

October 27, 2024—“... And Justice For All”

Let's open our Bibles and Bible apps to Acts chapter 6 today. I'll admit to you, this passage has me asking some questions personally today. When you teach through a book of the Bible sequentially—like we are in this series—you never know what topics God's going to address or want to speak to. In today's passage, we happen to be looking at the very first fight that the Christian church ever had. Now, here at Southridge, today is a very special day because we're celebrating baptism later on, and one of the people getting baptized today happens to be my daughter. I say that, because a disproportional number of my extended family are here today—on a morning where God has us looking at a passage addressing the first family feud of the first-century church. So I have to ask myself: coincidence, or divine orchestration? ☺

The story of today's passage begins in no better way. In Acts 6:1 we read:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing...

When it says, “*the number of disciples was increasing...*” this is Luke's way of saying the church was rocking! As a quick review of his second book, Acts, so far: in Acts 1 the disciples witnessed the resurrected Jesus—Jesus was risen! In Acts 2 they received the promised Holy Spirit for themselves. By Acts 3, three thousand had been added to their number in one day. And by Acts 4, there were no needy people among them. And now, by this point, scholars believe the church to be at least 20,000 strong.

This is what pastors go to conferences for, and what church shoppers search for: this is “the perfect church”! It's unified, it's growing, it's bold, it's strong... it's incredible!

But suddenly, it's in trouble. The back half of verse 1 of Acts chapter 6 says:

... the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Now, for us to be able to make sense of things, we need to understand a couple dynamics of first-century Jewish culture, since these were the first followers of Jesus.

First, we need to grasp the social dynamic. Much of the early church's converts lived in Jerusalem centre. While the culture spoke Greek, these Jerusalem-centred people spoke the purer Aramaic, so they were referred to as "Hebraic". Over time though, other Jewish people had spread to other countries along the Mediterranean coast. Living so far away from Jerusalem, they'd lost their capacity to speak Aramaic, and now could only speak and understand Greek. These are what's called "Hellenistic".

Over time, these two groups not only distinguished themselves by two different languages; they established two separate worship experiences using two different texts: the Hebrew scriptures and the Septuagint. And, as you can imagine, the Hebraic Jewish people looked down on the Hellenistic Jewish people, for not being as high-quality in their Jewishness. So, when Hellenistic Jewish people travelled into Jerusalem for Passover, they were viewed by the Hebraic Jewish people as second-class citizens.

Second, we need to grasp the practical tradition of food distribution at the Jewish temple. There were two collections. One was called the "basket" and was collected at the market every Friday, and distributed later that day. If you were in temporary need, you received a day's worth of support; more ongoing need received 14 meals, enough to last an entire week. Then there was a daily house-to-house collection called the "tray", which distributed directly to people. The church had adopted these customs.

So, can you see the problem here? The Hellenistic Jewish people—who'd come to Jerusalem for Passover, only to be gripped by all the commotion surrounding Jesus that they'd become converts, were upset because their widows were being excluded in the church's food distribution, which, because it originated in Jerusalem, would have been driven by the Hebraic Jewish people. When you add the value that Jewish people placed on their care for widows—but factor in the “second-class citizen” vibe of the Hellenists, I hope you can start to feel why they were so upset. Many scholars read the accusation as if the Hebraic Jewish people intentionally excluded and ignored them!

Now: to really feel the pressure of the situation, we need to put ourselves in the sandals of the Apostles, whose problem this was to fix. This was not just an issue for the Hellenists, or their widows; this was ultimately an issue for the Apostles themselves.

Remember that the Apostles—Jesus' original disciples—had been commissioned by Jesus Himself to be His witnesses in Acts 1. Filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, they were preaching boldly by Acts 3, as they rooted the reality of Jesus in God's Old Testament covenant promises, now delivered. But in Acts 4, remember, we read this:

From time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

As the leaders of the early church, the Apostles were overseeing the food distribution program—which meant that this was *their* problem to solve. But the deeper they got into food distribution, the less time they'd have to study the scriptures they were now understanding. So they could let themselves get distracted, or they could let the church get divided. Can you feel their tension? Do they allow the church to starve, or split?!

What's remarkable is that they didn't choose either—they chose both! Verse 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. 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 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

On the one hand, the Apostles refused to let their study get distracted by deepening their engagement in food distribution. (Note the term "waiting on tables" is more accurately translated "financial matters"; it's not intended to be degrading). On the other hand, they refused to let the needs of these Hellenist widows get ignored, so they devised a plan: to raise up a group of leaders from among them to lead that ministry. Instead of being crippled by and either/or decision, the Apostles created a both/and.

Even more surprisingly, their plan was embraced. Verse 5 of Acts chapter 6:

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. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Notice the details Luke includes here. He says their proposal pleased the whole group, meaning *both* the Hebraic and Hellenistic Jewish people were happy. He includes the names of the newly-appointed leaders—Hellenistic names—and describes the formerly-Jewish tradition of laying on hands to appoint rabbis as a way of giving this new leadership group significant respect. Through this both/and approach of the Apostles, the "second class citizens" were appointed to first-class leadership status, and instead of the insiders feeling like their own status was being threatened, they were thrilled!

As if things couldn't get any better, the story concludes in verse 7. It says:

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.

Remember verse 1, where the story started, and Luke basically wanted to say the church was rocking? In verse 1 he said, "*the number of disciples were increasing.*" Now, notice that, "*the number of disciples increased rapidly.*" See the difference?

Luke also adds the closing comment that a "large number of priests" were converted. That's a fascinating detail on which the story ends. On the one hand, it confirms that, even though greater attention was being paid to the needs of the Hellenistic Jewish widows, Hebraic Jewish leaders were also finding Jesus. It's as if the orientation to those on the margins didn't repel those of privilege, but that that very focus helped them more fully embrace Jesus. As well, it mentions priests, but not the high priests. It makes you wonder whether, in the Jewish religious hierarchy, even though these priests had status, in temple speak, maybe they felt like second-class citizens too. And maybe, watching a movement give second-class citizens first-class status appealed to them too. Regardless, the church was now stronger than ever!

Taking a step back, this first section of the book of Acts is Luke's recounting the birth of the Christian Church. But Luke wrote this for more than just history; he wrote it to anchor the early church in some core theology. In chapter 6, faced with a seemingly either/or choice—representing a lose/lose—the Apostles created a win/win by employing some both/and thinking. And to teach the church how to be a movement—in their day, and ours—I think that point rings true: **the movement of God requires BOTH the message of Jesus AND His mission of justice.** That both/and creates a win/win!

Appreciate that, from the time He launched His public ministry, Jesus always intended this duality to not only define His calling, but to describe His invitation to those who would choose to become His followers. Look at how He read about Himself:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

There's a messaging aspect to following Jesus: proclaiming the Good News of His love!

But because love is the message, the medium-that-is-the-message needs to not just be proclaimed verbally, but also practically lived out. Look at the same passage:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

The message of Jesus contains in it a mission of justice. Simply put: following Jesus is not about you. It centres on the kinds of people Jesus centred, who are often found on the fringes of society. And, through relationally-based love, it seeks to move people from the fringes to the centre, from low status to elevated status, from second-class to first. That's what justice is all about, fostering full inclusion and equality for everyone.

That's the both/and that Jesus invited personally, that Luke is now envisioning communally: where the movement of God thrives when BOTH the message of Jesus AND His mission of Justice are flourishing. Kind of like the polarity of breathing—or, maybe more accurately, the duality of diet and exercise (input and output), our challenge and invitation today is to audit how we're living out that both/and together.

Now, as we reflect on that, appreciate that the way I'm summarizing this like an equation does intend to suggest that this some man-made strategy or set of religious boxes to check. The both/and of input and output—embracing more of the message of Jesus and engaging in more of His mission of justice—is simply the practical recipe that Jesus and Luke have given us to allow God's Spirit to freely flow and flourish. This is how spiritual movements of God build and grow. This both/and creates a win/win!

So, take a moment and reflect on the degree and quality of spiritual inputs in your life. **How can the message of Jesus sink deeper into your heart?** Do you need to make Sunday's more regular, join a Life Group, or do some deeper reading, studying, or podcast listening, in order for Jesus' message of love to make greater sense to you?

Similarly, reflect on the degree to which you're engaged in Jesus' mission of justice. **Where can Jesus' mission of justice flow more fully out of your heart?** What marginalized person, excluded friend, struggling neighbour, suffering classmate, or disadvantaged co-worker can you befriend and support more practically, in order for Jesus' message of love to make greater sense to them as it's lived out fully in you?

Today, we get to celebrate some of this very dynamic together as a church family. At our St. Catharines location, we have some people being baptized. And their baptisms don't just represent embracing the message of Jesus; in many ways they also represent experience His mission of justice. I really hope, like we see in Acts chapter 6, that there could be an overwhelming sense among us of "if God can work in their life, maybe He can work in mine too." And I hope we'll be inspired to pursue more win/wins, by choosing the both/and of the embracing the message of Jesus AND engaging in His mission of justice in our lives, personally and together. Enjoy these baptism stories!