

Sermon for Sunday, May 4, 2025

Acts 6:1 through 7:2 and 7:44-60

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today's Scripture reading is a big text with many ideas in it. In order to have a solid understanding of this reading, I'm going to need to do some teaching about history and provide some explanations about language. Therefore, the beginning of my sermon is designed to help you to understand those topics. From that understanding we'll go to the decisions made by the twelve apostles and the larger ramifications of the choices they made and how those choices impact us, here in this place 2000 years later.

A bit of the historical context: in the earliest days and years of Christianity, before they even called themselves *Christians* the vast majority of followers of Jesus were Jews and their native language was Aramaic or Hebrew. (Jesus' cry from the cross *Eloi, eloi lama sabachthani* is spoken in Aramaic.) But the early disciples were successful in teaching about Jesus and belief spread to other people who didn't necessarily speak Aramaic.

In 587 BC Jerusalem was destroyed and many of the Jewish residents were sent into exile in Babylon. When the time was right some of them returned to Jerusalem, but others remained in their new homes. These Jews were part of what is called the *Diaspora*. They assimilated into the new culture and learned to speak Greek all while still worshipping God and considering themselves Jewish. Just as English is the most common language in our day and time, Greek was the common language of the people labelled the *Diaspora Jews*.

It became practice for Diaspora Jews to return to live in Jerusalem as they aged because they wanted to die and be buried in Jerusalem. As a result Jerusalem had Aramaic speaking Jews and Greek speaking Jews. Now just to add another layer to these labels: some of these diaspora Jews became followers of Jesus and are labelled the Hellenists in today's Scripture reading.

If you really needed to categorize people you could say that there were Aramaic speaking Jews, Greek speaking Jews, Aramaic speaking former Jews who are now Jesus followers, and Greek speaking former Jews who are now Jesus followers. All of them are represented in today's Scripture reading. Knowing these

differences helps us to understand the context of the reading for today.

The opening verse of today's Scripture reading draws a distinction between Hebrews and Hellenists. Another way to say it would be to draw a distinction between followers of Jesus who spoke Aramaic and those who spoke Greek. Why is any of this important? Language is powerful and it can cause barriers to be erected between people; people who have many other attributes and beliefs in common.

The twelve apostles had been witnesses when Jesus fed the 5,000 and healed the sick and injured. They knew that these actions were an important part of the work of ministry. There was never a question about whether to feed the Hellenist widows. They simply realized that the task was too big for them and that they were called to prayer and the sharing of the gospel.

From Acts 2 44-45 we learn, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." The early Christians were living a communal lifestyle and taking care of each other. Today's reading comes from chapter 6 and we surmise that the practice of sharing food had continued. It seems that the followers of Jesus had set up a system for impoverished people to receive food. But language barriers got in the way and needy people were going hungry.

Occasionally people express the opinion that politics do not belong in church. The problem with that opinion is that today's Scripture lesson begins with a political decision. "Anything that allocates funding towards the public good is, ultimately, political." The disciples made a political decision to solve the problem of widows who were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. A person who ignores the needs of the hungry, the poorly clothed, those who have no shelter, those who are sick or imprisoned means that they are making a political decision that stands against the teachings of Jesus.

So the original disciples asked the larger group to elect seven men to aid in the distribution of food so that the disciples could focus on the task of sharing the gospel of Jesus. The men that were chosen all have Greek names and so we assume that they spoke Greek and were connected with the community of the Hellenists in a way that allowed them to support the needy of that community. All were chosen because they were "full of the Spirit and of wisdom."

We learn nothing further about five of these men. Presumably they successfully provided for the needy. But we do hear stories about the work of two of them: Philip (whose story will be read next week) and Stephen.

Keep in mind that Stephen was initially chosen to assist in the distribution of food. This task had little to do with the verbal sharing of the gospel; we assume he was chosen because he had administrative skills. But the Holy Spirit was upon him and it appears that the Holy spirit had other ideas. The Holy Spirit used him and his voice to share the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection with others even though his primary task was to distribute food.

Ahh, that Holy Spirit...you've got to watch out for her! In a few moments we will be witnesses to the baptism of Ava Ray Forman. We believe and teach a number of things about baptism.

- We believe that through our baptisms our sins are washed away.
- We believe that in our baptisms we are adopted into God's family and become a "forever" child of God.
- We believe that in our baptisms we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and that our life will be forever shaped by the Spirit's presence. Now receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit is a dangerous thing. It sets us apart. In Stephen's case it got him killed. While I hope that the Holy Spirit doesn't bring any of us into a situation of danger, I make no guarantees. I can make no guarantees about Ava. I can make no guarantees about any of you.

Here's the thing about the Holy Spirit. She breaks down barriers and forces people to move to places they might not have ever considered going.

The martyrdom of Stephen forces many of the Hellenists to leave Jerusalem and scatter throughout the Mediterranean basin. The result is that the good news gospel of Jesus goes with them and is spread throughout the Roman empire.

My friends, many of us are of Scandinavian and German ethnic origin (with a few English and Scots-Irish thrown in for good measure.) If the Holy Spirit had not been striving to bridge the language gap that we witness today from today's Scripture we would not be sitting here worshipping. We would not be witness to a baptism. We would not be sharing in Holy Communion together. So let us give thanks to God for the brave witness of the saints

who, over 2000 years, and filled with the Holy Spirit continued to speak so that we might now share in God's promises throughout our lives. Amen.