

# BELPRES CHURCH

## Sermon: A HEALING COMMUNITY

Dr. Scott Dudley

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<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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 <sup>4</sup> and will 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, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

- Acts 6:1-7

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Transcript:

Well, hello, BelPres. Again, thank you for joining us. Because of technical reasons, we're a little limited on the number of slides we can show. So I'm going to ask you to actually get a Bible. If you have one nearby and can grab it really quickly, because we're going to kind of do the old school follow along in scripture. So if you've got a Bible handy, grab it or on your phone. If not, you can just listen along.

Thanks for joining us in the middle of a crazy, another crazy week. I have a close friend who writes columns for various publications, which, of course, opens them up to a lot of criticism. So, recently, he forwarded me an email he got from an enraged reader and it said to him, "You are the antichrist and will burn in hell," all capital letters, 11 exclamation point. ... 11, not 10, 11 explanation points. So he forwarded that to me. He also forwarded it to some of the elders in his church that he knew, and he said this to the elders, "Now that my true identity has been exposed, I'm wondering if this might affect my church membership. What is our policy regarding membership for the anti-Christ?"

I think that sums up our culture right now, right? Angry, divided, vilifying each other, arguing with each other. Part of it's understandable because we are under a ton of stress right now. Economic crisis, and

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now racial tensions, are flaring up and a global pandemic that cuts us off from the people that we would normally be processing all of this with. So we are right now, we're a powder keg, and any spark is just going to cause explosions.

I think it's interesting that when COVID first came out and I mentioned this a couple of weeks ago, all the TV commercials that related to COVID, they all started with the same line, "In these uncertain times," and then they ended by saying, "We're all in this together," until we weren't and then we started arguing about the lockdown. That can be discouraging, depressing, even a little bit scary, and I've had all of those feelings myself, but I also think it's hopeful because out of this chaos, it seems like something new is trying to be born.

I believe that Jesus is going to bring good out of this. I believe Jesus is going to heal our divisions, whether they are in our families, or in our churches, or in our country right now, or in our schools, or in our neighborhoods. I believe Jesus is going to heal these divisions and He's going to make us stronger and more reconciled than we ever were before. Jesus can do it. He's done it before and I believe He can do it again. Jesus gave us, the church, the job. He didn't give it to the government. He didn't give it to politicians. He didn't give it to the schools. He didn't give it to businesses. He gave it to the church, the people of God, who are part of all those institutions, to be a community that brings justice, healing, and reconciliation in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our schools, in our offices, and then to the rest of the world.

I think we long for that kind of deep reconciled community. One of the things that COVID has shown a lot of us, including me, is how much we miss being together. As I've said, I miss you guys like crazy because we were designed for community. So when this is all over, let's not just go back to being so busy that we don't have time for community anymore. But not just any old community, a meaningful community where we care for each other and heal divisions around us and in our world. You've heard me say this a million times, Jesus can do this, Jesus has done it before.

The first multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic, multi-political, multi-generational community in history was the early church that put Jews and Gentiles together who'd hated each other for centuries, Africans, Middle Easterners, Europeans, rich, poor, old young, and only Jesus can do this because this kind of reconciled community is not natural. It's supernatural. Our natural instinct is to create an us and a them and us is good and them's bad. But Jesus obliterates that narrative because He reminds me that I am a sinner that needs His grace, the same as you, the same as me, so that makes us all even. We're the same.

My friend that I just mentioned, who writes the columns, we've been friends since college. We were in each other's weddings. It's very close friendship. But in high school I considered him to be my enemy because I thought that he treated me disrespectfully. In retrospect, I'm not sure that's true, but that's how I felt at the time, so I thought he was my enemy. But in college, he suggested that we start to meet three times a week every week for an hour at 7:00 in the morning to pray together for an hour, three times a week. We did that for years, and out of that came this very deep friendship that wasn't grounded in shared affinity, but grounded in Jesus and that emerged out of prayer because that's what Jesus does. He takes enemies and He turns them into lifelong friends.

We can see this in a Bible story in the Book of Acts Chapter Six. Acts Chapter Six. The background is, if you want to follow along, if you've got a Bible handy or if not just listen. The background is that, that the church started in Acts Chapter Two, and you just get four chapters later, four measly little chapters later, and what do you have already? Surprise. Conflict, conflict in the early church. Now, back then, they consider themselves still to be Jews, but they follow Jesus. We'd call them Christians. A conflict arose

between Greek speaking Jews who are from Europe, and Hebraic Jews from Israel who spoke Aramaic and Hebrew. This passage shows how they healed those divisions amongst themselves, and then able to carry that healing to the world that they're a part of.

The text says this, Acts Six: "In those days, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So 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. Choose seven men who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them.'" Now at first it sounds kind of snarky, "Well, we're not going to wait on tables. We're too good for that." That's not what they mean. That's not what's going on there.

In that culture, there were no waiters and restaurants. Meals were served in homes. It was considered an honor to be able to serve the meal. In fact, the honor was reserved usually for the head of the house. So the apostles say, "We can't do it all. Someone else has to have this honor." So they appoint seven people to oversee the distribution of food, which was distribution of charity at the time. What they do is they create significant leadership positions for these seven people. They spread their leadership around. What that shows is that one of the ways the early Christians healed, found healing for themselves and the world, was by being a giving and receiving community. The distribution of bread, that was charity for the poor, and the principle here is if I'm in community with you and you don't have enough food, that's my problem too. If a person of color is having painful experiences, that's my problem too, because we're in community and I'm called to help.

BelPres, you are so good at this. You are such a great church at giving and helping. As we've mentioned, along with Jubilee Reach, you are helping hundreds, 700 families, find groceries, have groceries in this very difficult time because they're suffering from the lockdown. You've donated over a hundred thousand diapers. That's a lot of diapers. You are so good at the first half of this sermon point, the giving part.

The receiving part? I think we kind of struggle with that. I'm terrible at receiving. I'm a pastor, I like to help people. That's why I got into this thing, right? But I don't want to be helped myself. In this text, the Grecian Jews ask for help, because if we never asked for help, underneath there's some pride there. Like I'm the helper, but I don't need help myself and that robs other people have the joy of being able to give to you. So if you need support, if you need help, let us know on our webpage, Together At Home. If you need support, if you need to talk to someone, ask us. We are here to help and we need to ask others to help us, those of us on staff, and we do, because we all need help sometimes.

The second way the early church healed themselves and healed the world was to be a reconciling community. At the core of this text is a conflict in ethnic, cultural, political, socioeconomic conflict between the Greek speaking folks who were ... they were immigrants from Europe. They spoke a different language. They had different customs than the Hebraic Christians who are from the Middle East.

Jews considered Greeks to be unclean and wouldn't want to be anywhere around them. The Greeks and the Romans had conquered the Jews, so they consider them also the oppressors. Greeks thought Jews were inferior. They'd been at war for centuries. They'd hated each other for centuries, and now they're all in the same Bible study and there's all kinds of seething ethnic, political, cultural, economic conflict going on here. That threatens to derail the early church's mission to be a new society, United in Christ and not divided by all those other things.

So the apostles led by the Holy spirit choose seven people to oversee the distribution of bread. Verse five says this: "They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism." All seven of those names are Greek, the people that were being left out, which brings me to the third point. They heal the world by being a giving, receiving, reconciling, crossing the lines community. So the Greeks were being left out, so they appoint Greeks to distribute the bread, which forced people across all those lines, cultural, political, ethnic lines, and they listened to each other. They didn't shout at each other; they listened to each other, to see things from each other's different perspective.

But I want you to notice something else. Also, the majority group, the Hebraic Jews, now Christians, gave up some of their power so that there could be equity. They gave leadership away so that there could be equity. They didn't give it all away. They were still leaders too, but they shared power to empower the disempowered group, the Greeks, and that enabled the church to reach way more many people because they were a more representative community. That matters because a majority group in any company, country, church, school, any majority group, whether it's a racial majority, political majority, cultural majority, whatever it is, won't be able to see what life is like for the minority group, because they don't experience it.

I've been in conversations, for instance, with people of color who say that if I say the phrase, "I don't see color," they'll say, "That doesn't work for me because every day I am reminded that I am Asian or Latino or black so I don't have the luxury to say, 'I don't see color.'" Now, I'm part of the majority so I don't experience that. I don't see that. So I need to listen to my brothers and sisters in Christ who do. It's not just race. It can be a political majority, a cultural majority, geographic majority. When I was in graduate school, all of my colleagues grew up in cities. I grew up in Eastern Washington. So sometimes my colleagues would say snarky things about flyover country or country music. So I always say, "Well, you do know, don't you, that along with jazz and baseball, country music is one of the only truly original American cultural expressions rooted in Caribbean, African, and Scott's Irish music and the last form of oral storytelling left in our culture. You do know that, right?"

They were part of the geographical majority that grew up in cities in that school and they didn't understand what I grew up in, didn't know my needs, didn't know my experiences. The apostles didn't say to the Greek folks, "Oh, stop complaining. You're not being left out." They crossed dividing lines and sought to understand from the other person's point of view what was going on because they weren't experiencing themselves. That leads to a deeper, more reconciled community who heal divisions in our culture and in our world because we've healed them first in our families and in our churches, and in the other places in our lives, we can bring that healing to the world.

So let me give just two practical suggestions for how you can cross the lines. The first would be get curious. Listen to understand, like when someone says something that you don't agree with, ask questions, like, "How did you get to that? Why do you believe that?" Not passive aggressive, "Why do you believe that stupid thing?" But like, "No. Why ... Tell me, how did you get there? Help me understand." So that we're not always so certain that we're right all the time because we're not always right. I recently saw a satirical video about how COVID is dividing us because we're all so certain about COVID and the lockdown and all of that, and it makes kind of a good point. So I want you to see it. Take a look.

In these certain times, in these certain times, in these certain times, one thing that's for certain is our level of certainty. You don't have to wonder what's going on. There are answers. All you need is a favorite podcast or an acquaintance that works at a hospital. In just two months, we have managed to collectively

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come together and all become experts, experts, experts on pandemic-related topics. Just call up the relative, ask a neighbor. They will know for certain whether or not COVID-19 was manufactured in a lab, or if the United States is just interested in making money off of vaccinations.

Sure, a doctor who studied infectious disease for 45 years might have one thing to say, but you read a blog post written by your friend's former classmates, and you skip the first couple paragraphs of an Atlantic article that you would have kept reading had you not scroll down and seen how long it was. Who's to say who's right? We are, we are, we are.

In no uncertain terms there are good guys and there are bad guys. The good guys are the ones you agree with obviously. And the bad guys? They're the ones who are biased unobjective, agenda-driven. They watched the other channel. Certainty and correctness go hand in hand. The more certain you feel, the more correct you are.

In these certain times, you can be certain, I can be certain, we can be certain. Don't let anyone take away your certainty. Your certain beliefs are the right ones, and there's a study that confirms it. We're all in this apart. We're all in this apart.

That's us, right? I just feel like that video kind of captures the moment that we're in. We're also certain, but we can't always be right, so maybe let's be a little less certain. The second way, practical way that we can cross lines is to get your news from both conservative and liberal sources. One of my favorite sites is [allsides.com](http://allsides.com). For each news story, it has conservative, liberal, and moderate sources. I get my news from both conservative and liberal sources because it educates me better. It gives me a more complete understanding of what the problem is because I see the stuff that the other guys leave out of their articles and the context that they don't include, and when I put it all together I get a bigger picture. So get it from both liberal and conservative sources, run it through scripture because not every idea is a good one. Some ideas are just sinful, so run it through scripture. Now, let's not just dismiss something as sinful just because we don't like it or agree, but run it through scripture. Pray about it and then see things from multiple perspectives for a more complete picture of what's really going on.

So let me give a visual demonstration, okay? If I were to ask you, "Does this bottle have a label on it?", you would say, "Yes." If I said, "No, it doesn't," you'd say, "Yes, it does." "No, it doesn't." "Yes, it does." "No, it doesn't." "Yes, it does." Sociologists have a word for that kind of back and forth: Facebook. That's what's going on. But if you get around to see this bottle from my perspective, you see that it doesn't have a label. So who's right? Well, both of us are right and it's not until you see the bottle from all of its different angles that you really understand the bottle. It's not till you see the problem from all this different angles that you really see the problem. But when you see it from multiple perspectives, you know what, you can create better solutions.

In this story, the conflict between the Greeks and the Hebrews created a solution that created new structures of leadership that allowed the gospel to go forward by sharing the work. Multiple things can be true at the same time. It can be true that in the last 60 years, we have made a lot of progress on racial relations in our country. It can also be true that people of color still are experiencing things that are unjust and unfair. Neither cancels the other and we don't really get it until we get it from all sides of the problem. Then when we can see that multiple perspectives, then we understand each other better. Left and right, rich or poor, old or young, poor white people in Appalachia and people of color in Seattle, we understand each other better. If we're not doing this, then we are living in an echo chamber where our own ideas are constantly fed back to us because we're only listening to what we want to hear. All of that made worse by cancel culture, where if we disagree with something, we simply cancel it, unfriend it, unfollow it. We don't pay attention to it, which means we are increasingly polarized in our

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own little echo chambers that tell us everything that we want to hear with no contradictions. Pretty soon, we start to believe that all right-thinking people think the way I do and if you don't, you're either stupid or evil. Then we start calling each other names. "Well, you're Hitler. Well, no, you're Hitler. Your mother's Hitler. Your cat is Hitler."

Jesus calls us to do better. The people of God can do better than our culture. We're called to do better. We're called to model better. We're called to show the world a better way to do this. That doesn't mean we're always going to agree. We won't always agree, and that's good because do you know what they call a community where everyone thinks the same? A cult. We're not going to always agree, but Jesus calls us to a deeper community where our differences make us stronger, like they did in this story. I've mentioned a lot of times before how pastor Alexis who's from Rwanda helps me understand Jesus and the Bible better because he sees it through African eyes, which gives me a different perspective than I have, than I have grown up here. The way you know that you're really listening, the way you know that you're really crossing the lines and listening is every once in a while, not always, but every once in a while, you change your mind. If you haven't changed your mind about something recently, maybe you're not listening.

Know this is not easy and this is not comfortable, and I like to be comfortable, but there is no real community without uncomfortable conversations. There is no healed marriage without uncomfortable conversations. There is no deep friendship without uncomfortable conversations, which means if we are always comfortable in church, then we are not in biblical community. Now, we can't have these kinds of hard conversations with everyone, that would be exhausting, but we can have them with a few. When we do that, when we cross lines and reconcile and love across our differences, when we do that, we show how good Jesus is. We show how powerful Jesus is. We show that Jesus can do what the world cannot do right now, and then that giving, receiving, reconciling, crossing the line community also becomes a world healing community.

After they appoint the seven Greeks to oversee the distribution of food, verse seven says this: "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." Thousands became Christians because in a messed up, angry, divided culture, which the Roman world was, a community where people love each other across their differences is a drink of cold water to a world that is dying of thirst.

So this week, this week, maybe listen to some people or ideas that you don't agree with, not to agree or disagree, but just to learn, to understand, to educate yourself. Pray for relationships with people who are different than you in some way generationally, politically, racially, some way. Pray for those relationships and just get to know each other. Don't start talking politics, just to start get to know each other and forge a relationship. Something I'd encourage you to do is this summer, we're going to do six week long small groups online called All In Groups about how to follow Jesus more fully. I would encourage you to go to our website and sign up for one of these six week long online groups to begin to experience some community.

Let me close with two stories. A couple of weeks ago, an African-American man came to the church and the building's closed. We're all working from home because of the lockdown. But our business manager, Laurel, was here. This man asked for me and Laurel said, "Well, everyone's working from home," and then with tears in his eyes, he held up the Seattle Times ad that 200 white evangelical pastors signed lamenting the death of Ahmaud Arbery. Some of you were thrilled about that ad; some of you weren't so thrilled about that ad, and you let me know about it. That just shows we're a diverse community. Lots of churches made that happen, but we coordinated the effort so he came here. With tears in his eyes, he

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said, "Tell Scott Dudley thank you because to see this many white evangelical pastors sign this makes me, as a black man, feel that my experiences are being seen and being heard by someone."

Well, Laurel got his phone number. So a couple of days later, I called him and when I identified myself, he burst into tears and he said, "I'm a Christian, but I began to lose hope. But then that day a co-worker called me and said, 'Have you seen the Seattle Times?' I don't take the paper. I went out. I got one. I opened it up. I saw that ad and I started to cry because it felt to me, as a black man, that my experiences were being seen and heard and that made me feel loved. Jesus gave me hope through that." But we went on, we talked for another 45 minutes, not about race, not about politics, talked about Jesus and how He's changed our lives. I found out he lives in Auburn. He drove all the way from Auburn, here, to say thank you because he felt heard because 200 white pastors crossed the line and tried to see things from his point of view, and a little bit of division got reconciled and a little bit of hope got released.

Second story: A couple of weeks ago when there were some looters going in downtown Bellevue, Anthony, who is on our church staff, his first thought was the church. So he called Gabe who's also on our staff and a man named William who's part of this church and said, "Let's go to the church so that if looters get up to the church, maybe we can talk to them about Jesus." I didn't know this was happening at all. So they all showed up here along with our facilities manager, Sammy, to discover that actually the police and fire departments were using the church parking lot as a staging area. We didn't know they're going to do that, but they were here and it was all full.

So their mission switched from talking to looters about Jesus to showing hospitality to policemen, police people, and fire people, making coffee, making conversation and all of that, just being encouraging. Well, I found out about it eventually and so I texted in, "Okay, I'm going to come in too," and they said, "No, no, no, we got it. It's all under control. We're just serving coffee and having conversation. You're good. We're good. You don't need to come in."

But see, I have a hard time, back to sermon point number one, I have a hard time receiving help from anyone, I want to be the one who does the helping so I came in anyway only to discover that I was redundant and unnecessary, a devastating blow, so I went home. They had it under control. It was beautiful. Now, I need to mention Anthony and William are black. So on a day when America was divided between black and white, cops and African-Americans, two black men, along with Gabe and Sammy prompted by the Holy Spirit, went to the church, showed hospitality to police and first responders, and some divisions got a little more healed and a little more hope got released. No, that does not fix every problem we've got, but it's a step. You multiply that step enough times, you have a healed nation because God's people did the healing that we're called to do.

Those two stories together give me hope. We can do this BelPres. We can do this. We can be that giving, receiving, reconciling, line-crossing, world healing community through the power of Jesus who reconciled what never could be reconciled, who healed divisions that can never be healed, that never were healed before, mended wounds that had never been mended before. Jesus has done all of that and He can do all of that again, and may it start with us, Bell Pres, may it start with us in our echo chamber cancel cultural world that's refused to cancel each other because when He had every right to, Jesus didn't cancel us, He canceled our debt of sin instead.

So as our Modern Worship Director, Evan Jarrell, says, "Now our allegiance isn't left or right, it's above. Our allegiance isn't this or that, it's to Him who heals us, who makes us one, who reconciles us so we can go reconcile that world out there that He died to save." So, Jesus, you alone can do this. We are seeing our failure as a culture to be able to do this. Jesus, the powers with you, help us to move in your

power and heal what needs healing, reconcile what needs reconciling in your name, Jesus, so that the whole world will know that you are Lord. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

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**Discussion Questions:** Read Acts 6:1-7

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1. Given Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32, how do you think the widows ended up neglected? How do the apostles resolve the problem?
2. What were the qualifications for those chosen to oversee the distribution of bread? Why those qualifications?
3. The 7 people chosen to oversee the distribution all had Greek names. Why?
4. The story ends saying the church continued to grow. How did the resolution of this problem help the church grow?
5. How does this passage relate to your life this week?