
IN AND OUT
ACTS 6:1-6, ACTS 7:57-8:1
A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, JUNE 19, 2022
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Prayer.

When I was interviewing for my current position nine years ago, a member of the choir hopefully asked me if I sang. I said, “Yes, I do.” She looked moderately hopeful until I continued. “I sing in the car and in the shower, but my favorite place to sing is in church, when an excellent organist such as our own Kit Jacobsen fills the room with beautiful sound, covering my multitude of vocal sins.” I know my place and it is not in the choir!

While it is not my place, I am certainly glad that the choir stalls are the right place for the singers who are with us today. The ChorWorks students have been studying and performing here this last week, as part of an annual program sponsored by Duke Chapel Music for training musicians to sing renaissance and baroque music. I have no doubt they have had much instruction and practice this week, along with the joy of making music. My guess is that breathing is something they practiced. While the simple in and out of breathing is automatic and often ignored, it cannot be ignored by the trained singer. Intentionality is important. Choosing when to inhale and when to exhale is influenced by the music, the other singers, and the instructions of a fine director such as Philip Cave.

Singers, instrumentalists, athletes, meditators and others learn to control their breathing. Perhaps we all know the importance of pausing and taking a deep breath when we are tempted to say something we might regret. The movement in and out of breath is a natural part of our individual lives; it is also a part of our corporate life as a church.

Today we are continuing our sermon series on the book of Acts. Our reading this morning from Acts 6 tells the story of a complaint that bubbles up in the early church. It was a complaint by the Hellenists against the Hebrews. The Hebrews referenced here are Jews who have come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. They live in Jerusalem; they are the foundation, the beginning of this very new movement which is Christianity. They are the apostles and their followers. The Hellenists, the other group mentioned, were also Jews that had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. They, however, had been living outside of Palestine, spoke Greek, and may have developed social and cultural patterns that are different from those who never left Palestine. So we have the two groups: Hellenists and Hebrews. Both are Jewish, both accept Jesus. One has lived outside Palestine. The other lives in Jerusalem. It doesn't seem as though these are major differences, though we should note that the Hebrews had leadership and authority, which is why the Hellenists came to them with their concerns.

The complaint that the Hellenists raise is that their widows are being neglected in the daily distribution of food. They rightly spoke up for the most vulnerable in their midst. Rather than denying the problem or getting defensive, the Hebrews, the apostles, heard the complaint, asked the Hellenists to select people to solve the issue, then empowered them with prayer and laying on of hands to go forth and serve. The apostles then entrusted seven newly commissioned leaders with the resources of the community. Thank you for selecting leaders Here's the food. Make sure everyone is fed.

There is a beautiful example of conflict resolution in this passage, which I invite you to ponder. This is also a moment when the established leadership welcomed in and empowered new leadership. The Hellenists, who had previously lived outside of the region, are now brought in not only to the community, but also into its leadership. In.

One of the seven newly minted leaders was Stephen. Stephen appears only in Acts 6 and 7, so we want to be sure to catch his story here. He and the others were commissioned to “wait on the tables” as the apostles said “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.” (Acts 6:2) The apostles planned to spend their time on prayer and preaching, while others distributed food. (Aside: Please don’t see this as a hierarchy, serving food is a beautiful ministry as is prayer.) We presume the issue of food was resolved because it does not come up again, even though Stephen did not stick to waiting tables.

Stephen is described as “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5), so should we or should we not, be surprised that he does not stick to his assigned role? Along with six others, Stephen is commissioned to serve food, and before we are even done with this chapter, Stephen is out and about. He is doing signs and wonders. He is full of grace and power. He stirs up arguments about Jesus, so much so that his opponents secretly instigate false witnesses to testify against him. Before long, Stephen is standing before the council, giving the longest speech recorded in the book of Acts. Clearly, he is doing a little more than offering bread to the Hellenists widows. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, he has stepped out. He has gone beyond serving the needs of his own community, beyond the established leadership, and seems to be out on his own talking to the council. He was welcomed in, then stepped out.

Last week, when preaching about Acts 3, Assistant Dean Bruce Puckett spoke of the church’s beautiful work of welcoming in the outsider. The scripture tells the story of a man unable to walk who spent his days at the gate of the temple asking for money. Peter and John offered him the healing found in Jesus Christ. The man then jumped up, walked into the temple, and praised God. (Acts 3:1-10) We heard encouragement to be a welcoming church, inviting people in. It is a beautiful thing, and part of our calling.

We also send people out.

Here at Duke Chapel, we are blessed to have many visitors. Because of the beauty of the building, the Chapel is a destination for thousands of visitors. Prior to the pandemic, we had approximately 300,000 visitors annually. That includes everyone who came into the building, whether it was for an event, a worship service, a concert, or simply to take a brief look at the architecture. We love having people here and are happy to share this space with others. And yet, we do not exist to be a destination. This is not the end point. From here, the Spirit sends us out to serve. Some churches have a phrase posted above their entry reading “Come in worship, Go out to serve.” We need both, the gathering in and the sending out.

This morning we come to the communion table. We come as those who are hungry and need to be filled. We come literally with empty hands, waiting to receive the gifts of God. Once we have received the gifts of God at the table or in worship as a whole or the community of faith, are we tempted to think like a good consumer, “I’m satisfied. I got what I wanted.”? I rejoice if you find the gifts of God in this space. It is a gift when we receive and are filled, and when we are pushed and sent. If we have an image of ourselves coming forward with empty hands, we also need an image of ourselves filled, empowered, and sent.

The Holy Spirit sent Stephen out, out beyond the Hellenists, beyond the Hebrews, where he confronted an angry council, and later an angry mob. It did not go well for him; he was stoned to death. The first martyr of the church. This led to a persecution of the church in Jerusalem, so many believers scattered throughout the countryside. As the story of Acts unfolds, we will see that that scattering led to further expansion of the church.

One commentator writes, “Had the Church never broken out of that framework [of the established leadership of the Hebrews], it would have remained one of the many messianic sects that first-century Judaism produced. But in the very act of opening itself to the Hellenists, the Church opened itself to a portion of the community that would serve as a bridge for the mission to the Gentiles.”¹ Stephen was welcomed in, then went out. His preaching and martyrdom opened the doors to worldwide Christianity, an expansion that continues even now.

We breathe in and out. When do we make beautiful music? The song comes when we exhale.

Thanks be to God who welcomes us in and sends us out..

Amen.

¹ Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit, Justo L. González.