

Greek Speaking Widows Matter

Acts 6:1-7, Acts 10:9-34

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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Have you ever heard people say that we just need to get back to the early church? By that they mean the church of the Book of Acts. You have probably met those people who yearn, very honestly, for that idyllic early church described in Acts 4, where it says that the church was of “one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common”. It is a beautiful vision. I yearn for it, as well.

Pastor Tom read to us today the scripture from just two chapters later in which there is already division in that one heart and soul. It can happen so quickly. Here is what was causing the conflict. In Jerusalem there were Jews who spoke Hebrew and Jews who spoke Greek. Outside of Jerusalem, Jews spoke Greek. Those who immigrated to Jerusalem brought the Greek language and Hellenistic culture with them. The church of Acts included diversity and I love that fact. However, in the 6th chapter of Acts, the Greek-speaking immigrants point out that their widows are walking away hungry from the food distribution.

So, the disciples called the community together and said, “It is obvious that we can’t take care of everything. We want you to choose seven from among you to do the daily distribution of food. Pick men full of the Spirit and wisdom.” They chose the seven -- six of them were Greek-speaking Jewish Hellenists. One of them was Nicolaus, a Gentile from Antioch who had converted to Judaism and then to Christianity. When tasked with how to make their community truly equal they chose the non-cradle Brethren to run things. The aggrieved are chosen to lead. The community chooses equity over equality. Problem solved. The early church should experience no more challenges.

We know that’s not true. Let’s skip ahead to Acts 10, past the stoning of Stephen and the conversion of Saul. In this chapter, we learn of a man named Cornelius – a Roman centurion from Italy stationed in Caesarea. He is not a Jewish man, but he is a good man. He prays to God and does good deeds. One day Cornelius has a vision. An angel of God comes to him and says, “God hears you and sees you. Send for Simon Peter in Joppa. You will find him at Simon the Tanner’s house.” The angel gives no explanation of why Cornelius should send for Peter. Just do it.

Meanwhile, Peter is on the roof of Simon the Tanner’s house. He is praying when he has a vision. A giant tablecloth is being lowered to the roof. It is filled with all the foods that a good Jew is not supposed to eat. A voice tells Peter to eat but Peter says, “I will not eat anything unclean.” “What God has made clean you must not call profane,” the voice says. This same vision happens three times.

While Peter is trying to discern what this means, three men that Cornelius sent to fetch Peter arrive at Simon the Tanner's house. A voice says, "Peter, there are three men down at the gate. I sent them. Don't hesitate. Go with them."

So, Peter goes down and asks them why they have come. "We were sent by Cornelius, a Roman centurion who was visited by a holy angel. He was told to send for you to hear what you have to say." Peter invites them in, and then he hesitates. He doesn't do as he was instructed. He waits a day and gets some others to go with him. He is about to go into the home of a Roman centurion. He wants witnesses that can vouch that he hasn't profaned himself.

When they arrive, Cornelius is eagerly waiting for them. In fact, he has invited all of his relatives and close friends. He sees Peter and immediately kneels at Peter's feet in reverence. Peter says, "Please get up. I'm just a man." Peter looks around and sees that the house is packed with Gentiles. So, with a heavy sigh, he says, "Don't you know it is unlawful for me to associate with you? I'm only here because God told me not to call you profane. What is it you want with me?" It sounds a bit performative, doesn't it? It sounds like he is saying these words for the witnesses he asked to tag along.

I don't think this is the greeting God is hoping Peter would give Cornelius. But Peter is freaked out. All of his life he has been told that he was not to put himself into situations with Gentiles. Plus, Cornelius works for the occupier. This could be dangerous. Plus, Peter trapped himself. He has gone to Cornelius, as God told him to do. But he brought witnesses who didn't hear what God told him to do.

Cornelius says, "I don't know what I want from you. I was just minding my own business when one of God's angels told me to send for you. I assumed you would know what to do." And that is when Peter got his voice. He begins to preach, and he starts his sermon like this: "I understand that God shows no partiality." When Peter is done preaching the Holy Spirit shows up and all the Gentiles in the house begin speaking in tongues. It is Pentecost, all over again....in a house full to Gentiles who are part of the Empire. Peter can't believe he is doing it but he begins to baptize all these uncircumcised new believers. He turns to his witnesses and says, "What was I to do? These Gentiles received the same Holy Spirit we did. I didn't see that coming." Then Peter, who didn't want to come in the first place...who just wanted to do get this over with and then return to Joppa, became a guest in the home of a Roman centurion for several days.

Evangelical Christianity recounts this biblical text as the first Gentile conversion. It is, most definitely, a story about conversions the conversion of Cornelius and his whole household, and the conversion of Peter. It is Peter's conversion which we need to bear witness to today. Peter's conversion speaks volumes into the time in which we live. Covid 19, the video of George Floyd's death and an insurrection on our Capitol have pointed out deep and troubling issues of injustice in our world and in our country. We have to make a choice here. Do we continue on as we were, defending our positions and believing that all is just fine in River City or do we follow the example of the early church and allow ourselves to be changed, expanded, enlightened?

I received another unsigned letter recently from someone objecting to the Speak Their Names prayer flag installation on the corner of our property. The letter ended with a reminder to our

church that all lives matter. I agree, with every fiber of my being. Everyone belongs. Often the intention behind arguing that all lives matter is a good one. Our country has a tagline – “with liberty and justice for all”in other words “all lives matter”. It is a statement of equality, but it is a statement in name only. We can’t make this statement true in our nation until we admit that there is not liberty and justice for everyone here. Saying all lives matter instead of Black lives matter is speaking for equality vs. equity. Equality means everything is the same. Everything is equal. Equity is the practice of balancing that which has become imbalanced. Take a classroom situation. You can treat every child exactly the same, but there are children who need more help with their reading skills than other children. Teachers understand the need for equity over equality.

The early church had a problem with equity. The Hebrew-speaking widows were walking away full and satisfied. The Greek-speaking widows were walking away hungry. So, the ones that were hungry showed up with signs that said, “Greek-speaking widows matter.” Instead of looking at them and saying, “All widows matter” the disciples said, “We aren’t getting this right and we may not be the right ones to correct this situation.” They fought the urge to defend themselves. They denied the culture of equality and chose equity. They turned over the decision to the community and the community called seven Greek speakers to put the community back into balance. The early church models for us why we need to say that Black lives matter, trans lives matter, indigenous lives matter, immigrant lives matter before we can truly say all lives matter.

Peter believed in the impartiality of the gospel....theoretically....to a point. He believed it with his head, but his heart and his body were so engrained with his culture that it was difficult to distinguish the gospel from the way he was raised. Peter, who felt called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, still brought his biases with him. So God stepped in and sent Peter to the home of someone who pushed Peter right outside his comfort zone. The result was the conversion of Peter. “I understand that God shows no partiality,” he said. He wasn’t preaching to Cornelius when he said that. He was preaching to himself. “I see...I understand...God is reminding me that God’s love is all inclusive,” he begins his sermon.

We, like the early church, are in a constant struggle to excommunicate ourselves from culture....from the way we have been conditioned to see and treat those we are different from us. This lens is tempered by the call to be a good American, a good Christian, a good Brethren. We have to resist voices that tell us to defend culture over love, tradition over the gospel, fairness over equity, our rights over justice. We have a model from the early church. May we listen instead of responding defensively. May we seek to repair that which is broken... unbalanced. May we be converted. Greek speaking widows matter. Amen