Servant Leaders

Acts 6:1-8

Buckingham Church

February 21, 2021

Sometimes you need to read a verse of scripture that starts a story and just stop for a moment. Often this little story from Acts is told to illustrate how the early church first established what we now call “Deacons,” those whose role is to tend to the details of the care of the people of the church. That term has morphed in most places to be people who care about the details of worship, as is the case with our deacons, but the original intent of those who care for the details still stands. And, of course, this little story is the prelude to the tale of the stoning of Stephen: the first Christian martyr wasn’t one of the original disciples, it was one of the first Deacons! Who also happened to be a brilliant preacher.

But I want to go back to that first sentence a minute before we get caught up in Stephen. “During this time, as the disciples were increasing in numbers by leaps and bounds, hard feelings developed among the Greek-speaking believers…toward the Hebrew-speaking believers because their widows were being discriminated against in the daily food lines.” The Message

I want to talk for a bit about the widows. This word throughout the Bible means several things. It can mean literally “widows,” women whose husbands have died. In Biblical times and places, and still today in some places, widows usually became poor unless they had a prosperous son to take them in. They did not inherit property. They had no rights to their husband’s wealth if he had any. Unless they had a male child, or a daughter’s husband willing to take them in, widows dwelt on the bottom rung of society in terms of money and power.

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, God often calls out those who do not care for widows, or often the term is “widows and orphans.” These are the poorest of the poor, not only in terms of money and the ability to get food and shelter, but also in terms of voice and power in their families, villages, and nation. The prophets often save their deepest condemnation to those who neglect widows and orphans. God calls us again and again to look after those in our community who most need looking after. In time, that term evolved to mean more than literally “widows and orphans” to include all who are poor and powerless.

And sometimes, as in this case, the poor and powerless who are also ethnic minorities in any group are neglected even more. These widows about whom we are told in this text are all Jewish Christians, but some came to Jerusalem from Greek-speaking parts of the world. Those native to Israel must have looked down on them and so slighted them in the sharing of this community about which we read last week. We were told that everyone held all things in common, but apparently some were considered less entitled to the common-wealth than others. It has ever been thus.

To give the Apostles credit, they wanted to try to nip this sort of thing in the bud early on, so they asked that people of “good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” be appointed to this task. Caring for the poor and powerless wasn’t meant to be labor given to the least important members of the community, but rather to those considered respected by the community. Sit with that for a minute. Those who care for the most vulnerable were to be among the most respected. This was important work in the eyes of the leaders, though they did not see it as ***their*** work. And that’s fine, as long as the community did not neglect those most in need and had a clear process to take care of them.

Lots to think about in this first couple of verses. First, I wonder who we might describe as equivalent to those Hellenist (Greek-speaking) widows today? Someone who is dependent on others for whatever reason, often having to do with prejudice, unfair systems of wealth (I just read this week about a baseball player getting a $10 million contract while those who care for the elderly and infirm anywhere in this country often struggle to make the minimum wage). Maybe someone who is ignored by those in power (I long to hear a politician not say “I’m working for the middle class,” but “I’m working for those most in need of my power!”) When you read the newspaper or look at news on TV or computer, whose faces do you see when you think of the Biblical “widows and orphans?”

Next, I want to send a shout out to whoever it was among the Hellenists who spoke up to the disciples on behalf of the widows. Probably wasn’t one of the widows, because we know they most likely would not have been listened to, even in the early Christian community. It had to be someone with a voice, with even a little more power than those widows had. I also want to give a shout out to the widow who found that person and drew the injustice to their attention, the woman who found her voice and found a way to be heard. Was she a Hellenist, or perhaps one of the Hebrew widows who had befriended a sister and saw what was happening?

And I want us to think about this: where are we in this story?

Are you in the place of the Hellenist widow, one who has no power, is dependent on others to stay alive, and wants to draw attention to the injustices built in to so many family and societal systems that impact you?

Are you in the place of a Hebrew widow who is getting what you need but sees that others are not and needs to call those in power to pay attention to what is going on?

Are you someone with minimal power but more than the poor and powerless who sees injustice and needs to reach out to those in power to urge them to right what is wrong?

Do you have more power than you admit to yourself and need to help design new systems to right the injustices in the systems of our society so that those who most need care can receive it?

A year into this pandemic, we are all tired. If we have our eyes open, we have also seen that this pandemic has brought to the surface so many systemic issues that need attention in our society. Who are “essential workers,” and how are they being protected and compensated for this essential work? How is our medical system working its way through systemic racism that dates back centuries but has persisted – it brought me up short one day when I finally realized that the Tuskegee syphilis experiments were still going on in my childhood! And who designed a system for distribution of vaccines that relied on people exclusively to use a computer, thus making it harder for some of the poorest, those lacking internet access, those most elderly and physically disabled in our society – who need the vaccine the most – to get access to it?

There’s more, of course. And once you see that injustice, you can’t un-see it. The first church in its early days found that a critical part of its very identity was to see things like this and address them. I believe it is still part of our identity to see what others gloss over; to empower those without voice to find a voice, or to speak on their behalf or with them. We don’t have to be a big church to do that, nor have lots of money. We just need to do what that early church did: share what we have both in stuff and in power. Model for others what it means to love one another. Amen.