

Acts | The Incendiary Fellowship

The Seven Servants

Acts 5.42-6.8

6.19.16

And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

^{6.1} Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. ² So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. ³ "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. ⁴ "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. ⁶ And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

⁷ The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

We've been looking at this New Testament book called The Acts of the Apostles the continuing story of the Christian movement from right after the resurrection of Jesus Christ up to St. Paul's arrival in Rome some 30 years later.

At this point in the story...the movement is still centered in Jerusalem... and it's growing! Luke, the historian sort of NAMES this period or stage, "the Growth phase" – v. 1 "when the disciples were increasing in number"...and when a movement or cause grows rapidly...there will always be growing pains...certain frictions and issues...and Luke doesn't ignore these concerns in the Early Christian movement...but he is impressed that they were resolved with amazing speed and power.

Also, always in the background is the Temple... a huge contrast between the New Temple Jesus Christ is building (made up of redeemed people) and the Old Temple (glorious to look at, but the Headquarters of God where God Himself was not welcome).

Today, we consider these growing pains...some initial tremors... There will be more...there will be full-blown earthquakes and THIS episode and its complaint (v. 1) is preliminary/preparatory for a much bigger internal issue that's coming.

Today we think about institutional religion or organized religion...when a movement or group or belief system gets big enough so that it has to develop some sort of order or policies ...organization and why IS it that we resent that... Why are so many people today leaving institutional religion or organized religion? Is there anything we can do to stem the tide...or should we opt out?

Let's look at: 1) Stifled Life 2) Wild Life and 3) Cultivated Life

Toward the end of the last century...there was a big resurgence of spirituality. The social theorists of the Early Twentieth Century turned out to be wrong. THEY said that as the world gets more educated and informed that religion and spirituality would dry up and YET...that has NOT been the case...and in fact the more emotional and vibrant forms of spiritual practice and religions seem to be flourishing MORE than the more cerebral or intellectual forms.

But following the 20th C – and especially after September 11th, 2001...that resurgence of spirituality and religion took a kind of dark turn. And now, while spirituality is still apparently popular/growing...forms of religion that are thought of as fundamentalism or traditional or zealous...are often labeled “fanaticism.”

And the idea that “THIS BELIEF is TRUE and THAT BELIEF is not true”...any attempt to claim spiritual or religious certainty is often judged TO BE offensive and judgmental and narrow-minded and...bad. If you say you're certain – that's bad.

And of course we have to ask that person, “Well are you certain about that? Are you certain that being certain is bad?”

But that said...we are all...rightly concerned about fanaticism...and religiously motivated violence (of course the whole world is thinking about the tragedy in Orlando). And there IS something that makes us nervous about fundamentalism (of course as Kathy Keller said after 9/11 – “Doesn't it really depend on the Fundamental? I mean no one's that worried about the Amish...they're fundamental is non-violence and simplicity)... But STILL... we live in a time when people are worried about fundamentalism and fanaticism... AND...

The Bible is very much aware that organized religion CAN go bad...We've been seeing it in the corrupt Temple religion of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus Christ. HE TOOK ISSUE WITH THE LEADERS OF THE TEMPLE...He highlighted the pitfalls of organized religion. Whole long sections of Jesus Christ's teaching were directed at the sins of the spiritual and religious leaders of His day.

Read Matthew CH 23, the famous “Woes” – “ You tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but...are unwilling to help them with so much as a finger (4)... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers... (14): Life Stifled by heavy rules, by hypocrisy and spiritual pretense.

And, we've been seeing the leaders of the Temple in their dealings with the Apostles...only interested in holding their positions and keeping up appearances and dividing into parties (the Pharisees and Essenes and Sadducees...all claiming to be THE true guardians of the faith) – they split...they can't agree...petty.

We've seen competition – people trying to prove how good/moral they are...praying long prayers and being very scrupulous/picayune ...Big emphasis on money and it's as if you can buy God's favor.

And it all becomes very HORIZONTAL – getting people to greet you, recognize you, admire you, be afraid of you...showing off...bragging about your ancestry, your service record, your abilities, your connections.

And who can blame anyone for wanting to get away from that kind of stuffy, stifling, repressive, fake, two-faced kind of religion? Stifled Life!

And yet in OUR own day...people who have escaped organized, institutionalized religion, looking for a more vibrant encounter directly with God that AVOIDS all this nonsense ... in other words, people who leave institutional religion in favor of private, personal spirituality...IT TURNS OUT, according to the latest studies: THOSE PEOPLE DON'T FIND WHAT THEY'RE LOOKING FOR.

After surveying 11.2 million respondents the conclusion: “The young survey respondents report being less spiritual and spending less time praying and meditating... religion has NOT been replaced with spirituality.”

Organized religion has its problems...but privatized spirituality has problems of its own. The report goes on to say that other societal ills like suicide and the over-prescription of pain and psychotropic medications directly mirrors the rate of decline in organized religion. In other words: as the one goes down the other goes up at almost the exact same rate. Organized religion has its problems...but privatized spirituality has problems of its own.

BUT what we've been seeing in the history of the early Gospel movement is really NOT organized religion and NOT privatized spirituality.

It's an eruption of life, wild life!

Jesus Christ had said, ““I have come to give them LIFE and abundantly so!” (John 10.10)

They apostles were told (as we saw last week) t keep on teaching (QUOTE) “The whole message of this LIFE” It’s a message of God coming to us. In Jesus Christ, God becomes a Man, a New Adam, the originator of a New Humanity. He lives under His own Laws and He obeys them from the heart – He obeys IN MY PLACE. He keeps my obligations FOR me...He does MY part of the deal.

Then He dies to pay my debts. Jesus Christ bears my penalty IN MY PLACE. On the Cross He is bleeding out life...He lives the life I was failed to live and dies the death I deserved to die. And death cannot hold Him... He comes from the tomb alive and He is breathing LIFE into the world.

The Breath of God is reconstituting humanity...a new society of people are coming alive. It’s NOT privatized spirituality – it’s fiercely communal. They are (as we’ve seen) continuing TOGETHER in the Name of Jesus Christ – represented by Him, the New Adam.

It can’t really be called a religion...and it’s definitely not a dead institution like the Temple and all its stifled , forced... hypocrisy and peer-pressure and fakeness. This is something very different; it’s the UnReligion...it’s a WILD OUTBREAK of God’s LIFE.

People were so relieved...they became spontaneously generous (some sold property to help their new family)...the disqualified were NOW included and they leaped for joy (3.8) WILD, UNTAMEABLE, ABUNDANT LIFE is flooding Jerusalem...even many of their opponents were coming around, (7) “The word of God kept on growing; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.”

And then...with over 5000 people believing this, there was a complaint...a murmur...like in the Exodus when they murmured against Moses.

But THIS time...the Apostles – The Twelve Heads of the New Tribes of Israel answer the complaint... “We can’t stop serving the Good News in order to serve food...BUT someone has to do it because those widows are connected members of this LIVING Body and...you know... ya’ gotta eat!”

So they look to the New Family – “Look, choose SEVEN men (seems like a good complete number!) and men who really GET IT...who are believing this message of life...enabled by the Spirit to see the implications of grace...and therefore know how to make grace-based decisions...men who have a good reputation as being Gospel Men...”

And the congregation chooses seven Greek men... It was the Greek-speaking widows who'd been neglected. "They're in the MINORITY and we are going to honor the WEAK... If they don't have the numbers, we'll give them a bigger voice...because THAT'S what Jesus Christ does for us: He doesn't favor good/strong people, He favors the weak and the disqualified and humble, "So, have at it, brothers! We trust YOU because we trust the Gospel!"

And they bring these guys to the Apostles...who probably thought, "Wow...these people really GET IT – what a great plan! What wise organization! They're favoring the powerless...because they ARE powerless and they know: God loves the powerless!"

Now, what do we do with this? How does it speak to our own anti-institutional age?

For one thing, it frees us from a false dichotomy: the choice is NOT between stuffy, dead corporate religion (on one hand) and cool, authentic, personal spirituality (on the other hand).

In the Gospel we get life...and that life cries out to be cultivated. It's organic, like plant-life, a growing, living thing...and as in agriculture we tend to the life, prune it, till the soil, pull the weeds, water it.

The word for shared worship in Latin and thus in other Romance or Latin-based languages is "culto" – We still use the word "cultus" meaning the apparatus for worship.

Cultus (i.e. worship) and cultivate and culture are all related words – they mean to till or turn-over or ruminate on. And when God gives life in the Gospel, He calls on us to cultivate it...turn it over... care for it in the context of awe...of worship.

The organic is also organized...life is made up of cells...it grows with order... Organic and organized are NOT at odds...it's life cultivated.

The only alternatives to organized religion are DISorganized religion or UNorganized religion... Modern spirituality is most often just DISmembered and what's dismembered can not remain alive... spiritual life grows like a vine...and Jesus Christ described is as remaining cultivated vine...

Notice also that in the Life of the Gospel and the Gospel Community – "the disciples" as they're called here, the priority is on the Gospel. It's the blood of the Body and the Sap of the Vine.

The Apostle's reply makes it clear: the congregation has need for grace...must hear Good News again and again: "God loves Me and proved it in what Jesus Christ did for ME! HE paid my debt! He reconciled and ransomed me in Jesus Christ!"

That has to keep flowing into the congregation – if that stops or if we start taking it for granted...if we face that temptation the Apostles faced and we succumb...if we say, “Yeah...to shower the church with grace and Good News is important ...but there’s a lot of other things the church should be doing... plus, I think BY NOW we’re all clear on the Gospel...so let’s move on... the Word is important but it’s NOT everything!”

If we go that way, soon and very soon...love will dry up...It’ll become stifled life...merely horizontal.

It’s not that we’re saying, “Widows need food? What are we a welfare agency? We’re only worried about souls!”

No, we’re saying, “Widows are mourning and we are too – blessed are they that mourn! We KNOW about mourning and about being weak and vulnerable and excluded...and we know the joy of being served and embraced and comforted by God...and we are! The life death and resurrection of Jesus proves it...and as we continue to hear it, we’re compelled to care for the weak...but if we neglect this News everything grinds to a halt. Life is stifled!

The Gospel instills the Heart of God in those who believe it... It cultivates LIFE in us. It compels us to love one another...and sometimes, in order to love more effectively, the organIC calls out to be organized... As Paul said, “It’s faith, expressing itself by love” (Gal. 5.6)