



Now Hiring

TEXT
Acts 6:1–7

May 28, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

I know what you're thinking: finally, some Scripture about institutional structure and organization. It might not seem like the most exciting text, but today we get a glimpse into how the community in Acts dealt with some needed changes.

While the Gospels are accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the book of Acts is about what Jesus' followers did after the resurrection. In that way, it is the story of the birth and formation of the Church. It's the story of individuals and communities of people gathering together and talking about who Jesus is and what it means for this world and for the way we live our lives.

And by the fourth chapter, we read that things were pretty good. The end of Chapter 4 reads, "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold

them and brought the proceeds of what was sold."

To be honest, that hasn't always been my experience of church. These days, churches are well-known for division and conflict about things that, to the average person, are a shockingly small deal. Some people think that if we could only get back to what the original church was, then we would be much better off, and I think the end of Chapter 4 is what they are thinking of.

But as it turns out, in the *next chapter*, we read about some pretty impressive deception in the church (it really is a strange story, and I encourage you to read the opening of Chapter 5), followed by healing and persecution. And then we land on Chapter 6 and today's verses about *more* conflict and what amounts to a meeting to tweak the infrastructure of the church operations manual. It's starting to sound less and less utopian, and that's because changing the way we do things has always been part of the church story.

You don't have to know me too well to know I'm always in pursuit of finding a new system for doing something.

This is a little embarrassing, but I have a T-shirt rotation. During college, I started to realize I

had way more shirts than I actually wore; a lot of them ended up living in the bottom of the drawer. So I started to take only about a dozen shirts to school with me each year, although I would get shirts through various activities. Each year I would discover great shirts, while I would also pack some up that would not make the return trip at the beginning of the next year.

And when I graduated and moved into my first apartment, all the T-shirts were together again for the first time. And I decided a couple of things: (1) I have a lot of shirts, and I should give a bunch away. (2) The shirts that remained are shirts I should like so much that I want to wear them every day. (3) If I like all my shirts enough to want to wear them every day, I should figure out a way for no shirt to get stuck living in the bottom of the drawer.

The answer? I would always wear what was on top of the pile. And when I'd do laundry, I would always then put the newly washed shirts on the bottom. It was kind of like a conveyor belt of shirts, and yes, I am that quirky.

We do this with all kinds of things in life — something needs to change, so we figure out a way

to address it, whether it is how to deal with T-shirts or other (ahem) less important things. I could talk about my systems for the rest of the sermon — I seriously could — but let's get back to Acts 6.

At this time in the life of the church, growth had given way to new needs that required new ways of doing things: specifically, leadership and organization.

We read that the Hellenists — likely to be Greek-speaking Jews — feel their widows are being neglected. The synagogue had a long tradition of care of the poor, and followers of Christ continued this practice. But distribution had become unmanageable, and some scholars think that the Greek-speaking Jews might have been discriminated against by the Hebrew-speaking Jews, so the resources would always seem to run out before the Greek-speaking, Hellenist, Jews received them.

There's clearly a dilemma. The preaching of the Word was, and is, important, but the apostles were presented with an issue that would demand time and energy. So, decisive action was needed. At first glance, it's like reading the minutes of a congregational meeting, but I think they also tell us a few things about who we are as a community of faith.

First, change is not new to the church.

Part of what we see here is that the church, even early on, has always dealt with evolving needs that required creativity to address. That's actually inspiring to me because, frankly, the church is not the first organization I think of when it comes

to cutting edge innovation and problem-solving.

There is something about institutional church culture that makes it — makes us — conserving and tradition-preserving. Maybe it is our desire to conserve what is true or to remain faithful to what has been handed down to us. But we have seen that this at times can harm us despite our good intentions. Biblically, we see it with Pharisees and Sadducees as they attempt to protect the faith of their ancestors from destructive innovation. But in so doing, they, and we, often miss the truth.

When we cling too tightly to what is the same, we risk tuning out the needs of the marginalized, and we close our ears to prophetic voices — all because we become too focused on what is familiar and comfortable.

So if we first see that change is not new to the church, it shouldn't surprise us that ...

Second, conflict and resolution are not new to the church either. Conflict is what brought this issue up in the first place: There were people who were being neglected for what amounted to discrimination. But there is another discussion that we don't see: how they arrived at the solution they did.

Sometimes what *is* in Scripture isn't as interesting as what *isn't* in Scripture. The account of this decision makes it seem like it all happened naturally, easily and without much discussion. It would be like saying, "We decided there was a need for a new space, so we decided to build a Welcome Center and a new

Child and Family Development Center; and let's throw in a new organ in the Sanctuary — and so we did it! And then we began exploring this idea of Village on Antioch, so that's happening." That skips over a *lot* of discussions, decisions, actions, and no small amount of praying and hand-wringing, and disagreeing and compromise.

Surely, as the apostles and the community of faith worked toward a solution, there was arguing, and differences of opinion, and uncertainty about which seven people they picked. The reality is that this decision was made in the face of a conflict — as a result of a problem. But you know what? They got through it. They had the courage to deal with it *and to openly discuss it*. Did you notice that they called together the whole community to present what they would do? I don't imagine that happened immediately; it surely took some time to work toward an answer, so I imagine their solution had been discussed at length with a lot of different people.

But the legacy that remains — the story that gets written — is the one about what they decided.

Luke, the author of Acts, decided that what mattered most was not the conflict, but rather the importance of the solution and the open sharing of that solution with the whole community.

So, change isn't new, and conflict isn't new. But the third thing we can take from this is about leadership. More specifically, leadership comes from the ground up, not from the top down. The apostles instruct

them to “choose from among yourselves.” They chose people who were part of the community, among the disenfranchised, and they chose people who were apparently not currently in leadership positions.

If we see leadership as coming from above, it results in seeing leadership pass from God to Jesus to pastors and church officers to the wider congregation. The result is that in our humility, we look to others as being more qualified than we are, and thus higher up on the leadership rankings. That appears to run counter to what Jesus demonstrated. Jesus went out and called the twelve apostles — each of them living their own lives and doing their own thing and arguably unqualified to follow *any* rabbi, let alone the Messiah. So what we see in Jesus calling the apostles, and what we see here in these verses, is that leaders arise from the needs of God’s people for guidance and service.

That’s something that should speak very deeply to us; it means we are called to search for ways in which others are in need of guidance and service, and then ask ourselves, “How can I help?”

I’ll give you an example of how this was very recently true in a small way for me.

Last week two friends of mine were in need of moving a large object into their house. They sent out a text to a bunch of people asking for help. And I know what you are thinking: I love being asked to help move large, heavy pieces of furniture!

But that’s not the thought I had. Meredith and I were eat-

ing dinner when this text came through asking for help for the *next day*, and I thought, “Oh, that is absurd! That’s not enough notice; who could do that? They will never find help!”

And this, friends, is the awful truth of what happens when you know you are preaching. I can’t imagine why, but the week before you preach is when you discover, again, what a hypocrite you are.

And so against my will, mind you, I found myself thinking, “Oh wait. I can lift things. And I can get there at that time to help. I should probably help with that. In fact, God might in fact be *calling* me to go and lift heavy furniture with little notice.” And then I shook my fist a little bit at God, and I told the friends that I would *love* to help.

Don’t get me wrong, I can produce excuses all day. I think we *all* get very good at finding reasons we can’t get involved. We’re all busy, and we know someone who knows more about that, and someone else who has more time, and someone else who would probably be better at that. Have you ever found yourself doing that? I do that a lot.

But oddly, those seven people picked by the community in Acts, we don’t know if any of them had any experience distributing food and service, or if they had any community organizing experience or any number of things that would look good on a resume. But what we do know is that the church community decided the most important criteria were: (1) good standing, (2) full of spirit and wisdom, and (3) who we can appoint to this task.

So basically, they were looking for people who were respected and trusted, who were striving to live well in this life and before God, and who were able to do what was asked of them. That’s it. They could pick up the rest as they went along, and that unnerves me a little bit. Maybe I’d be more comfortable knowing that these were all experts in their field because that would give me an excuse.

So the question is this, and this question is for all of us: If change and conflict are not new to this place and are not new to our lives, where in your life could you be part of a solution? Where in your life might you be called to bring about change by addressing a need and, in doing so, becoming an instrument of God’s work as you are in service to someone else?

Or maybe for you it is to ask, where are you avoiding open and honest discussion that might bring conflict in your life?

Or where in this community might you find a place to be helpful, not because you are an expert, but because you strive to live well in life and before God?

Friends, this world and this church seek people who are willing to step out to meet need. We are called to be those people.

So what is your response?

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.