Jewish people who had lived in and around Jerusalem their whole lives, perhaps in families that had lived in Israel for generations.<sup>2</sup>

Then, there were lots of others from the surrounding area who had come to the big city to be healed of their diseases by the apostles. (Acts 5:16) Many of these believed and became a part of the church.

And we'll remember that the miracle at Pentecost affected people who had come from all over the world to observe Passover, who stayed for Pentecost, believed, and also became a part of the church. They would have given the church an ethnic flair.

Among these internationals was a large presence in the church of "Hellenists."

##### *Internationals (including Hellenists)*

The Hellenists were Jews whose families hadn't lived in Palestine for a long time. Some, for generations, maybe for centuries.

These Jews lived among the Gentiles in foreign lands and had adopted the customs of Greek culture.

These Hellenistic Jews worshiped God in Greek-speaking synagogues in the cities where they lived. Many of them didn't even know or speak Hebrew or Aramaic.

There would have been huge social and cultural differences between the Hellenistic Jews and the native, Judean Jews.

So, the first church ever was made up of a diverse group of people. It was not homogenized but was heterogeneous.

And it isn't hard for us to imagine a large or a small church made up of a broad diversity of attenders...  
 ...who may be single, married, or widowed.  
 ...who may be married with no kids, with kids, or empty nesters.  
 ...whose kids may be home-schooled, go to a private or charter school, or to public school.  
 ...who may differ with each other on political issues and candidates.  
 ...whose ages might range from very young to very old.

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<sup>2</sup> Some, since the return of the exiles under Zerubbabel and Ezra, 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

...whose economic situations might vary drastically.

And on and on we could go. There is always diversity in every church - from the first church of Jerusalem to here.<sup>3</sup>

That would mean that there were differences among the people of the very first church when it came to culture, background, age, demographics, social status, language, race, dress, politics, musical taste - and more.

With respect to faith, the church was monolithic. Everyone was aligned. Everybody believed in Jesus.

But in terms of culture, the church was diverse, with all the wonderful upsides and actual challenges that come with diversity.<sup>4</sup>

The drama we'll see this morning revolved around the needs of a certain group within the church, a group of widows.

We are not surprised to discover that one of the primary benevolence ministries of that church involved the support of widows.

### **A Church's Heart to Help, Wounds**

#### *God's heart for widows*

Some of the people who had believed in Jesus were widows. So, from the very start of the church, widows played an integral role in the church's life.

In Jerusalem, widows attended large group worship services, teaching sessions from the apostles, fellowship gatherings, home meetings, and communion services.

Widows were eagerly welcomed and assimilated into the life of the church.

But widows, in that culture and in most cultures, can be among those with great, urgent, pressing needs.

That's why the Old Testament gave clear and compelling instructions to the Jews to take care of their widows.<sup>5</sup> The New Testament urges the same thing.<sup>6</sup>

The church in Jerusalem (which was 100% Jewish) was determined to ensure that the widows who could not provide for themselves would be provided for by the Jesus-following community.

The ministry effort of the church to provide for the widows was *organized* and *intentional*. There was a daily distribution of food for the widows in the church. And we say, "*Way to go, church!*"

However, as well intentioned as this ministry was, it wasn't going well. It really wasn't.

If you had asked the apostles how the ministry was going, they would have told you that it was going great. Widows were being served. Food was going out. "*Everything is fine.*"

But everything wasn't fine. The church's attempt to help had created wounds.

There was a problem, but it was one that the leaders hadn't seen.

It is not uncommon for leaders to be oblivious to significant problems in an organization.

<sup>5</sup> See Exodus 22:22; Deut. 24:19-21; 26:12-13; Isaiah 1:17.

<sup>6</sup> Paul gave detailed instructions to the churches as to how to care for widows. (1 Timothy 5:9-16.)

<sup>3</sup> There would not have been a lot of difference when it came to faith, as all of the Christians were Jewish at this point. But there were surely differences in the way the Jewish faith was practiced in Jerusalem vs Mesopotamia vs Arabia vs Egypt.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps Judean Jews looked down on the Jews who hailed from foreign lands as being polluted by non-Jewish influences. Maybe the Hellenists looked down on the local Jews for being sheltered and unsophisticated.

That is true in businesses and schools and families...and in churches, including the first one.

*The church's [still developing] heart for widows (v. 1)*

***[1] Now at this time,<sup>7</sup> as the disciples<sup>8</sup> were increasing in number, a complaint developed on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving<sup>9</sup> of food.<sup>10</sup>***

The widows weren't the ones complaining. Others were complaining on behalf of the widows.<sup>11</sup> Their beef was legitimate. The Hellenistic Jewish widows were not receiving food.

We wonder how this could have happened in a church that was doing so many things right and that was trying to do this thing right.

Well, Luke doesn't say. And that's helpful, because by not saying we can let our imaginations run wild.

Nothing here implies malice. No one accused anyone of not liking the Hellenistic widows. And it wasn't that the Judean widows were cutting in front of the Hellenistic widows in the cafeteria line.

Most likely, the cause was thoughtless administration or inattention to details. In other words, poor management.

Maybe the food distribution plan - when to get the food, where to go to get the food - just wasn't getting out to the Hellenists in a way that the Hellenists would have understood.

I can see how that could happen.

- If we send around a church-wide email to get out critical information, some people won't get the word. We don't have every person's email, and some don't have email addresses. Others have them and never check them (as I was reminded in a chat with a young person this week, *"I never check my email."*)
- If we post something on the church web site, some people won't get the word because they don't check the church website. We've gotten the word out, but not really.

Somehow or other, these Hellenistic widows weren't getting the word. They were *"slipping through the cracks."*

What made it worse was that at this time, the responsibility for the distribution of food was evidently in the hands of the Judean Jews. So, while we don't believe that the Hellenistic Jewish widows were overlooked on purpose, the optics were terrible.

Today, frictions can arise between groups because of *real* or *perceived* slights. When the group in charge - even inadvertently - overlooks the group not in charge, the slight is magnified.

That was what was going on in Jerusalem in the church.

Hurt feelings and empty stomachs prompted grumblings in the ranks. Something needed to be done. Thankfully, when the leaders learned what was happening, they led, and they led fast.

Notice what's going on.

The church had launched by the power of the Holy Spirit. It sprang into existence as a living organism. Everything that happened was organic.

coins or in goods, to be distributed later in the day. Those who were temporarily in need received just enough to enable them to carry on; those who were permanently unable to support themselves received enough for fourteen meals, that is, enough for two meals a day for the coming week.....It is clear that the Christian Church had taken over this custom." (from William Barclay)

<sup>11</sup> Greek: gonguzmos (γογγυσμος) - a murmuring, same word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) for the complaints of the Jews against God or Moses. I do not attribute the same negativity to these complaints.

<sup>7</sup> *"At this time"* doesn't tell us much about the time frame. The interval between Pentecost and this episode was probably quite brief, as in months.

<sup>8</sup> Luke refers to Christian converts as *"the disciples"* here for the first time in Acts.

<sup>9</sup> *"Serving"* (Greek - diakonia / διακονία) makes its way into verse 1 to describe the distribution of food. *"Diakonia"* belongs to the word group describing ministry of all kinds in the New Testament, and which is (nearly) transliterated, *"deacon."*

<sup>10</sup> "In the synagogue there was a routine custom. Two collectors went around to the market and the private houses on Friday mornings to collect for the needy, either in

But with its growth, life in the church got complicated. It began to take on the life of an organization - and that's not a bad thing.

Here, the church was learning how to deal with the issues of an organization: conflict resolution, roles and responsibilities, priorities, and structure. In short, ministry management to the glory of God.

### **Response to a Challenging Situation (Acts 6:2-6)**

#### **It's the People's Choice! (6:2-4)**

*The Twelve state their priorities (v. 2)*

***[2] So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables."<sup>12</sup>***

#### **The apostles saw the need**

Clearly, the apostles saw it as their role to address the situation, and to do so publicly. Just as clearly, they did not see it as their role to meet the need, personally.

They understood how important it was that the church should meet the needs of the widows. But it wasn't going to be them who met that need.

#### **The apostles knew their role**

That was because, for them to personally serve tables, they'd have to neglect the Word of God. They were unwilling to do that.

It wasn't that the apostles thought serving widows or waiting tables was beneath them.

They simply knew that they had been tasked by God with a special stewardship for the ministry of the Word. They "owned" that.

#### **The apostles saw the dangers**

They were responsible for the public preaching and teaching of the Word. They went from house to house giving instruction to smaller groups. They met with people, individually.

If they got personally involved in the service of food to the widows, the ministry of the Word would suffer. The people in the church needed to receive the teaching that they alone were able to provide.

#### **The apostles set their priorities**

So, to have neglected the ministry of the Word would have done damage to the progress of the overall work. To neglect the food service for widows would also hurt the overall work of God.

It wasn't a matter of one thing being important and the other thing not. It was a matter of stewardship. The apostles had to do what only they could do.

But, to continue with the ugliness of having some widows not served while others were served was intolerable.

And so, because the apostles knew that every person in the church was equipped by the Holy Spirit for service, they gave a bold charge to the congregation.

*The Twelve delegated authority to the congregation (v. 3)*

***[3] "Instead, brothers and sisters, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task."***

They never removed themselves from the loop of responsibility in the matter, but they trusted that the members of the church would take ownership of the matter.

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<sup>12</sup> Elements of this story remind us of Exodus 18, where the advice of his father-in-law (Jethro) lightened Moses' overwhelming workload through delegation.

Now it may be that you are thinking that the apostles were making a big deal out of what looks like a mundane chore - serving tables.

Not at all. Human need was at stake. Relational issues were at stake. I don't think it is a stretch to say that the unity of the church was at stake. This issue could have driven a wedge, dividing the church along the lines of Hellenists and Judeans.

That is why the men chosen had to be men of *“good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.”*

It is also clear that these seven men - whoever they might be - would not be the only ones serving tables. In fact, they themselves might not be serving tables at all. The seven were placed over this task.

They were the Ministry Coordinators (the management team) for the just formed **Judean and Hellenistic Widows Food Ministry**.

The Twelve charged the congregation to select the Seven and then reaffirmed exactly what they would continue to do, as the shepherds of Jesus' church.

*The Twelve stated their priorities (v. 4)*

**[4] “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry<sup>13</sup> of the word.”**

Again, the apostles saw their stewardship as either / or.

*We'll either feel put our finger into every ministry pie and will run ourselves ragged by constantly putting out fires and abandon God's assignment for prayer and the ministry of the word.”*

<sup>13</sup> In this passage, “διακονία” (service/ministry) is used in reference to both food distribution and the teaching of God's truth.

<sup>14</sup> They knew that they could not serve tables AND be fully engaged with prayer and the ministry of the word. Prayer and the ministry of the Word were all-consuming stewardships, and they had to give their all to doing that.

<sup>15</sup> [Acts 6:5] *The announcement found approval with the whole congregation.*

OR

*We'll do what God has called us to do, and trust God to raise up people from within the congregation to do what He wants them to do!”<sup>14</sup>*

And just as you would have expected, the congregation said *“Amen!”<sup>15</sup>* to the apostles' plan.

They didn't resent the apostles not serving tables. They wanted the apostles to be “apostling.”

And they gladly stepped up to the plate and did what the apostles charged them to do.

They chose - and Luke helpfully named - seven godly men.<sup>16</sup>

### **The People Made Their Choices (6:5)**

**[5] *The announcement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip,<sup>17</sup> Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.<sup>18</sup>***

Luke singled out Stephen for his character, which is helpful, because he is the main character in the story we'll explore next Sunday.

Plus, a couple of chapters deeper into Acts we discover that Philip (NOT the Apostle Philip, Matthew 10:3, but a different man) was a gifted leader who made sure that the message of Jesus spread to Africa as he shared Christ with a man from Ethiopia.

<sup>16</sup> We are not told how these men were singled out. They had likely emerged as leaders and were recognized as such. But whether it was by acclamation, a formal vote, appointment, casting lots, or some other means we don't know.

<sup>17</sup> Most scholars agree that this Philip was not the Apostle Philip, but another man.

<sup>18</sup> By highlighting Nicolas' being from Antioch, Luke foreshadowed the central role of Antioch in Gospel ministry. Many believe that Luke hailed from Antioch.

About the other five we know nothing at all, except that they were all Hellenists. Their names tell us that they all came from the Greek world. Brilliant.

The congregation knew that trust between the two parts of the church had been compromised by the previous oversight.

And they knew that trust could be rebuilt only by placing Hellenists over the ministry of serving the widows.

The appointment by the congregation of these seven Jews from the Greek world was a tremendous demonstration of godly wisdom AND loving sensitivity.

### **The Leaders Confirmed the People's Choices (6:6)**

***[6] And they brought these men before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.<sup>19</sup>***

In the Bible, the “*laying on of hands*” can symbolize different things.<sup>20</sup>

Here it was a statement from the apostles to the congregation and to the Seven that they would stand behind these men and support them in every possible way in their ministry to the widows.

At the end of the day, the Seven having been chosen and commissioned, Luke backed away from this scene and gave us another in his series of “State of the Communion” progress reports.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> It was not the congregation (or their delegated representatives) that laid hands on the Seven, but the apostles. They had made clear that they would confirm the men whom the congregation chose to be over the ministry of serving the widows. (v. 3) The apostles gave the final thumbs-up to the congregation's choice.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, in Acts 5:18, the Sadducees “*laid hands*” on the apostles, meaning that they grabbed them and put them in prison.

<sup>21</sup> Thus far, we have progress reports at 2:42-47, 4:31, 5:14-15, 5:41-42.

<sup>22</sup> The priests who believed were probably not of the Sadducean aristocracy (we have no record of a Sadducee becoming a believer), but were likely poorer pious priests, like John the Baptist's father, Zacharias. (See Luke 1)

### **The Blessing of God (Acts 6:7)**

***[7a] The word of God kept spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem...***

The church's roller-coaster ride sky-rocketed upward and it church made dramatic progress immediately after:

- the leaders affirmed their unwavering commitment to fulfill their ministry. (“*prayer and the ministry of the Word*”)
- the leaders dealt with a sensitive situation lovingly and boldly by entrusting ministry to the congregation.
- the congregation carried out the ministry to ALL widows, preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of love.

And what are we to make of the second part of Acts 6:7?

***[7b]...and a great many of the priests<sup>22</sup> were becoming obedient to the faith.<sup>23</sup>***

Why were the Jewish priests in Jerusalem drawn to believe in Jesus following this incident?

I think it was because they saw that the church was doing a great job of reflecting God's heart for the care of widows. The Law of Moses commanded as much. And it may be that the church was doing a better job than the temple or the synagogues were doing.

I think that it was the love of the church for widows that moved these priests to investigate the claims of Jesus and when they did, they found Him trustworthy and believed in Him.

<sup>23</sup> Luke was not saying here that leading an obedient life had anything to do with salvation (eternal life). Often, the New Testament writers use the term “*obedience of faith*” (or similar terms) to express “*faith*” as obedience to the command to believe. See Romans 1:5, where this is clearly the idea. Also, see John 6:29, John 3:36, Romans 15:18, 16:26; 2 Thessalonians 1:8, Hebrews 5:8-9, and 1 Peter 4:7. Luke, along with the rest of the New Testament, is affirming that when a person believes in Jesus for salvation, they are obeying the command of God.

Management matters. And the church's loving and wise management of this ministry made eternal impact on the widows who were served, on the entire church, and on a watching world.

### **Conclusion:**

This short passage of the Bible has long intrigued me.

Here we see the Jerusalem church weathering a potentially unity-destroying storm (*Some* widows were being ignored over *others!*) with such wisdom and grace that the work of God moved forward.

It became stronger so that at the end of the day, the roller-coaster ended up, again, on an upward trajectory.

As I have meditated on this incident with our church in mind, I am impressed that there is something here for you and me. And I'll close with three thoughts as we seek to apply Acts 6 to our lives and to our ministry.

**ONE**, let's not miss that people in need are worthy of all the care and dignity we can lavish on them.

Let's make it our aim to go out of our way to assist the widow, to give food to the hungry, to provide help to the weak.

Give your undivided attention to a child who approaches you or who may look a bit lost, or sad.

Approach the person you haven't seen here before with a warm, hospitable greeting.<sup>24</sup>

Listen well. Weep with those who are weeping and rejoice with those who are rejoicing.

Share Jesus' good news with someone who hasn't yet believed.

**TWO**, in Christ, there is no such thing as un-spiritual ministry. All service performed in His Name glorifies God.

The apostles dignified table service when they required that those who gave leadership to the widows' ministry should be "***men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.***"

No chore is menial because every chore is a stewardship from God. So, we celebrate every act of service and we honor every servant.

By the way, there is a group of servants here at church we call "Deacons." (The word means "servant.") They are all voted into office at Annual Meetings of the church for a two year term of service after being interviewed by Elders.

We take the service of Deacons seriously, and so do the Deacons. Deacons serve, often behind the scenes, usually without any fanfare or recognition.

But it is Deacons who oversee how the grounds are kept, open and close the building on Sundays, make the coffee, arrange for communion, and help with church financials.

Among the many things that the story from Acts 6 does is highlight the honor of any and all service done in the Name of Jesus, including the service of Deacons.

Thank you, Deacons, for your service here.

**THREE**, everyone in our church has been gifted by the Holy Spirit to serve Jesus.

Sure, the apostles could have waited tables. They had the spiritual qualifications and (I assume) the physical abilities.

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<sup>24</sup> There is a ministry designed for those who want to welcome well here on Sunday mornings. Join the Greeters ministry. Call Jean Sherrill @ 210-708-2149.

But for them to have done so would have cheated the church of their unique contribution of teaching.

As well, if the apostles had been “hands on” with food service, they would have been robbing others in the church who could have done that job and probably done it better than the apostles would have.

When you are serving in the unique ways God has gifted you to serve here at church, or at home, or in the broader community, or around the world, the work of God goes forward, just as it did in Jerusalem.

And when we are the loving and serving church Jesus died and rose to make us, it will be as true here as it was there that ***[6:7] The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in [San Antonio]...***