

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: What Could Be

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Scripture:

Acts 6:1-7

¹ In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews^[a] among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Transcript:

Great to see all of you here in the room, as well as those of you who are joining us online. Thank you for being part of our worship this morning. The scripture comes from Acts 6. It says, "In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food."

The 12 gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and we'll give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word. This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.

Also, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. The Word of God spread and the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith." A while back, I saw a news story about a church that got in a big fight because the decorating team had hung up Christmas banners in the sanctuary for Christmas.

But another group of people got mad about that because they thought the banners were distracting, so they ripped them down and threw the banners in the trash. This created quite a bit of a ruckus. They called a meeting to try to resolve it, but all that happened was they ended up shouting at each other. Then some people actually started throwing punches. They had to call the police to come and break up the fight at their church, which was called Grace Church. Not so much, right?

Every church has conflict, including this church, although we've never had to call the cops to break up a fight yet anyway. We know that in our culture there is tons of conflict right now. Generational conflict, political conflict between liberals and conservatives, who have gone from seeing each other as opponents who are wrong, to seeing each other as evil, as enemies who are evil. Families are divided over this, they're not talking to each other. Workplaces, schools, our entire country, causing some people to wonder, "Can the United States stay united much longer?" But what could be, what could be if disciples of Jesus showed our country a better way? Not to agree because we don't, but disagree and still be united. How would that heal divided families, workplaces, schools, churches, country? The Bible shows us how, because the only kind of church you see in the Bible is not where everyone is all the same.

The only kind of church you see in the Bible, and I mean the only kind of church you see in the Bible, is lots of different generations, different races, different political opinions altogether in one church. Which is really hard because when people are that different, they disagree about almost everything and that's okay. As I said a couple of weeks ago, conflict is not a bug, it's a feature in the church, because it means that we are different and that's what God intended.

As long as we move forward in unity. Unity does not mean that we agree because we don't agree. Unity means we disagree in a way that shows the world the power of Jesus to bring different kinds of people together. When they see us disagree, they still see the power of Jesus to bring different people together, and where we allow the Holy Spirit to use our differences, to refine our viewpoints, to be closer to Jesus. That's what we see going on in the story that I just read.

The background is the church started back in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit came, and there were people there from Europe and Asia and Africa, different languages, different cultures, but they all understood each other miraculously through the Holy Spirit. Thousands of people became Christians and it was super exciting. That's Acts 2 when the church started, but then just four little chapters later, that's all it took.

Four little chapters later, they're already fighting. Because see, when the church is thriving, Satan's go-to strategy is always, always to get us bickering. The text says in those days when the number of disciples was increasing, so church is booming, the Grecian Jews among them complained. What, complaining in a church? Can't believe it. Complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

At this point, they still consider themselves Jews, but they were followers of Jesus so we would call them Christian. They would distribute food to widows in need, but the Greek Christians were being left out. The Greek widows were being left out. This is an ethnic conflict between Hebrew and Greek, but it's also a political conflict because Greeks were the liberals of their day, and the Hebraic Christians were the conservatives of their day. It says the 12 apostles gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God, in order to wait on tables." Now, that could sound snarky like, "Do you know who I am? I'm an apostle. I don't wait on tables." But that's not what's going on here. Because in that culture, serving the food was considered to be a really high honor, and it was usually done by the head of the house.

Then they say, "Choose seven men who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them." Notice what they do not do. Notice what they do

not do. They do not say, "Okay, okay. Look, we are just too divided on political and ethnic and cultural grounds, just too divided. Let's just separate. We'll have a church for Greek people and a church for Hebrew people, just easier that way."

Now, that's what's happening in our country, folks leaving one church to go find another church that agrees with them on everything that they think because it's easier. It's just not biblical. It's not in the Bible. Instead, to quote Pastor Brian McCormick, instead, the apostles here choose truth over tribe, truth over tribe. We all belong to some kind of tribe or tribes, plural, all of us. A tribe is just a group of people with a shared identity, culture and values. There are political tribes, conservative, liberal, modern worship, traditional worship, that could be a tribe. In high schools, there are athletes, drama kids, scholars, huskies, cougars. Now we're going to have to call the cops. You're going to get in a fight. We're going to have to call the cops.

Bombers.

Richland bombers, I don't know about that. In this story, it's Greek and Hebrews. Now, tribes aren't bad. Tribes are not bad. In fact, the Bible says that in heaven, there are still tribes. It says in heaven there will be a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne. That's the beautiful way tribes exist, side by side, enjoying all the diversity of culture and food and language. Tribes are good.

What is not good is tribalism. Tribalism is when our tribe, our politics, our culture occupies a place in our heart, too close to our heart where only Jesus should reign. When we try to put our tribe's interests over another, that's tribalism and it's destructive. It divides families and churches, and schools and nations. At its worst, it leads to civil war and genocide. In this story, the disciples choose truth over tribalism in a couple of ways.

First, they opt for and. Because a lot of times when we get into conflict, it's often because we're locked into either/or thinking. Either the Greeks or the Hebrews, either meet people's physical need for food or spiritual need for the Word of God. The disciples choose and. Greeks and Hebrews, physical needs and spiritual needs. I see a lot of either/or happening in our politics today, and I think that's why we're gridlocked. For instance, arguments over what to do about homelessness.

Now, what is the role of the government versus private sector and all of that? That that's legit topic for debate. I am not taking sides. What interests me is the rhetoric where you've got one side saying, "No, the solution is affordable housing." Then you've got this other side saying, "No, the solution is mental health and addiction recovery." Am I the only one? Am I crazy? Am I the only one that goes like, "Might we need both?"

Maybe some folks need the housing and some folks need the addiction recovery, and maybe some folks need all of the above. Might we get better solutions if we get out of our either/or and take the best from all sides? Of all people, Christians should be and kind of people because Jesus is all about and. Jesus, who is fully God and fully human. Jesus, who the Bible says came in grace and truth. Now, it's not always possible to opt for and but when possible, opt for and.

Second way to choose truth over tribe is to get comfortable with the discomfort of disagreement. The Greeks and the Hebrews here in this story, you know what they don't do? They don't go, "This is getting uncomfortable so I'm just going to leave. Or I'm going to unfriend you. I'm not going to follow you. I'm not going to talk to you. I'm going to cancel you. I'm going to go to a different church because this is getting uncomfortable and I don't like to be uncomfortable."

They stayed in relationship to work through the disagreement. We are not comfortable being uncomfortable. We often avoid people that we don't agree with. We cancel them, we don't listen to them. But here's the thing, okay, here's the thing. I need to be in a church where people disagree with me, because that's how the Holy Spirit will refine my viewpoint until it's closer to God's. Because here's the thing, it is possible. It is a remote possibility, I must be honest.

But there's a tiny bit of possibility that I may not always be right. For instance, there is a tiny, the most remote possible possibility, just hardly worth mentioning possibility, that I may not always 100% of the time, my political views may not always 100% of the time reflect Jesus' viewpoint. It's just possible I might not always be right about politics. It's just possible so I need to be in a church where people disagree with me.

God has been so faithful to bring me to just such a church, constantly disagreeing with me. Unity is when we allow the Holy Spirit to use our differences to help us all have a worldview that more closely reflects Jesus. In this story, it's through disagreement that the apostles come to a better solution closer to God's heart. It's through the disagreement that they did that. Now, sometimes that takes a long time. Sometimes it may take years, maybe even decades. But if they didn't live in the discomfort of staying in relationship and listening to each other, they never would've gotten to God's better solution. Do you know what they call a group of people who all think the same? A cult. Unless there's abuse going on, disciples of Jesus get comfortable with the discomfort of disagreement and stay in relationship with each other. That shows the world the power of Jesus to bring very different kinds of people together. There is no real community without uncomfortable conversations. There is no healed marriage without uncomfortable conversations. There is no deep friendship without

uncomfortable conversations. Our elders who help lead this church, they are all different ages from teenagers all the way up to people in their 70s, their 80s. They are different races, different politics, and that's good and unfortunately, increasingly rare in churches these days so well done, BelPres.

Now, all of those differences means our elders don't always agree, but we stay in relationship and keep working at it. Then the third way the apostles choose truth over tribe here is they cross lines. They choose seven people to oversee the distribution of the food. The text says, "This proposal pleased the whole group." The entire church was all happy at the same time. What would that be like?

They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Also, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. All of those names are Greek. The Greeks were being left out so they appoint Greeks to distribute the food. That forced people to cross ethnic and cultural, and political divisions. Opt for and, get comfortable with the discomfort of disagreement and cross lines.

When we do this, like in this story, we bring healing to our divided families and churches, and culture and schools and nation. Couple of years ago, a hopeful thing happened in Israel. A group of Messianic Jewish leaders, so that's Israelis who follow Jesus, they're Christians, and Palestinian Christian leaders met to work together to bring peace and justice. Now, those two groups don't agree any more than Israelis and Palestinians in general, but they're both Christian.

They spent a week together reading scripture, praying and having very uncomfortable conversations. At the end, they issued a statement. This is what the statement said, "In times of tension and conflict, relationships suffer while suspicion, accusation and mutual rejection thrive." Does that sound familiar? Does that sound like America? At such times, it is even more essential that we who follow Jesus, must live a life worthy of our calling in our attitudes, words, and deeds.

Therefore, we will listen more carefully to one another, so as to understand each other even when we disagree. Even though we are convinced of our own positions, we will not require others to change their position as a precondition of our fellowship. Some of us think God promised the land to the Jews, but we reject any interpretation of that, which denies the peoplehood of the Palestinians and the right to remain in the land of their ancestors.

We lament with them the suffering and injustice caused by that denial. Others of us, believe God's promise of the land extends to Palestinians, but we reject the interpretation of this conviction that denies the right of Jews to a secure homeland. We lament suffering and

violence caused by those who seek to destroy Israel. Our shared faith calls us to listen, respect and even challenge one another in Christ-like love as we seek His justice and peace. We are united in Jesus. We share one another's sufferings, we need each other. That was their statement. But they don't just issue statements, they also act. They support each other's ministries and they bring groups of Israelis and Palestinians together to go through the same process to reach that deep level of relationship. Healing the conflict one group at a time, which by the way, is how Rwanda and South Africa is healing their divisions.

This one group at a time strategy. Tribalism doesn't get much more intense than the Israeli Palestinian conflict. But these Christians are opting for and. God wants both Israelis and Palestinians to thrive. They're embracing the discomfort of disagreement and staying in relationship, and they are crossing lines. They don't agree, but they are united in Jesus. All of which has the flavor of hope and feels so much better than the division and anger and resentment in tribalism that we are seeing all around us.

Now, that kind of unity isn't natural, it's supernatural. It requires prayer and the Holy Spirit, but when we do it it brings healing. The same thing happened in Acts 6. After the disciples find a solution to the food distribution problem, the end of the story says, "So the Word of God spread and the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly." Because when we move forward in unity, not agreement but in unity, God works through us to spread the Good News of Jesus and bring healing.

We can't do that when we're fighting, but when we are united, Jesus brings His kingdom through us. Three action steps for this week, three action steps. First, listen to understand. We've said this before, listen to understand, not argue, not line up your rebuttal arguments as the other person is talking, stacking up your rebuttals like jets over O'Hare. No, no, no, just listen, and not just to the other person's opinion, but the heart, their heart behind that opinion.

A good way to do this is to repeat back to the other person, "I think this is what you have said." You do not share your point of view until the other person says, "Yes, that's what I said. You heard me correctly." The other thing that's helpful just as an aside, and I've said this before, give equal amounts of time to getting your news from both conservative and liberal sources. If you spend 30 minutes on one source, spend 30 minutes on the opposite side.

Because all media is biased, all media is biased. They only tell one side of the story. The only way to correct that is to get both sides. Otherwise, we end up in our echo chamber where everything we read, everyone we know thinks exactly the same way we do. That is contributing to the tribalism that we're seeing in our country. Because we think, "Well,

everyone I know agrees with me and everything I see on the news agrees with me. If you don't agree with me, you must be stupid, or bad or both."

Then we start calling each other names, "You're Hitler." "No, you're Hitler, your mother is Hitler." Yeah. Well, your cat is Hitler. Seriously, come on. We can do better. Listen to understand. Second, spend more time in prayer and scripture than you spend consuming news, which will either dramatically increase your Bible and prayer life, or dramatically decrease the amount of news you consume. But either way, you're going to feel better, less angry, less worried, more hopeful, more peace, more joy.

Then third, this one's hard. This one's hard. This week, talk to someone you disagree with about something and listen to them to understand, and never give your viewpoint in that conversation, not once. Just listen to understand. I know that's hard, right? That's hard. Just listen. You can give your viewpoint at another time, but not that conversation. Just listen to understand. Some of you have heard me tell a story before about when I was a college pastor.

The church I was at, hired a younger man to do young adults' post-college ministry. I was in my 30s, he was in his 20s. We're about 10 years apart. But in our first meeting, he said, "Scott, now that I'm here, I don't think the church needs you anymore. I can just do the college ministry and the young adults' ministry together. I don't think we need you anymore." I said, "Why? I think I still have a role." He said, "No, Scott, you don't understand. My generation wants church to be authentic and relevant."

I snapped back, "Can you tell me the generation that wanted it phony and irrelevant because it wasn't mine, you young whipper-snapper? When I was your age, nevermind." As time went on, actually some of my college students started going to his young adults group so I was losing students to him. They'd come back and they'd tell me how cool he was, and what a great preacher he was and how awesome the group was. I'd be like, "Praise Jesus." In a way, it was tribalism.

It was generational tribalism, even though we were only about 10 years apart. It was group tribalism, this group versus that group. I prayed about this, and gradually the Holy Spirit showed me that as the older person, it was my job to bless and empower the younger person, not resent him. One night I went to his young adults' group and I noticed something. He was a really good preacher, and I told him that afterwards.

I invited him to come and preach at my college group, even though that might mean my college students would leave even more. He did a great job. After that, we started to meet for coffee, pray with each other, listen to each other's hearts for the people in our respective

ministries. Then at one point he said to me, "Scott, I am having a hard time dealing with the stress of ministry. You've been doing this longer than I have. Could you mentor me on that?" I said, "Yes, I can, but I need your help to help me understand young adults better. What are my college students, what are they headed toward? I need your help too so we can mentor each other that way." We formed a friendship. Now, we didn't agree. There are a lot of things we still didn't agree about, ministry style, theology, all of that stuff. But we were united in our desire to see a generation come to Jesus. We opted for and that both our ministries thrive.

We crossed lines, we worked through uncomfortable disagreement, and both of our ministries grew. Because when we are united, the kingdom of God spreads. It just feels better than anger, resentment, tribalism. That's what we see in the New Testament Church, very different ages, races, politics. They didn't always agree, but they were united in Jesus. And thousands, and then pretty soon millions of people started following Jesus because in an angry divided world, which the Roman world was very angry, very divided.

A community where people are really different and love each other, is a drink of cold water to a world dying of thirst. One Roman historian at the time said that Christians were the third man, the third kind of human being because they weren't Gentile or Jew, rich or poor. They were Gentile and Jew, rich and poor, Asian and African and European, old and young, liberal and conservatives. Something so unique that the word had to be invented for it, because this supernatural unity in all of that diversity had never been seen before in human history.

They had to invent a word to describe it. A word that just means little Christs. A word that defines a new way of living and a new kind of community, Christian. Jesus, make us worthy of the name, make us worthy of the name. In all of our differences, bring us together. Lord, help us to disagree in a way that shows our world the power, your power to bring very different people together. Lord, where you refine through our disagreements, refine our viewpoints to be more like yours.

Jesus, help us to be that kind of community so that when the world looks at us, they are drawn to you, the one who holds us all together. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Introductions: Spend a few minutes as a group introducing yourselves and welcoming new members to the group.

Icebreaker Question: Tell the group about the last good book that you read.

Opening Question: Looking back to last's week's sermon and scripture...How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

For Further Study: read Acts 6:1-7 and Philippians 2:3-11 this week.

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What "tribes" do you belong to?
- When and how does healthy pride of your tribes become unhealthy tribalism for you?
- What are some ways you will break down tribalism this week?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead