

Sermon Notes: May 10, 2020

Focus: Acts 6:1 (But today's reading is in Acts 7).

All Readings

If you ever thought Acts of the Apostles was a beautiful description of the ideal church you, my friend, are sorely mistaken. The first chapters of Acts are nice, but by the middle chapter 3, it goes downhill fast. Acts 7 is the end of a long slide from dubious leadership choices - even amid apparent success. The only thing that saves the church from its questionable direction is, ironically, murder of Stephen and persecution of the early church. A few people's genuine kindness to those who are different will make lasting change for the whole church – Stephen is in that category. I want to focus on a verse you probably never thought to spend much time on.

The Hellenists and the Natives Acts 6:1b *The Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.* This text is critical to understand the culture behind the text. Acts 6 is awful (not only because of Stephen's murder). It's awful because the church goes against its supposedly deeply held values. The Holy Spirit, in chapter 2, demonstrated that there should be no room between Greek and Jew, slave and free, this is something Paul will hammer on. Alas, the church is still run by humans. Socially connected people and marginalized people had to figure out how to be one community. They failed by choosing to treat each other with suspicion and disregard.

In my mind, the apostles were not cohesive visionaries. They made one ad-hoc move after another while the was exploding with people. Classism and religious bigotry drove some of the highest leadership decisions before and after Acts 6 and 87. The "haves" in church were the old-timers: the Hebraic Jews. Then upstart Hellenistic Jews came in from different parts of the empire to worship and ended up staying in Jerusalem. They had heard the call of the Spirit. 'Greeks' (I am using a catch-all term) are the 'have nots' regarding religious zip code.

That's only a piece of the puzzle. Being culturally Greek was the invisible backpack of privilege outside the church. Let me give you a weird example of privilege: Circumcision. Males would exercise and socialize in their birthday suit - you heard me correctly. Circumcision for the Hebraic set was a source of otherness and ridicule from the outside world. It was also a source of pride religiously.

In the not-proud-category, some Hebraic Jews went so far as to reverse their circumcision (epispasm) in order to fit in. People more oriented to a Greek worldview saw circumcision as an unwise business and social climbing decision. In the church, the uncircumcised (Greek) were being questioned by the proudly religious as not faithful enough to Jesus.

See. It is complicated. The Church was flipping who is in charge (Hebrews became the new dominant). Instead of questioning the whole system of privilege, they sidelined Greeks instead. It's not all bad news, but you have to wait until Acts 15 for real systemic change. See next paragraph for 15's text.

Waiting tables Have you ever noticed that the deacons appointed in chapter 6 were all Greek? The Hebrews thought the best way to stop the complaining in verse 1 of chapter 6 was to appoint Greeks to serve Greeks. They were throwing Greeks at a problem that was really the

whole community's problem. Instead of reorganizing their internal culture, they sort of went the opposite. I think the seven Greek deacons was a non-optimal choice. We spiritualize it because of the murder of Stephen, but it will take until all the way to Acts 15 before the whole community really begins to remake itself in God's image and stop (for a moment) trying to make haves and have nots.

15:28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell." That is a pretty short list for belonging to the in-group.

Today is more Acts 6 than Acts 15 We have a lot of casual classism. It's like the air we breathe. Personally, I know I have Greek privileges. I am white, male, and highly educated. But I can "code switch" to redneck (Hebraic in Acts) and can code switch to "country club." (Greek in Acts) when necessary. I can become invisible when necessary and demand attention when it serves me.

Because of my redneck in country club world, I see stuff. Some can't be unseen. I will spare you the most egregious examples. But let's use an example that has repeated dozens of times in California when someone finds out I'm from Texas and Oklahoma. I get one or both of the following reactions. 1st is 'Uckh' Texas. The grunt means "I didn't know you were so backward, stupid, and generally unenlightened." The second reaction is more subtle: "You speak so well for being from Texas/Oklahoma." Do you hear the subtext of that? — "You don't seem as stupid as I thought you would be." Our desire to stratify is alive and well and I only experience a fraction of fraction of what people of color, immigrants, and queer people deal with daily.

One more complication in the Acts 6 story The wrinkle is called the "Synagogue of the Freedmen." They were not of Hebrew decent. They were slaves from north Africa and Rome who had been freed. They came to Jerusalem and wanted to "out Hebrew the Hebrews."

They were so opposed to Stephen because they finally had freedom. Their religious identity was hard won. Some 'softy' like Stephen was acting and preaching in such a God-wants-everyone way that threatened their aspirational religious identity. The freedmen sold Stephen out to the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was outside the Jesus movement and had no investment in internal squabbles, unless it could possibly upset the fragile social order they worked hard to be on top of. Side note: Paul would become a major enforcer of the fragile order. He was instrumental in Stephen's death and the early persecution.

Kindness is radical Your take-away from these notes could be "it's nice to be nice" which is ok. Be nice when it cuts across the grain. Be nice when your zip code actively resists your form of niceness. Be nice in the long haul, and maybe, just maybe, nice will lead to legal, systemic, and cultural change. Be nice even when it comes at a cost. Be nice - it might just break the locks on cultural, economic, and religious gates.

If you have made it this far. Here is your hopeful, cynical poem/essay about kindness
Written by the blogger "Chronically Irritated"

Do good deeds, anyway. Do them often. Do them because you can. Do them because it will make you happy. Just don't do good deeds in hopes of recognition, gratitude, or to gain

anything in return. Because, sometimes, you'll get none of those things. Sometimes, you'll even get kicked, just for trying to do a good deed. Do good deeds, anyway. Do them often. Do them because you can. Do them because it will make you happy.

Just don't do them expecting to change hearts and change minds. Some people won't even notice. Some people will notice, and won't give a xxxx/ In a year, whether they gave a xxxx or not, some people will have forgotten you ever did anything at all. Do good deeds, anyway. Do them often. Do them because you can. Do them because it will make you happy.

Just don't do them to get someone's approval. People you love might call you naïve. Some people will suspect you have a hidden agenda. Some people will tell you that you're wasting your time. Some people will actually try to make you feel like xxxx, mostly because it makes them feel better about never having tried. Do good deeds, anyway. Do them often. Do them because you can. Do them because it will make you happy.

Just don't do them so you can tell the Internet about it. It negates the spirit of a genuine act of kindness. It cheapens it. It stops being about the good that you did, and starts being about you. Do good deeds, anyway. Do them often. Do them because you can. Do them because it will make you happy.

If you do good deeds for the sake of putting more awesome into the world, without expecting others to make it gratifying for you, then even if you do get kicked, it won't matter. Since you did it knowing you might get kicked, it won't faze you, and you'll still be happy. (Winning!) You'll still find a way to do it again. If you do it often enough, there will be plenty of times that you won't get kicked. Those times will be awesome. Do it because doing a good deed makes you better. And after getting kicked a few times, you deserve to feel better.

So brace yourself. The world is full of cynical people. It isn't always ice cream and unicorns. Just keep trying, because someone out there is worth it. You just might need to wade through some disappointment to find them. You won't know unless you keep doing nice things for others, and you won't want to keep doing them if you're doing it for the wrong reasons.

So, here's to doing something good for someone else. Here's to doing it even if no one appreciates it. Here's to ignoring the people who think you're wasting your time. Here's doing it because you can, and not for a humble-brag post on Facebook. And, here's to not getting kicked today. [Full poem](#).

I, Todd, took out the potty words. Building on her thoughts, I would add that if enough people do acts of radical kindness and care, systems will change (probably slowly). Kindness is an individual *and* a group sport. Eventually with enough players, governance will change. Policies will change. It is a long game and takes enormous persistence. You'll need some Holy Spirit level of grace for that kind of persistence. — May we move from the small mindedness of Acts 6 and, with God's help, move to Acts 15.

Todd