

## **Pandemic: The First Casualty**

April 26, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### **Acts 6:1-7:2a, 51-60**

So today marks week 6 of us worshipping online. Because of the spread of the coronavirus, we have been either social distancing by choice, or sheltering in place by law, for a full month and a half. Some days it feels like these six weeks have flown by, and some days I wonder if it has been 6 weeks or 6000. Time seems to be moving and acting very differently than normal and I don't always know anymore what day it is.

This pandemic has kinda taken over...pretty much everything. It's even taken over this sermon series, which I've titled – because I don't have a creative cell left in my brain – “Pandemic,” as we look at the wild spread of the gospel through the world after the resurrection of Jesus.

So last week, we looked at the different phases of a Pandemic, put out by the World Health Organization, beginning with Phase 1, where we have an event, have something that has happened, some potential for something else to happen, but nothing has really taken hold yet. In the development of a Pandemic, there is a virus, but it has not yet infected a human being. In the spread of the Gospel, Jesus has been resurrected, but that news has yet to transform the hearts of anybody.

Then we talked last week about Phase 2, where we see the first shades of a spread into the human population. In the spread of the coronavirus, this would have been when the virus mutated and jumped from an animal to a human being. In the gospel message, this took place when the disciples' hearts were burning inside of them on the road to Emmaus – when the message of the risen Christ was stirring within the hearts of Jesus' closest followers. But it hadn't really begun to spread, beyond that close inner circle.

Today we are moving into Phase 3, where we see a community-wide outbreak. The gospel has begun to spread.

Between last week's story and today's story, we have skipped over a lot. Jesus has ascended into heaven. The day of Pentecost has come and gone. And all of a sudden, this isn't just a story anymore about the disciples. We now have a whole community of people who we are dealing with. A community with diversity and challenges and conflict. People with different interests and different priorities and different gifts. Essentially, we have the beginnings of a church.

And we see in this budding little church two distinct groups of people. We have the Hebrews, and we have the Hellenists. These are both groups of first century Jewish people.

- **The Hebrews** were mostly people who were born and raised in Israel and their entire religious tradition was drawn from traditional Jewish practices. They chose primarily to speak the Hebrew language (along with some Aramaic) and strongly resisted any outside cultural influences. There were times in their history when they were severely persecuted for their strict adherence to their faith, seasons when practicing their faith was even illegal, and yet they did it anyway.
  - The closest comparison we might see in today's Christian community would be, maybe, the Amish, or the Old Order Mennonites, who do everything they can to avoid the outside world in service to their faith.
- **The Hellenists** were also Jewish people, but these were folks who had returned to Judea after having been previously scattered throughout the region – some of them had been scattered by force, and others by choice. And in their time away from Judea they had blended traditional Jewish teachings with Greek cultural influences. They had adopted the Greek language, and some of them had even gone so far as to have the marks of circumcision surgically removed so that they could exercise in Greek gymnasiums and not be identified as Jewish. As a result, they had had the benefit of preferential treatment in society. But the Hebrews looked at these folks as sell-outs, and tried to keep them at arms-length.

As we see in today's scripture, the Christian faith was taking root within both of these two communities. And we see this conflict arising again between the two groups when the Hellenists – the Greek-speaking Jews – accuse the Hebrews of neglecting their widows in the daily distribution of food. There was a custom at that time of caring for the most vulnerable people in the community – including the widows who had no means to support themselves – by providing them with food and seeing to it that their basic needs were met. Evidently this work was overseen by the Hebrew people and the Hellenists learned that the Hellenist widows were being overlooked or forgotten, or even maliciously ignored.

And so what do they do? They talk to the guys in charge. They go to the pastor. They complain to the disciples.

And the disciples look around at each other and say, "You know what? This really isn't our job. If we were to take on this conflict, there would be no time left over to do the things that we have really been called to do." So, they create a committee.

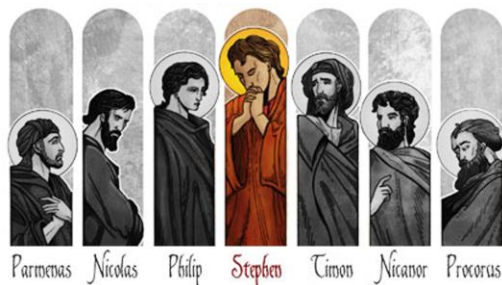
They go back to the people and essentially say, "You're right. This is a problem. So get together amongst yourselves and come up with a group of seven people from among this community. Seven people who are passionate about this issue who can work to resolve it. Seven people who have a heart for service and who can help to lead you and give you guidance and direction in this area."

And so they did. The first-ever administrative council was born.



And we are told that *“The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”*

One of the seven identified to serve in this way was Stephen.



As we quickly discover, though, this was not Stephen’s only gift, or passion, or place of ministry. He wasn’t content to merely resolve conflicts and assure fair treatment of vulnerable people. Important work, to be sure, but not *his* call. Proclamation, performing of signs and wonders – that is what Steven was *really* passionate about.

In Jerusalem at the time there were a lot of different Jewish communities, each one with its own synagogue, much in the same way that now we have scattered throughout every town in the United States different Christian churches, each with a different history and a slightly different set of practices and customs and beliefs, while all holding firm to one big core belief – that Jesus Christ is Lord.

We already talked about two distinct groups of Jewish people at the time – the Hebrews and the Hellenists – but within these two larger groups there were smaller groups

- (just like we have the Lutherans, but then within the Lutherans we have the Missouri Synod Lutherans, and the ELCA Lutherans, and the Wisconsin Synod Lutherans.
- Or, back where I came from, we had the Baptists, but then within the Baptists there were the Southern Baptists, and the American Baptists, and the Landmark Baptists, and the Cooperative Baptists, and the Free Baptists, etc, etc).

The same was true for Jewish communities. One of the synagogues of the Hellenized Jews – the Greek-speaking Jews – was what was known as the “Synagogue of the Freedmen.” And although there is some disagreement among scholars about what this name meant exactly, it is likely that this synagogue was either made up of descendants of Jewish people who had been taken into slavery by the occupying Romans, and then

later released, or they could have been *Roman* slaves who were released from slavery and who had converted to Judaism.

But whoever they were, it appears that Stephen might have come from this community of faith. And Stephen's newfound vigor, his excitement, his words of proclamation and the signs and wonders that he was performing made the folks in his synagogue really nervous. So they decided that they needed to stomp out Stephen's excitement. And they were mean, biting, backstabbing about the way they did it.

- Stephen respond...by preaching at them. Preaching a reeeeeeeally long sermon – all of chapter 7 is Steven's sermon, leading me to believe that his preaching too long may have been the last straw and the thing that lead to him being stoned. And his sermon was every bit as biting as the accusations that the council made against him. We didn't read it today because, frankly, *I don't want to be stoned.* But essentially, Stephen is preaching a sermon in which he uses a big chunk of the Hebrew scriptures to level some major accusations against the religious leaders. He accuses them of "fighting against the Holy Spirit," of "murdering the Messiah," and of "failing to keep the Torah."

It's not surprising that the leaders in the synagogue didn't like what Stephen had to say. What is a little surprising is the way they chose to bring about justice. We might call it vigilante justice. They didn't like what he had to say, so they took him out back and stoned him. No formal trial, no due process. Just an angry mob of people.

It's interesting. In this resurrection "pandemic," here we are here in Phase 3, the community phase. The phase where we begin to have more than just one or two people involved. The good news of the hope and the promise set forth in Christ's resurrection has taken hold and is sweeping through the community and changing lives and affecting people – mostly for the better.

- But here's the thing about a community: As we see so clearly, whenever we are dealing with more than one or two people, there are going to be challenges. We see fights break out between the Hebrews and the Hellenists. We see the disciples troubleshooting and organizing this community and setting up a basic structure to ground and order life together – where different people are responsible for carrying out different parts of ministry, based on their gifts and abilities. And we see the new baby church grow with this structure in place.
- And then we see strong personalities emerge, we see deep fear bubble up to the surface, we see people jockeying for status and position and infighting about basic doctrines, and backhanded politicking and feelings getting hurt and individual groups taking matters into their own hands and we see the worst-case scenario play out: One of the seven lying dead in the street.
- And we have to ask ourselves: what happened? How did we move so quickly from the joy of the empty tomb to this stoning in the street? From Jesus appearing to the disciples and setting their hearts on fire to all this squabbling and fighting? Is this really the church? Is this really what God had in mind when

he set those first few hearts ablaze? Is this really what life in community looks like? Because frankly, it is a pretty bleak picture.

And unfortunately, these are questions that did not die when Stephen took his last breath. We still have to wrestle with them today.

How do we respond when our church leadership (or our state's leadership, or our country's leadership, for that matter) make decisions that we don't agree with? What do we do when we feel overlooked, or slighted, or ignored? Or when it seems like other people – other Christians, even – aren't following the same gospel that we are trying to follow?

What do we do when we start seeing disagreements and factions forming? This week, those factions have been over the question of whether we can and should exercise our personal freedom to assemble, or whether we should continue to shelter in place indefinitely. And with protests breaking out across the nation, it's clear that we as a country are not all of one mind. And probably as a congregation we are also not all in agreement on this, and when it comes time to start looking at gradually making our way back toward in-person gatherings we are going to need to do so with a HUGE amount of grace and compassion toward one another.

And the challenging thing, with this current struggle that the world is in for sure, but also with the smaller, pettier, things that we as human beings find to fight about, there are very few easy answers.

- Do we re-open, or not? And when? And under what circumstances? And with what precautions?
- Do we voice our opinion, or do we stay silent?
- Can we agree to disagree, or is the issue too important for that?
- Do we respond to that post on Facebook that has us riled up, or do we just scroll on past? (Okay, that one's easy – most of the time, just scrolling on by is hands-down the better decision.)

Honestly, I struggle to answer most of these questions. In most cases, my answer is: "I don't know."

But here's what I do know:

- I know that I am a better person today because there have been people in my life who are very different from me who have pushed and challenged me on issues when I have gotten stuck in my own ways of thinking.
- I know that the people in my life who I feel the safest with – who I can be the most myself around – are in many cases the people with whom I have had the worst conflicts. I *hate* conflict. I will go to great lengths to avoid conflict. But intimacy is often born out of conflict, if that conflict can be handled in a healthy way.
- And I know that in the darkest seasons of my life, it has been my community – the people around me – the broken, imperfect, messy people who together make up broken, imperfect, messy churches – it is these people who have given

me the strength to keep going, when my strength on its own would not have been nearly enough. And often, these people who have been my supports during the hard times have been the people with whom I disagree the most in terms of politics or theology or worldview.

Here's the thing:

- For whatever strange reason, despite all of the struggles and challenges and conflicts that arise within a community, God decided to take up residence in community. The spark that burned in the hearts of the disciples on the Emmaus Road turned into a flame and that flame spread into the community.
- It spread into the hearts of very different people with different histories, different backgrounds, different priorities, different languages. It spread into the hearts of people who would never see eye-to-eye on particulars of the faith. It spread among people who would interpret scripture very differently; who would interact with culture very differently; people who had different gifts and graces and hopes and dreams and passions and tasks and ways of looking at the world.
- And while there would be upsets and hurt feelings and splits and schisms within these communities, the spirit would still be at work there. Even in the church's most embarrassing moments throughout the centuries (and there have been many of them), God has continued to breathe life into these communities and to transform lives within them.