

**Pastor Jonna Bohigian**  
**Listening to the Widow**  
Acts 6:1 – 7

This fledgling group, called the church, was making quite the impression. They just grew and grew and *grew*, despite threats, imprisonments, and commands *not* to preach in the name of Jesus. They just couldn't *help* themselves; they *had* to speak about the One they had witnessed, the One who suffered, died, and was raised from the dead. They couldn't *help* but witness to the power of Jesus to bring salvation to those who believed. And they were not alone in this venture; the Holy Spirit was the One who empowered them, gave them the words to say, and brought *thousands* to faith.

The church was a family, who cared for one another and ensured that no one was in need. Some had even sold *all* their property for the benefit of the church. But one day, grumblings began to arise. Not *everyone* was being taken care of; some were overlooked.

Let's take a look at what was going on here. The church at this point constituted two groups of people: the Hebraic Jewish converts and the Grecian Jewish converts. The Hebraic Jewish converts were locals; they were from Palestine. They spoke Aramaic, and had been embedded in the Jewish culture their entire lives. The Grecian Jewish converts were *not* locals. They were immigrants, some coming from quite a distance. Their language was not Aramaic, but Greek, and they worshiped in separate Greek-speaking synagogues. They were different in their language, "education, outlook, and worldview."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 94.

It was also likely that the Grecian Jews constituted a disproportionately large elderly population. Why might that have been? There is a Jewish belief that God will *first* raise from the dead those who are buried in Jerusalem. Because of this belief, many Jews moved to Jerusalem, so that they could be among the first to be raised.

In Acts 6:1, it says that the Grecian Jews grumbled against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. Widows were one of the most vulnerable groups at that time. They had no spouse and were *dependent* upon their children and communities to provide for their needs. Isolated and desperate, yet surrounded by a community whose aim was to love one another. The Grecian Jews began to grumble.

“The Twelve did not allow this resentment to fester. They immediately called an ‘all church’ congregational meeting and unveiled their plan.” This was an important ministry that could not be overlooked, but it was simply too much for the Twelve. They would “concentrate on their primary responsibilities [of] prayer and teaching the word of God,” and seven men would be chosen to distribute the food.<sup>2</sup> These seven would have the reputation of being “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3b).

This recommendation pleased everyone, and they did as they were told. They chose seven: Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. “They presented these men to the [Twelve], who prayed and laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:6).

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<sup>2</sup> Ger, 94.

A fine story, but frankly a little boring. Conflict and resolution in just 6 verses. What we need help to see, however, is that the seven men chosen were not just *any* seven filled with the Spirit and wisdom. They were seven *Greek* men. Each one of the seven names is a *Greek* name.

So let's go back a bit. The church is gathered and given the commission to find seven men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom. The Grecian Jews had been grumbling against the Hebraic Jews, so one might expect the two groups to fight over these seven positions. Wouldn't each group want representation, so that *no* group was marginalized? We don't have any details here, so we don't *know* why this was a seemingly easy task to accomplish. Maybe the Hebraic Jews were convicted that they had not cared for the Greek widows well. Maybe this negligence was *news* to them. Maybe the process took a *lot longer* than what Luke indicates in this chapter. Maybe they spent a long time, listening to stories of widows and seeing their desperate state, convincing them that all seven ought to be Greek leaders.

We don't know *how* they came to the decision that all seven would be Greek, but we do read how *effective* this decision was. Acts 6:7 says, "The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith." The Twelve were unhindered in the ministry to which they were called, and *all* in the church – locals, immigrants *and* widows – were esteemed and cared for.

I can't *help* but imagine that the growth of the church in verse 7 was a result of a number of things. (1) The movement of the Holy Spirit, (2) through the faithful witness of the disciples, and (3) the church's elevation of the foreigner and the

widow. *This* was the calling of God to His people from the very beginning – to care for the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. No *wonder* Jewish priests became Christians; they saw God’s calling for His people *fulfilled*. What a *wonderful* story!

But Scripture is meant to be *more* than a story. Scripture is meant to *shape* us as *twenty-first* century Christians! So what might this passage be speaking to us today? What might *our* contemporary widow situation be?

In our culture, as well as in the church, it doesn’t take much work to agree that the contemporary comparison is *racism*. The sin of marginalizing people based on the color of their skin is not simply a problem “out there” or from long ago; it is a sin that is sadly experienced by, and *perpetuated* by, those in the church *today*.

This is not an easy thing to hear. *No one* wants to hear that the church, that you or I, could be agents of this *sin*, this *injustice*. But as we listen carefully and with open hearts, those of us a part of the majority culture, see *ourselves* in the stories that we hear. And we recognize that we have a long way to grow.

I invite you to listen with open ears and open hearts to the courageous storytelling of three from St. Timothy’s, exposing some of their most painful memories. (play video)

Anna-Marie, Sam, and Becca: *thank you*. Thank you for sharing these most vulnerable stories with us. Thank you for sharing your experiences *and* your hope, that we might grow as the body of Christ, honoring one another above ourselves.

Like the church in Acts, in order to grow, you and I *must* hear the stories of the widow – or in our case – the person of color. As we hear these stories, the Holy

Spirit works to convict us of sin, and our response is to confess. We have been *slow* to listen to the stories of people of color.

We have been *slow* to recognize that the witness of the church has been cut at the knees because of the segregated nature of the church. In 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is 11 o’clock on Sunday morning.”<sup>3</sup> In a study conducted by the Lifeway Research Team in 2015, they found that Sunday morning has become *more* diverse than in 1963, but not by much. 86% of churches *still* have one predominant ethnic group. Sunday morning is “the last segregated hour.” Their research revealed that “most churchgoers are [in fact] content with the ethnic status quo...In a world where our culture is increasingly diverse...it appears [that] most people are happy where they are – and with whom they are.”<sup>4</sup>

Church, Jesus did *not* die so that we could worship him with people who look just like us. Jesus died so that you and I and *all* people might be saved, reconciled to God and reconciled to one another. *This* is the witness of the church that desperately needs to be healed, so that those who do not know Jesus will see the power of Jesus to honor those who have been marginalized and to reconcile *all people*. *This* is our calling; *this* is your calling. May Jesus be glorified in the unity of his church! Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.louisianaweekly.com/eleven-oclock-on-sundays-is-still-the-most-segregated-hour-in-america/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/january/most-segregated-hour-of-week.html>