

A Text to Help Us Understand Systemic Racism
Acts 6:1-7

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Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.
Acts 6:1

Our subject today is systemic racism. Our text is one that can help us understand what systemic racism is and what can be done about it.

I realize that setting the sermon up in this way is an exercise of white privilege. I as a white male in his 60s have to learn what systemic racism is and can treat it as a subject for discussion. Nonwhites live the effects of systemic racism every day. They know its meaning in their bones and cannot get away from it.

The text I put under study today is Acts 6:1-7. These verses tell of a problem that developed within the early church. The first Christian community faced from its inception problems that initiated outside its fellowship. The problem we are going to study today is different because it originated within the fellowship and it threatened to severely – perhaps even fatally - divide the church.

I do not propose there is a one-to-one correspondence between the case described in Acts and our situation in the U.S., but there are similarities enough that it can teach us about our situation and lead us to see what can be done about it.

You may want to press the pause button on your computer and grab your Bible so you can have our passage open before you. It will help you follow along as I teach through the passage. So press pause and get your Bible. I'll wait until you get back.

Do you have your Bible? Good. Turn to Acts 6:1-7.

The setting

Verse 1 not only states the problem that was disrupting the early church it gives the setting for that problem. Let's begin by looking at that setting and see the problem in its context.

The early church has been growing numerically. We do not know the amount of time that has elapsed between the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit of God filled the church with power and this scene in Acts, but however long or short that time was it was a time of significant growth. Already on the Day of Pentecost the church grew by 3000 members (Acts 2:41). A little later, in Acts 4:4, 5000 members are mentioned. I do not know if that means the 3000 increased by two thousand to make five or if the three were increased by these five to make 8000. All we know is that the line on the graph charting the church's growth kept rising. Acts 5 goes on from

that 5000 or 8000 to speak of a time when more than ever were added to the fellowship (Acts 5:14). So the early church has been growing in number.

Significantly, this church that has been growing in number has also been growing in diversity. The story we are reading just now takes place in the City of Jerusalem. Like all cities, especially capital cities, Jerusalem was a place of diversity. If you want proof of Jerusalem's diversity, all you have to do is remember that when Jesus was crucified Pilate had a sign posted to name the charge against him, and Pilate had that sign written in three languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin (Jn. 19:20). There was diversity in Jerusalem.

The diversity of the city reached into the church as the Christian community grew. Our text mentions two groups. In the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible the two groups are called the Hellenists and the Hebrews. The Today's English Version (TEV) calls them the Greek-speaking Jews and the native Jews. The King James Version (KJV) calls them the Grecians and the Hebrews. Both groups were Christian. Both groups were ethnically Jewish. But they had this difference between them. The ones called the Hebrews were from Jerusalem for the most part and were natives of the region of Palestine. They spoke Aramaic, a language akin to Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament. The Hellenists, though they, too, were Jewish, were from elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world. And they spoke Greek.¹ What we have then in this early church is a diversity of cultures.²

Something more to be said about this early church that was growing in number and growing in diversity is that it was growing in its ability to meet need. You will recall that when the twelve disciples were confronted with 5000 hungry people whom Jesus commanded them to feed, they had no idea how to go about doing it (Mk. 6:37 and par.). Now they have a welfare system in place. We aren't given the details about how it worked, but there was a daily distribution of food that went to widows and, presumably, other poor. Care for widows in particular ran deep in the tradition of these people. It went all the way back to the foundational documents of the Old Testament (cf. Ex. 22:22; Dt. 14:29, 24:17-21, 26:12-13).³

This welfare system that was in place seems to have been administered by the twelve. They, all of Hebrew background⁴, had the chief positions, under God, for governance and authority in the church. Insofar as there was power in the early church, it belonged to the twelve.

The problem

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 128.

² John R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1990), p. 120-121.

³ "Widow," *New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by Henry Snyder Gehman (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970). P. 993.

⁴ It should be noted that one of the twelve, Philip, has a Greek name. This Philip, not to be confused with the Philip of Acts 6:5, was from Bethsaida (Jn. 1:44) on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. John identifies Bethsaida as being the city of Andrew and Peter as well as of Philip. Thus I take it that Philip, the member of the twelve, fell within the Hebrew group despite his Greek name. Cf. William Barclay, *The Master's Men* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1959), p. 89; and H. H. Platz, "Philip," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol 3, ed. by George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), p. 785.

We turn now from the setting of the problem that developed in the early church to the problem itself. If you are following along in your Bibles, we are still in verse 1. The problem is that an injustice developed with the system for delivering food to the needy.

The injustice was first felt by the Hellenists, especially by their widows. Almost all the widows in the early church were poor. They were, for the most part, old, infirm, and struggling against the difficulties of life in a male-dominated society. The widow's way was uphill and difficult.

The widows among the Hellenists were particularly disadvantaged. They were originally from elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world. When their husbands got older and felt they were close to dying, they moved to Jerusalem so he could die in the Holy Land and be buried in the Holy City.⁵ When those old men died, their widows were left in Jerusalem bereft of any family who could help support them financially and care for them personally. So these widows were more dependent upon the aid of the church.

As time passed, these widows must have reported to the Greek-speaking people closest to them – the few they trusted - that something unfair was happening. They weren't getting access to the system that was supposed to be helping them. They would go to get their groceries but would come away empty-handed and unnoticed. Meanwhile, the Hebrew widows standing in the same lines, were getting their bags of groceries. Hebrew widows were getting access to the daily food distribution; Hellenist widows were not. Need did not seem to matter. The system itself seemed to favor one group over the other. The Aramaic speaking administrators of the system tilted toward Aramaic speaking widows and were blind to the Greek speaking widows.

This injustice first felt by the Hellenists was wholly unknown to the Hebrews. It was unknown to them because their widows were receiving their rations. The system was working for them. The system was weighted in their favor. The system was weighted in their favor because the people at the top were like them in language, culture, and experience. As far as the Hebrew group was concerned, the programs were all proceeding apace. There was nothing but success. Nothing was wrong. It was the greatest system in the world.

The Hellenists who first felt the injustice began murmuring about it among themselves. The Greek word in our text is *gongysmos*. The NRSV and New International Version (NIV) render it *complaint*. My Greek dictionary says the word can also mean secret talk, whispering, grumbling, and murmuring. The KJV renders *gongysmos* as murmuring. What we have, I think, is an undercurrent of frustration on the part of the Hellenists. And they talk about it. They have a language for it. It tells a common narrative they all know. It is couched in an idiom the Hellenists understand because it is part of their experience. It is an idiom – a narrative – unknown to the Hebrew streets and Hebrew homes where there did not seem to be a problem.

At last pressure builds. The injustice that has been experienced and talked about privately gets exposed. The idiom of Hellenists gets a wider expression. The murmuring becomes an expressed complaint. In terms we would use today, the Hellenists speak truth to power.

⁵ Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, tr. by R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), p. 261.

Unofficial leaders among the Hellenists go to the official leaders in governance – the twelve – and speak in a language they hope the Hebrews will at long last understand and respond to.

The solution

We have spoken of the setting of the problem and have outlined the problem itself. We come now to the solution to the problem, a solution that begins to unfold in verses 2 and 3. The solution has five aspects.

First, the twelve listen to the Hellenists. They take the matter seriously. They take the time to learn of the real experience the Hellenist widows are going through. They do not simply repeat and rely on their own experience from their position of privilege and power. They listen. They learn. After listening and learning, they admit there is a problem they had not seen before. The system has not been working as well as they thought.

Second, the twelve bring the community together. They seek unity. Instead of perpetuating the division and accentuating the divide, these leaders lead toward a solution that will benefit all. They bring the whole community together and they help the whole community understand the real issue that has been exposed. They teach the rest of the community that there is a flaw in the system the privileged think is wonderful.

Third, the twelve treat the Hellenists as equals. The NRSV – in a noble effort at gender inclusivity – misses the mark here when it says the twelve called the Hellenists *friends*. The word actually is *adelphoi*, and it means *brothers*. *Adelphoi* – brothers – carries connotations of unity and oneness and equality that *friends* does not. Brothers are people in the same family. There is difference, to be sure, but not otherness. The twelve treat the Hellenists as equals.

Fourth, the twelve open the system of governance to make it diverse and resemble the make-up of the community. They do not simply expand the charitable efforts of the community. They open the system of governance so the diversity of the community is mirrored in the power structure of the community. Positions of authority are created for Hellenists to occupy, and the Hellenists get to choose who from among them will rise to those positions of leadership.

Fifth, the twelve codify the new structure. They write into law by way of outward ceremony and blessing the expanded and diverse form of leadership.

That this five-part solution was a happy one is evidenced in verse 7, which says the community was not destroyed by this conflict or its solution but went on with continued growth that reached new inroads.

Well that is the case from the Book of Acts. I make no claim that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the New Testament situation and our own, but there are glaring similarities. Something like this is happening today. There long has been a murmuring that has gone unheard, unheeded, misunderstood, ignored, and denied. Of late there has been an uprising as murmuring takes the form of legitimate protest. A people among us – not strangers but *adelphoi* – brothers and sisters – full members of the same family – are feeling and have long felt the system is weighted against them. Meanwhile, many of us who are the beneficiaries of this

system do not understand the uproar because we have not felt the flaw of the system that has been weighted – intentionally or unintentionally – in our favor.

Our task today is to acknowledge what we do not understand and confess we will likely never understand it in full. But we should listen carefully and teachably to those who do understand. We should listen sensitively to their experience, see them as *adelphoi*, and then help the victims of injustice gain a place at the table where policy decisions are made.