

## Giving and Receiving, Reconciling and Healing

### Acts 6:1-7

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists (ethnic Greeks) complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup>And (in response) the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. <sup>3</sup>Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, <sup>4</sup>while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.' <sup>5</sup>What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch (ie, a convert to Judaism; in other words, a Greek man who converted to Judaism, who then became a follower of Jesus). <sup>6</sup>They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

<sup>7</sup> The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Hannah, working for Brooks, showed me a customer service email she received: "You can take your shoes and shove them up a protestor's a..." aaand you know what the next word is.

Heard this from a friend, who has a long-time friend who is a writer who writes for various publications—which, of course, opens him up to criticism. He

got this email from an enraged reader who didn't like his column: "YOU ARE THE ANTICHRIST AND YOU ARE GOING TO BURN IN HELL!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" All caps, 11 exclamation points. Not 10, 11.

He forwarded that email to the elders at his church and said to them, "Now that my true identity has been exposed, I wonder if this might affect my church membership. What is our policy regarding membership for the antichrist?"

I think these kind of sum up our society right now, right? Angry, divided, vilifying each other, arguing with each other. Part of it's understandable because we are under a ton of stress right now. The baseline for our collective stress has risen. Economic crisis, politics, racial tensions flaring up and a global pandemic that cuts us off from the people that we would normally be processing all of this with. So we are a powder keg, and any spark is just going to cause explosions.

I think it's interesting that when COVID first came out, all the TV commercials that related to COVID started with the same line, "In these uncertain times..." and then they ended by saying, "We're all in this together." Until we weren't, when we started arguing about the lockdown. Now we're arguing about wearing masks—still. That can be discouraging, even a little bit scary, and I've had

all of those feelings myself. But as I've said before I also think it's hopeful because out of this turmoil, it seems like something new is trying to be born.

I believe that Jesus is going to bring good out of this, and already is. I believe God wants to heal our divisions, whether they are in our families, or in our schools, or in our neighborhoods. I believe God is going to make us stronger and more reconciled than we were before. Jesus can do it. He's done it before and I believe he can do it again. I think we all long for that kind of deep reconciled community. Again, Jesus can do this; because... Jesus has done it before.

The first multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic, multi-political, multi-generational community in history was the early church that put Jews and Gentiles together who had hated each other for centuries. Africans, Middle Easterners, Europeans, rich, poor, old, young, and only Jesus can do this because this kind of reconciled community is not natural. It's supernatural. Our natural instinct is to create homogeneous groups where there is an us and a them, where us is good and them is bad. But Jesus obliterates that narrative—destroys the dividing wall, as the apostle Paul puts it in Ephesians 2—because he reminds me that I am someone who needs his grace, the same as you, the same as your neighbor, the same as the protestor and the politician and the policeman and the

pastor, so that makes us all even. We're all on level ground in God's eyes. Equally in need, equally beloved.

Acts 6: The background is that the church started in Acts Chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost, and you get just 4 chapters later, 4 little chapters later, and what do you have already? Surprise! Conflict! Conflict in the early church; who would've thought it??

Now, back then, the first followers of Jesus considered themselves still to be Jews, but Jews who follow Jesus. We'd call them Christians. But that name wasn't attributed to them until later in the book of Acts, chapter 11. Back in ch.6 a conflict arose between Greek speaking Jews who are from Europe, and Hebraic Jews from Israel who spoke Aramaic and Hebrew. This passage shows how they healed those divisions amongst themselves, and then were able to carry that healing to the world that they were a part of.

The text says that when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the 12 apostles 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. Choose seven

who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them."

Now at first it sounds kind of presumptuous, "Well, we're not going to wait on tables; we're too good for that." That's not what they mean. That's not what's going on there. In that culture, there were no waiters and restaurants. Meals were served in homes. And it was considered an honor to be able to serve the meal. In fact, the honor was reserved usually for the head of the household. So what the apostles are saying is, "We can't do it all. Someone else has to have this honor." So they appoint seven people to oversee the distribution of food, for those in need. What they do, is they create significant *leadership positions* for these seven people. They spread their leadership around.

What that shows us is that one of the ways the early Christians found healing for themselves and the world, was by being a *giving and receiving community*. A giving and receiving community. This was food for those in need, and the principle here is, if I'm in community with you and you don't have enough food, that's my problem too. If a person of color is having painful experiences, that's my problem too, because we're in community, level ground together, and I'm called to help.

We are usually good at the giving part. The receiving part? I think we kind of struggle with that. I'm not very good at receiving. I'm a pastor, I like to help people. That's why I got into this thing, right? But I don't want to be helped myself. In this text, the Grecian Jews ask for help, which is a good thing. Because if we never asked for help, underneath there's some pride there. Like I'm the helper, but I don't need help myself; I'm fine. But that robs other people of the joy of being able to give.

So if you need support, if you need help, let us know. If you need support, if you need to talk to someone, ask. That's why I'm here, that is why your deacons are available, and the elders—and each other. We are here to help and we need to ask others to help us, because we all need help sometimes. So, they became a healing community by first being a giving and receiving community.

The second way the early church healed themselves and healed the world was to be a *reconciling* community. At the core of this text is a conflict—it's an ethnic, cultural, political, socioeconomic conflict between the Greek speaking folks who were immigrants from Europe, who spoke a different language, and had different customs, and the Hebraic Christians who are from the Middle East. Again, different language, culture, customs.

Jews considered Greeks to be unclean and wouldn't want to be anywhere around them. The Greeks and the Romans had conquered the Jews, so they also considered them the oppressors. Greeks thought Jews were inferior. They'd hated each other for centuries, and now they're all in the same worship service, occupying the same space, and there's all kinds of seething ethnic, cultural, political, and economic conflict going on here, that threatens to derail the early church's mission to be a new society, united in Christ and not divided by all those other things.

So the apostles, led by the Holy Spirit, choose seven people to oversee the distribution of bread. Verse 5 says: "They chose Stephen... also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas a proselyte from Antioch." All seven of those names are Greek, the people that were being left out, which means that the church had chosen to be reconcilers and includers and not dividers and excluders, by giving them positions of ministry and leadership. Which brings me to the third point (overlapping a lot with the second, of being a reconciling community):

They become healers by being a *crossing the lines* community. By involving and elevating the Greek Christians, it forced people across all those lines; cultural, ethnic, economic, political lines. And we can safely assume that they were able to

do all of this because they listened to each other. They learned to see things from each other's different perspective.

But I want you to notice something else: the majority group, the Hebraic Christians, gave up some of their power so that there could be equity. They gave leadership away so that there could be equity. They didn't give it all away; they were still leaders; but they shared power to empower the disempowered group, the Greeks, and that enabled the church to reach way more people because they had become a more representative community.

This matters, because a majority group in any company, church, school, or country—any majority group, whether it's a racial majority, political majority, cultural majority, whatever it is, won't be able to see what life is like for the minority group, because they don't experience it. So there has to be intentional crossing of lines, listening, and empowering of the disempowered to see things from others' perspectives.

For instance, we hear people of color say that when a white person says the phrase, "I don't see color," they'll say, "That doesn't work for me because every day I am reminded that I am Asian or Latino or black so I don't have the luxury to say, 'I don't see color.'" Now, I'm part of the majority so I don't experience that.

So I need to listen to my brothers and sisters who do. I need to listen to understand.

The apostles didn't say to the Greek folks, "Oh, stop complaining. You're not being left out." No, they crossed dividing lines and sought to understand from the other person's point of view what was going on; and that led to a deeper, more reconciled community which healed divisions in their midst, and therefore brought that healing to their neighbors, and the world.

Let me give just one practical suggestion this morning for how you and I can cross the lines, and become reconcilers and create healing community; and that is: Get curious. Get curious. I'd like to make a bumper sticker that says that.

Get curious. Listen to understand. Let your sentences end more often with question marks than exclamation points (11 of them, with all caps 😊). For example, when someone says something that you don't agree with, ask questions, like, "How did you get to that place? Why do you believe that?" Not passive aggressive, "Why do you believe *that stupid thing*?" But rather, "Tell me, how did you get there? Help me understand." So that we're not always so certain that we're right all the time because... we're not always right! Right?

I recently saw a satirical video about how COVID is dividing us because we're all so certain about COVID and the lockdown and all of that, and it makes kind of a good point. Take a look:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1QUfGN5OEO>

That's us, right? I think that video kind of captures the moment that we're in. We're all so certain, but we can't always be right, so maybe let's be a little less certain.

We can remain curious. I've learned the phrase, "Curious is better than furious." It isn't easy, and I've thrown curiosity out the window many times. But with God's grace and power we can return to curiosity and make it more of a reflex.

We can be curious about our internal reactions to people and situations. We can be curious about how we got to where we are in terms of systemic racial injustices. Austin Channing Brown, black American speaker, writer and media producer providing leadership on racial justice in America, wrote a book titled *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, and she states this beautifully and succinctly when she says (from the book): "Our only chance at dismantling racial injustice is being more curious about its origins than we are

worried about our comfort. It's not a comfortable conversation for any of us. It is risky and messy. It is haunting work to recall the sins of our past. But is this not the work we have been called to anyway? Is this not the work of the Holy Spirit to illuminate truth and inspire transformation and reconciliation? It's haunting. But it's also holy." She is talking about crossing lines, being reconcilers, and being curious. Uncomfortable, but holy. And necessary, for the sake of community.

Let me give a visual demonstration. If I were to ask you, "Does this bottle have a label on it?" you would say, "Yes." If I said, "No, it doesn't," you'd say, "Yes, it does." "No, it doesn't." "Yes, it does." "No, it doesn't." "Yes, it does."

Sociologists have a word for that kind of back and forth: Facebook. That's what is happening.

But if you get around to see this bottle from my perspective, you see that it doesn't have a label. And I see it from your perspective. Oh, it does have a label. So who's right? Well, both of us are right from our points of view, and it's not until you see the bottle from all of its different angles that you really understand the bottle.

So, it's not till we see a problem from all these different angles that we really see and understand the problem. When we see it from multiple perspectives, you know what, we can create better solutions.

It shows us that multiple things can be true at the same time. For example, it can be true that in the last 60 years, we have made a lot of progress on racial relations in our country. It can also be true that people of color still are experiencing things that are unjust and painful and wrong. Neither cancels the other out, and we don't really get it until we get it from all sides of the problem, and when we stay curious about it. Not everything is either-or. Many things can be, and are, true at the same time.

When we can begin to see this way, when we can see that multiple perspectives can be had, and heard, then we understand each other better. If we're not doing this, then we are living in an echo chamber where our own ideas are constantly fed back to us because we're only listening to what we want to hear, and what we agree with.

We're not going to always agree, and that's a good thing, because Jesus calls us to a deeper community where our differences make us stronger, like they did in this story. Listening and being curious and seeing things from all sides

doesn't mean we have to agree. It means that we are increasing understanding and learning, and therefore increasing love and finding solutions and accepting one another more. And experiencing personal growth and learning.

The way you know that you're really listening, the way you know that you're really crossing the lines and listening is every once in a while, not always, but every once in a while, you change your mind. If you haven't changed your mind about something recently, maybe you're not listening, and learning.

This is not easy and this is not comfortable, as Austin Channing Brown says, and I like to be comfortable, but there are no reconciled and healed communities without uncomfortable conversations. Now, we can't have these kinds of hard conversations with everyone; that would be exhausting, but we can have them with a few. When we do that, when we cross lines and reconcile and love across our differences, when we do that, we show how good Jesus is. We show how powerful Jesus is. We show that Jesus can do what the world cannot do right now. And then that giving and receiving, reconciling, crossing the line community also becomes a world healing community.

After they appoint the seven Greeks to oversee the distribution of food, verse 7 says this: "So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in

Jerusalem increased rapidly..." Many became Christians because in a messed up, angry, divided culture, which the Roman world was, a community where people love each other across their differences was a drink of cold water to a world that is dying of thirst.

So this week, maybe listen to some people or ideas that are different from yours, not to agree or disagree, but just to learn, to understand, to educate yourself. Pray for relationships with people who are different than you in some way, generationally, politically, racially, some way. We're in between the major party conventions, so this is a great time to pray! Pray for those relationships and just get to know each other. Don't start talking politics—don't jump in with, "So, what did you think of Michelle Obama's speech at the Democratic Convention last week?" if you're talking to your Trump supporting neighbor. Just to start get to know each other and forge a deeper relationship.

And little bit by little bit, like the mustard seed, like the little bit of yeast, we bring healing, to ourselves, and our communities.