

The Calling of the Seven (Acts 6)

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[0 : 00] Thank you for listening to The Table Church podcast. The Table Church is a justice-oriented, inclusive community of folks who are doing their best to thoughtfully and authentically follow the way of Jesus.

If you want to support our efforts to declare a more beautiful gospel, we invite you to partner with us financially by going to thetablechurch.org. Thanks so much again for joining us.

Let's dig in. Hello. Good evening. All right. I need to do a little bit of like stage arrangement so I have a job for you all.

Speaking of bringing back old traditions, we're going to do like introvert alert. We're going to do a little bit of shake and howdy, okay? But there's a purpose to this. So I want, in a minute, when I tell you to stand up if you're able, find somebody that you don't know or don't recognize.

I'm having this realization about The Table recently that there is about, you're not going to believe this, about 600 people who consider The Table Church like influential in their spiritual lives in some way.

[1 : 04] Church home, listen to podcasts online, all of that. About 600 people. But any one of you maybe know like 25 of them. All right? So we're going to try to start beating down these barriers of thinking that it's just the 20 of us and that's it.

All right? So you're going to get up. You're going to find somebody that you don't recognize. You don't know their name. And then you're going to ask the question about what is a meal that has stayed in your memory for years.

Okay? An important meal that has stayed in your memory for years. And this is going to connect to the sermon a little bit. So, on the count of three, we're going to get up, find somebody, get their name, find out a memory of a meal that they have.

One, two, three, go. Thanks, everybody. Hopefully, if you're on the live chat, watching online, you shared some memories in the chat as well.

Thanks for doing that. My name is Anthony. I get to serve as one of the pastors here at The Table. We're in the middle of the book of Acts and talking about the birth of the church, some of the first Christians, the first followers of Jesus and how they responded to the gospel of the kingdom and what they did about it.

[2 : 15] And we're turning our attention to a story that revolves around some food. Now, imagine that story that you just told or just heard about, about a meal that you particularly remember. However, I'm going to guess that in most cases, not all, but in most cases, you were probably with some people.

And even if you weren't maybe with some people, maybe at least somebody, you were in a restaurant and somebody brought you that meal. Now, imagine that you're in this situation, you're with some people, you're in a restaurant, someone prepared the meal for you.

And imagine that you're watching your friends, your family, other restaurateurs all get the food except you. I hear somebody go, aww.

Except you, you're watching everyone else get the food, but you don't. How would you feel? Go ahead and say it out loud. How would you feel? Hungry? Rejected?

Disappointed? Yeah, yeah. Not great, right? That's a good summary. All right. So with that in mind, let's turn our attention to the book of Acts, chapter 6.

[3 : 22] It's the book of Acts, chapter 6. You can join us with your phone or with a Bible, or you can just listen along. The words are not on the screen. This is the book of Acts, chapter 6.

And we've been exploring stories about these first followers of Jesus, how they responded to Jesus' gospel of the kingdom, his life, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension.

A few weeks ago, we were a little bit early, but we talked about Pentecost, the arrival of the Spirit, empowering God's people. And then we've talked about the implications of that, about folks sharing in common their possessions, selling their homes.

Last week, Becky shared about what it means to be in a covenant community that makes promises to each other, what it means to break those promises. So speaking of broken promises, let's take a look at Acts, chapter 6.

It says, About that time, while the number of disciples continued to increase, a complaint arose. Greek-speaking disciples accused the Aramaic-speaking disciples because their widows were being overlooked in the daily food service.

[4 : 36] So let's pause there for a second. Let me give you a little background and context. In Jerusalem, which is where the first chunk of the book of Acts happens, you have mostly Aramaic-speaking Jews.

So Aramaic is a cousin language related to Hebrew. And in Galilee, Palestine, Judea, that was the language that Jesus spoke, that disciples spoke, that everybody who was Jewish in that region spoke.

You also had the diaspora. Those were the Jews who, over the centuries, have been spread across the Roman Empire, the Greek-speaking world, and they've spread around as well.

But some have come back to Palestine, to Jerusalem, to live there, to experience the temple, or to join this new offshoot of the Jewish religion called the Way, the Way of Jesus, what we know as Christianity.

And so there are the Aramaic-speaking ones, the OG Jews, the ones who are speaking the mother tongue, the home language. And then there are the other ones who were afar and came back home, and they speak Greek.

[5 : 41] They speak the lingua franca of the empire, Greek. And so we know from earlier chapters that part of what the disciples were doing, what the first Christians were doing, is that they would share their possessions with everyone.

And there would be this daily distribution. And in most translations, it says a daily distribution of food. The word food's not there. There's a daily distribution of anything that you could need. Money, resources, housing, and food included. And so the Greek-speaking disciples are noticing, hey, those widows, those whose husbands have died or, in some cases, have just abandoned them, left them, they're not getting the daily distribution, which means that they're not, in the least, they're not getting food either.

So, verse 2 continues. So the twelve, that's the apostles, those OG disciples who were following around Jesus, called a meeting of all the disciples and said, it isn't right for us to set aside proclamation of God's word in order to serve tables.

So, brothers and sisters, carefully choose seven well-respected men from among you. They must be well-respected and endowed by the Spirit with exceptional wisdom, and we will put them in charge of this concern.

[6 : 56] As for us, the twelve disciples say, the apostles, we will continue to devote ourselves to prayer and the service of proclaiming the word. And this proposal pleased the entire community.

So they selected Stephen, a man endowed by the Holy Spirit with exceptional faith, who we'll read about later, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Arminas, and Nicholas from Antioch, who was a convert to Judaism.

The community presented these seven to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. And God's word continued to grow. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased significantly. Even a large group of priests embraced the faith. Would you pray with me? Good, gracious God, we're grateful that you are here with us today.

And even though we've all heard lies of that we are not enough, that we don't belong, that we don't fit in, that we don't measure up. God, you speak through those lies and you proclaim your love and acceptance over each and every one of us.

[8 : 02] God, I lift up the many needs and concerns of this community and all of our neighbors and friends who we represent, God, knowing that we are in a world that is absolutely filled with turmoil.

God, we remember the constant barrage of bad news that comes from our own country when it comes to shooting after shooting after shooting. God, we remember the folks who are fighting the good fights in Ukraine, who are pushing back against an empire that desires death and destruction.

God, we remember the continued efforts to bring equality for our LGBTQ friends and family across this country, knowing, God, that there are forces who wish to continue a genocide against trans kids, discrimination against gay people.

God, we remember the fight to continue to pursue justice and equity for people of color and particularly for black people in America. God, the fight is not over merely because it's not trending on Twitter anymore.

It continues, God. And so we pray as spirit-filled people, as Pentecost people, that we might be empowered to, first of all, see, to see with clear eyes, not eyes that have been diluted by empires and powers of darkness, but rather eyes that see the way the world is in every way, in the way that your light is breaking in and in the way that the darkness is still thrashing about, attempting to pull us in.

[9 : 46] God, would you give us eyes to see and then would you give us hearts to hope? Hope, not in the magical sense that things will just get better, but rather hope that perseveres and believes that there is good in this world and that it is worth fighting for.

And may the weapons of our warfare, God, not be the weapons of the world of bloodshed and the myth of redemptive violence, but rather may our weapons be of truth and of forgiveness and of amazing love.

Now, God, as we turn our attention to our word, your word, we pray that your spirit would give us a sense of understanding and illumination that these words, God, may not merely be resounding in our ears, but rather be growing in our souls so that they might become physical in this world through our bodies, God.

We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. So, we are confronted with a problem.

And the problem is a group of people who have been rendered invisible by prejudice and a system that is unable to see when hurting people are hurting.

[11 : 09] The word overlooked in verse 1 actually gives the sense of being invisible. And so, you have this daily distribution of at least food, food and more, and the Greek-speaking widows are just not seen and therefore not being given the things that they need.

It's like seeing all your friends, all your family, everyone else in the restaurant being given a meal and the waiter never seems to make their way to you.

So, the Hebrew prophets in what we call the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, make it very, very clear that when you ignore those who are overlooked, and in Hebrew language that's the idea of the orphan and the widow and the stranger, the foreigner among us, when you overlook these sorts of people, you're actually doing the same thing to God.

Malachi, the prophet Malachi in chapter 3 writes, those, is the word of God, God speaking, those who oppress the widows and the fatherless and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, they don't fear me. And this is the continual theme in the scripture, that if you want to measure how vibrant your relationship is with God, then you need to measure how vibrant your relationship with is with the marginalized, the oppressed, those who have been left out, overlooked, or not seen.

If you want to measure how deep and how spiritual you are, you're not going to start with the number of chapters of scripture you read a day, the amount of hours of prayer that you're spending, how big you tithe or give, how many hours you spend in the church. If you want to measure the vibrancy of your relationship with God, then the prophets, the scriptures make it clear, start with how your relationship is with those who have been overlooked. So, the disciples hear this complaint. And in some ways, this story kind of serves as the counter story to a story in the book of Numbers, where the Israelites are wandering around the desert, and they begin to complain that they don't have food. And in that story, there's kind of some anger from Moses and some anger from God. But in this story, the reaction is different. Notice how the apostles respond. Anybody familiar with the acronym DARVO? D-A-R-V-O? Anybody? What is it? Do you remember what it stands for?

[13 : 48] Not offhand. Okay, that's okay. Sorry to put you on the spot. So, DARVO is this typical response when someone comes at you with a complaint, and you can decide, am I going to respond in a affirming posture or in a DARVO posture? And DARVO stands for deny. No, I didn't do that. Attack.

How dare you accuse me of that? And then reverse victim and offender. So, DARVO D-Denying. A, attack. R-V-O. Reverse victim and offender. You would accuse me. I'm just trying to do the will of God. How dare you? I am now the victim in this story, even though you're the one who's been hurt.

DARVO. But that's not how the apostles, the 12, respond to the story. Listen to what they do. They first take the word of the group seriously. They get this complaint about the widows being overlooked, verse 2, and the 12 call the meeting of the disciples and said, we need to take care of this. They don't deny. They listen and respond, and they take the accusation seriously. They didn't spiritualize the issue, which can tend to happen in churches. Hey, you're not taking care of this. Well, you know, you want food, but in reality, spiritual food is more important. Man does not live by bread alone. And they didn't respond with toxic positivity. So toxic positivity is this idea of like, you come at me and you tell me your problems, and I at least you. Well, at least you have a roof over your head. Well, you know, I've been abused. I've been hurt. I've been traumatized by the church. Well, at least you've got a family that cares for you. You have this toxic positivity, or you combine spiritualizing with toxic positivity. Well, at least you're going to heaven when you die. It doesn't matter how bad your life is here. At least you've got that going for you. Toxic positivity. No, it doesn't matter how bad your life is, what the complaint is, somebody is there to tell you it's not as bad as you think. This was the story of my brother's funeral. My brother died in a car accident, and we went to the funeral. I had an A speaking part, but not the only speaking part. And so lots of the attitude that was coming from my brother's church was this like, well, but God's going to use this to do great things. And, you know, at least he's in heaven now, and he's healed and whole. And I suppose all of that's true, but there's still the fact, the reality that there's a wife and a kid who no longer has a husband and a dad. And it was a tragic life cut short at too young of an age. And none of that was acknowledged. It was just at least, at least, at least. And that's not what the apostles do. The apostles, they listen, they don't deny, and they don't respond with this sort of spiritualizing, well, it's not as bad as you think. At least you've got something else going for you.

[16:49] So they don't deny, they listen, and they accepted responsibility for the error of overlooking the needs of a neglected, and in this case, prejudiced against group. You've got the Aramaic speaking Jews there in Jerusalem, and there was some times a bad blood between the Aramaic speaking Jews and the Greek speaking Jews, the ones who maybe waited too long to come home, the ones who are a little late to this whole Christian following Jesus game. And so there was a sense of superiority.

We were the first to hear the word of Jesus. We were the first to respond. We never left Israel or Jerusalem. You all did. So there's some prejudice at play. And so the apostles, they listen, they respond, and they acknowledge the responsibility. Prejudice and privilege has this really interesting way of rendering the problems of a system invisible to one group and doubly visible to the other. Because it wasn't the apostles who noticed the problem. The folks who were being prejudiced against, they were the ones who had to speak up. They were the ones who felt the issue every day. Whereas those who were the ones actually creating the system that rendered people invisible, they had no idea. They didn't know. And notice that the apostles, the twelve, they don't go back to the Greek speaking widows and those speaking up on their behalf and saying, you know, could you just be quiet? You're just complaining.

Hmm. We know. We'll get to it. They didn't do that. Those who have historically been overlooked, marginalized, left out, they are often the ones who have to speak up for themselves. Because these systems that have rendered them invisible means that they have no other choice but to be the ones to be loud. And the disciples don't shame them for that.

So they take immediate action. They gather the congregation together, say, what are we going to do about this? And immediately come up with a plan. They don't create like a five-year longitudinal study on the effect of food deprivation of Greek speaking widows and how, like, no. They're like, oh, there's a problem. Let's respond today. If you've been part of churches for a while, you know how things can get mired in committee and teams and meetings and setting schedules. Whereas the problem that needs to be solved just still needs to be solved. And I'm all for, I mean, we just spent 15 months writing bylaws. Don't get me wrong. I'm all for, like, doing things in a systematic, thoughtful, diligent way.

[19:40] But when people are going hungry, you just need to take action sometimes. So they take immediate action. And this part is crucial to recognize.

Choose among you, so the disciples, the 12 were speaking to the Greek speaking folks. Choose among you seven well-respected men, and we will put them in charge of this concern. So the 12, the apostles, they relinquish power, and they give that power to the offended party. You were the ones who noticed the problem, so we are going to empower you to best understand how

to fix the problem. It's important that when we take it upon ourselves to speak up for the marginalized, we realize that in many ways we're still continuing the problem of not letting them have a voice.

It's better to let them act on their own behalf, to allow them to lead, and us, the empowered ones, to follow.

It's also important to note that the 12, they appointed men for this position. So you may think, well, if we want to allow those who have been hurt to be the ones who are part of the solution, why not choose the widows? And I think the reason is that this kind of serves as a continuation of the Mary and Martha story.

[21 : 11] So if you don't know the Mary and Martha story, there's a story about Jesus going to the house of Mary and Martha. Mary sits as a disciple learning at Jesus' feet. Martha is busy in the kitchen.

She comes into this gathered place where the disciples are learning, and Martha's like, I've been busting my ass all day. What are you doing, Mary? And Jesus is like, no, no, no, I am not going to take from Mary this better thing.

And Martha, you could have joined. So this story continues where it was considered women's work to be the ones who to take care of the widows and to provide for the daily distribution of food.

And there's this interesting thing where the Jewish system in Jerusalem, they had a system for caring for widows. So what probably happened is that these Greek-speaking widowed women, they decided to follow the way of Jesus, and they get ostracized, they get kicked out of respectable society for claiming that Jesus is Messiah.

So now they are dependent on the church for doing what the church has said it's going to do, which is to provide, to have everything in common. So they come, they're overlooked, the twelve that empower seven men.

[22 : 24] They don't make this women's work. They say the men are going to be the ones that take care of it. It's a continuation of the Mary and Martha story. Mary chose the better thing by sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Mary is empowered to be a learner, a disciple of Jesus. And the men should be the ones empowered to serve tables and care for the kitchen and the distribution.

It's the continuation of Jesus and Jesus' followers turning over tables and switching systems and an upside-down sort of kingdom.

So, to review, when confronted with an issue of prejudice and discrimination, the disciples did not DARVO.

They didn't deny, attack, and reverse a victim and an offender. Rather, they took the word of the group seriously. They didn't spiritualize. They didn't try to have a positive spin on it.

[23 : 22] They accepted responsibility for the error of overlooking the needs of a neglected group. They took action to fix it immediately. And they included the hurt people in the solution to the problem and appointed a people from the aggrieved party to administer the solution.

So, what are the implications for us? First thing that comes to mind is that love, this Christian word that we like to toss around but maybe don't consider its depth often enough, love needs to grapple with power.

Love needs to grapple with power. We live in a world in which power is not equally distributed. And so, the way that I'm going to love my fellow straight white man probably needs to be different than the way that I love an overlooked or neglected or marginalized person or group.

Love has to grapple with power in order to respond appropriately to the injustice in the world. And for those of us who are often in an empowered place in society, the giving up of power, the handing over of responsibility and privilege and authority to those who have typically been marginalized or overlooked, that's the most Christ-like thing we can do.

Philippians 2 is this kenosis hymn, this Christ hymn, this hymn about Jesus emptying himself of divine rights and privileges and taking on the form of a human, becoming obedient to the cross, even unto death.

[25 : 09] If we want to be Christ-like, Jesus-like people, it's never going to be about amassing more power. No matter what a Christian nationalist may tell you, no matter what somebody who wants to change the world may tell you, it's never going to be about amassing power for ourselves.

Rather, it's going to be about grappling with power the way it's been misused and abused in the world. And if there is any collection of power, it's so that it can be given away. This obviously speaks into many, many issues that we deal with today.

The church, again and again and again, grapples with women and abuse. If you follow Christian news at all, you might be aware that the Southern Baptist Convention is dealing with the shocking and disappointing results of its study into the levels of abuse in its denomination.

Not only that it was rampant with it, but had a systematic attempt to cover it up. And we are seeing the same pattern play out that we see again and again, where there's denial and attacking and reversing a victim and offender.

Where there should be repentance and lament and the giving away of authority because they've lost it. This speaks into the way that we deal with race today in the church.

[26 : 40] Scott McKnight, in his commentary in Acts, talks about Isabel Wilkerton's book, *Cast*. And Wilkerton proposes that we learn to think of our society in terms of caste, which presses on the problem of power and hierarchy and an inability for white people to perceive the negative impacts of their social dominance.

Put in the terms of church life today, McKnight writes, The structures, policies, and virtues of churches are ethnically construed to favor those in power who are often white.

And at least one major reason our churches are so segregated on Sunday is because minority cultures immediately sense the dominant culture at work in typical white churches and choose to worship somewhere else where the power differential is not present.

So when you have leaders who are unable to see inequity, then of course our churches are going to be more and more segregated.

But that is not the vision of the kingdom that Christ left us with. Rather, there is a vision where all tribes and tongues and nations and races are gathered together, singing in their own tongues, proclaiming the glory of our God.

[28 : 01] It speaks into issues of disability and accessibility. Of course, it speaks to the issues of LGBTQIA inclusion in the church and why this church is going to continue to go what some may consider overboard in our proclamation that God loves queer people and that we are going to march and that we are going to be part of the solution and continue to give away power to those who have been overlooked for too long.

And of course, it speaks in the way how we handle those who are materially poor. The table church, for all of its great things, is not the most socioeconomically diverse place that you can go.

So what does that say about how we have rendered some folks invisible? To us. The implication is, if you are one who is on the underside of power, who tends to be rendered invisible in some way, speaking up loudly on behalf of yourself or your group is not wrong.

It's not complaining or mumbling in the desert. It's the right thing to do. Speaking up should never be, bring you shame or cause someone to shame you for saying when something is wrong.

And if you are the one holding the power, then we get this marvelous imitation to imitate the way of Jesus by giving away that power and privilege, by pursuing equity in ways that perhaps we never have before.

[29 : 54] So the book of Acts continues to bring a challenge to us. Not that it is a absolute blueprint for how we must precisely respond in every way, but it does give us some values and some principles that perhaps we have strayed too far from.

Of how we can be a church that will make mistakes, will render some folks invisible, and then be given the opportunity to make it right.

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