"Meeting Needs and Making Enemies"
Acts 6:1-15
Ellen Wong

When I received this assignment, I thought, "How did I get so lucky with the shortest chapter in the book?" But then reality set in, and I thought, "How am I going to speak for a half hour?" Basically, what happens in this chapter is that seven deacons were chosen to manage the food distribution, and Stephen was seized. Do you remember what Porky Pig said at the end of each Looney Tunes cartoon? "Th-th-the, th-th-the, th-th... That's all Folks!" We can go home now. In all seriousness, the shortest or smallest of anything does not mean it's the least significant or less important. And this holds true for this chapter.

Think back to grade school. You probably had a favorite subject. How many of you enjoyed math? How many of you despised math and loved English? How about PE or recess? I, myself, favored math. And I believe God is the master mathematician. He adds, multiplies, and subtracts. It says so in the bible.

Acts 2:47b (NKJV) says, "And the Lord **added** to the church daily those who were being saved."
Acts 6:1 (NKJV) "Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was **multiplying**", multiply.

And let's not forget how He fed thousands of men by multiplying five loaves of bread and two small fish (John 6:9 – 11). In fact, "multiply" is used in the Bible from 34 to 100 times depending on the Bible version.

So, the Lord adds, multiplies, and in addition He's in the business of subtracting. Last week in Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira were eliminated, **subtracted** for lying to the Holy Spirit and being deceitful. Subtraction also occurred in Judges 7 (v.2-7) when God commanded Gideon to reduce his army from 32,000 men down to just 300, that's a huge subtraction of 31,700 so that Israel would know it was God who won the victory.

One thing He doesn't do is . . .? Why did the girl wear glasses during math class? To improve d-vision. Division. One thing He doesn't do is divide. God never divides. That's Satan's job. The letter D in divide stands for devil. Devil stands for diabolos. In Greek, diabolos comes from dia (which means through or across) and ballō (to throw or cast); in other words, it literally means one who casts or throws something through, across, or between people to divide them. The devil divides man against God, man against woman, and today we see people divided against others who have different values and political views. Boy, is he good, but God is greater.

Let's turn to verse one. "Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was **multiplying**, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution." (v.1 NKJV)

Did you know that every apostle was a disciple, but not every disciple was an apostle. The Greek word for **"apostle"** means "one who is sent" and can refer to anyone sent on a mission. The Greek word for **"disciple"** refers to a learner and is used throughout the New Testament to refer to people who believed in Jesus and followed Him. Every person who believes in Jesus is called His disciple.

As the number of disciples multiplied there were bound to be problems. The more people there were, the more likely there would be some kind of conflict. Imagine how that could even happen in the house of the Lord among those who love the same God. See, we are no different from the early church.

Hebraic Jews and Hellenistic Jews were two first-century Jewish cultural groups distinguished primarily by their language, geography, and cultural exposure rather than their core religious devotion. Hebraic Jews lived in Judea, spoke Hebrew or Aramaic, and closely followed local traditions, while Hellenistic Jews lived across the Roman diaspora. Diaspora is a Greek term meaning "to scatter" or dispersion. It is the spreading out of a large group of people from their original homeland to different places all over the world living outside their ancestral countries.

The Hellenist, also known as Grecian Jews, spoke Greek and used the Greek Septuagint Scriptures (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible). If we compare this to the American people across the country, we could parallel this to how differently we greet each other. Hawaiians may say "Aloha", while Texans respond with "Howdy". In California, if a trespasser walked on our property, we'd call the police. But in Alaska, they'd grab their shot gun. I think you get the point. They were all Jews, but they did things a little differently. It's easy to get the Hebraic and Hellenist mixed up since they both start with the letter "H"; so, let's call the Hellenists who adopted the Greek culture "Grecian Jews" for the rest of the lecture.

The Grecian Jews complained that their widows were overlooked for the daily distribution of food. (v. 1) Their complaint was about discrimination. Discrimination, injustice, and inequality seem to surface in all areas of life through various cultures, workplace, or even in the home setting. Don't we hear this all the time? One employee gets preferential treatment over another. Another sibling gets away with everything, usually the baby (youngest child). Although, in my family that wasn't the case. It was the boy, not the baby of the family. My brother got away with everything, and that's typical in many cultures. We shouldn't be surprised that conflicts arise. Instead, we should focus on finding resolutions. That is exactly what the apostles did. There are three points I'd like to address about this whole scenario.

Point #1. Speak up; express your concern.

Kudos to the Grecian Jews who complained. Why would this be a good thing? How many times have you been in a situation where you or someone you know have complained about how something was done or not done? Don't we know better? Sometimes we do. People who are dealing with a situation at hand may know better on how to do something more effectively, more efficiently, than someone, for example, sitting in a corporate office somewhere far, far away. But how productive is it to complain especially to others who are not even directly involved or don't have authority to change the issue? It says in Philippians 2:14a, "Do everything without grumbling or arguing…" Grumbling is an interesting Greek word called goggusmos. It is an onomatopoeic (änə ṃadə ˈpēik) word meaning the word sounds like the real noise it names. It's like the cat's meow.

There are right and wrong ways to approach things. I wouldn't recommend that you storm into someone's office and blurt out your discontent, or go directly to the person who hurt you and give them a piece of your mind. That would be the wrong way.

Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:26–27, "'In your anger do not sin'...and do not give the devil a foothold." Notice that he didn't say, "Do not be angry". Anger itself is not necessarily wrong, but uncontrolled anger can quickly lead to sin. We need self-control to handle anger in a godly way. Don't let anger linger, because if we don't deal with it, it can grow into frustration, bitterness, resentment, and a desire for revenge—giving the devil a foothold and creating a bigger problem.

Consider approaching an issue with love, and I often suggest, start on a positive note. This grabs attention and, more often than not, the person will listen with an open mind verses starting off with an attack. Although, this doesn't always work. There are some people who like to complain just to complain. For every solution you give, there's a reason why that wouldn't work. This sounds like a husband who gave several solutions to his wife, but none were good enough. She didn't want him to fix it. She just wanted to be heard. Had the Grecian Jews not express their concerns, nothing would have changed.

Over the years of teaching, I've noticed it's not uncommon for students to take more classes than they can handle. I had a mother who was a full-time student and had a full-time job. Do you remember the Enjoli perfume commercial in the 1980's?

The lyrics go like this:

'Cuz I'm a woman, Enjoli
I can bring home the bacon,
Fry it up in a pan,
And never, never, never let you forget you're a man.

Do you remember that commercial? Here's the rest of the lyrics:

I can work till 5 o'clock,
Come home and read your tickety-tock...
Tonight I'm going to cook for the kids,
And still be all woman!

Their logo "the 8-hour perfume for the 24-hour woman!" It's insinuating women don't need to sleep. Is this possible? To a certain degree. Anything is possible. But the real question is, how well does a woman function under these conditions or in certain areas of her life? As for my student, it impacted her negatively. It affected her family, job, academics, and health.

Point #2. Recognize your limitations.

"So the Twelve (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.'" (v. 2)

Imagine Carol leading a small group, bringing food, decorating the tables, playing the piano, collecting the offering, and then running up on stage to give the lecture. I already think she's a super woman (the Queen of POW), but she's not that good. None of us are.

The apostles recognized that they couldn't do it all without sacrificing what they were called to do, and that was to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

When you say "yes" to something, your saying "no" to something else. Ask yourself, where should you be devoting your time? Time is precious. You can buy fun, buy youth, and even buy a wife. But you can't buy back time. You can't do everything and be everywhere. Some of us are people pleasers so I understand it can be hard to say no.

Point #3. Approach things with wisdom and compassion.

The apostles continued to say in verse 3, "Brothers, 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 will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." (v. 2-4)

Notice the apostles said, "choose seven men from among you." That was brilliant! "This proposal pleased the whole group." (v. 5a) What's the chance that you or I could please everyone? Rare. The very people who complained were the very people who were given the opportunity to come up with a solution. That is wisdom.

The apostles were wise. You could be smart, have a degree, a Ph.D. and be filled with knowledge, but if you don't put that knowledge into practice, you'd get the 3rd degree from God. Wisdom is putting the knowledge to work. "They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip (we'll read about him in a couple of weeks), Procorus (he was the scribe-writer of the Book of Revelations translated from John), Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas …" (v. 5b) All these men happen to have Greek names, and why do you think seven men were selected? This may go back to the traditional Jewish communities where seven respected men managed public businesses with official councils.

Let's examine the apostles' decision making more closely. They displayed great wisdom because #1) the disciples were allowed to pick a group of men to be in charge. If the people didn't like what these men did, they couldn't blame the apostles because it was their choosing. #2) The apostles didn't give the disciples the authority to put these men in charge. They told them to select seven men and "we will turn this responsibility over to them…". (v. 3b) The apostles still had the last say. You decide; we ratify. You appoint; we anoint.

In the early church, the chosen men were ordained or commissioned by the apostles (meaning - set apart by prayer and laying on of hands). (v.6) Laying hands on someone, an ancient Jewish practice, was a way to set a person apart for special service. Laying of the hands was also referenced in Numbers 27:23 and Deuteronomy 34:9 when Moses laid his hands and commissioned Joshua as his successor to lead the nation of Israel. These seven men became deacons. The Greek word for **"deacon"** is "servant" or "helper". A deacon is an ordained or appointed church officer whose role is focused on service.

Apostles, disciples, and deacons were all different, important roles in the early Christian church: **apostles** were sent messengers or primary leaders, **disciples** were learners or followers, and **deacons** were appointed servants who handled practical community needs, managing the distribution of aid to the widows.

Everyone contributed to the advancement of the kingdom just as all the POW volunteers contribute to the advancement of the kingdom. This was apparent in verse 7, "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly (added, multiplied), and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."

Some claim Acts is like a book of firsts as Carol had mentioned in her first lecture. It introduces things for the first time.

Acts 1: First time ministry was entrusted solely to men and women after Jesus ascended back into heaven.
Acts 2: First time The Holy Spirit was poured out to the people.
Acts 3: The first recorded miracle by the apostles was healing of a lame man.

Acts 4: The first opposition to the early church by critics, skeptics, and unbelievers.
Acts 5: The first judgment of the early church by the removal of Ananias and Sapphira for the sin of lying and deceiving.
Acts 6: Not only did we see the first deacons appointed, but we see the first man to be described as having the face of an angel.

Up to this point, great wonders and miraculous signs were performed through Jesus and the apostles, but now it comes from a common man, an administer, Steven, one of the first listed deacons. What were these signs and wonders? I don't know. It wasn't revealed. What we do know is, God is still working today through those who gives the Sunday sermons, through the hands and feet that build water wells in third world countries, and through people who lend a shoulder to cry on after the loss of a loved one. In other words, you, Christ's followers. "The most important prerequisites for any kind of Christian service is to be filled with faith and the power of the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit's power, we can exercise the gifts God has given us." (Life Application Study Bible, NIV)

The second part of this chapter is making enemies.

We know "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Timothy 2:13 ESV)

Stephen was no exception to making enemies. Opposition arose from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen. They were a group of Jewish slaves who had been freed by Rome and had formed their own synagogue in Jerusalem. They "began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke." (v. 9b-10) There were no details as to how Stephen stood up against their arguments. However, we know that wisdom came from the Holy Spirit.

This is similar to when the Pharisees and Herodians tried to trick Jesus into a political trap about whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. If Jesus said "yes", He would anger the Jewish people who hated Roman occupation and taxes. If He said "no", they could accuse Him of treason against Rome and have Him arrested. Jesus wisely responded, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." (Mark 12:17) An answer from the Spirit of Wisdom.

Regardless of what Stephen said, it didn't say that he was smarter, more educated, or a better speaker. He was able to withstand the arguments through the "wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke." We, too, can ask for the Spirit of Wisdom as we navigate through life.

Because the Freedmen couldn't get the upper hand with a fair debate, verses 11 says, "Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, 'We have heard Stephen speak

blasphemous words against Moses and against God.'" Notice where it says, "Then they secretly persuaded some men to say…." Think, if it was a secret, how did Luke, the author of Acts, know that they lied and used secret tragedies against Stephen?

Remember when Luke described the Synagogue of the Freedmen? He listed where these Jews were from: Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia. (v. 9) There was a very prominent rabbi who lived in Jerusalem but was originally from Cilicia. His name was Saul of Tarsus. We'll find out later that he was mixed up in this whole shenanigan. When Saul later converted, better known as Paul, the Apostle Paul, some scholars are convinced it was Saul of Tarsus who told Luke, "This is what happened. Let me tell you what we secretly did behind the scenes." It makes sense to me. How else would Luke know that some men were secretly persuaded to lie?

These men couldn't do anything to Stephen until "… they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law (who are also known as scribes, teachers of the law). They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin." (v. 12) Does this sound familiar? The Sanhedrin was the same supreme Jewish council and high court that arrested Jesus, put Him on trial for blasphemy, and pressured the Roman governor to order His crucifixion. This occurred after stirring the people with deception.

2 Timothy 4:3-4 ESV – For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

Don't we see this today? It's not uncommon that the "news" will twist facts to stir people's emotions to suit their needs. Organizations may even promote false information to get a mob or protestors to behave a certain way. They, too, fall victim to the schemes.

Stephen said all the right things, did all the right things, but the Freedmen still produced false witnesses who testified that he said something he didn't say.

Have you ever been accused of saying something you never said? Maybe it was a big misunderstanding or not. One time, I told a colleague of mine that she did a spectacular job with her students at this event. And for whatever reason, she told everyone I said the opposite. We could say and do all the right things and still be attacked. It's becoming more apparent as believers of Christ are being arrested and martyred.

Verse 15, "All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel." I don't know about you, but if I had a large group of elite leaders staring at me with intense anger, I would feel a little intimated. But instead, Stephen had a face of an angel. What does that mean? This

man was filled with the Holy Spirit. We could assume the look on his face was not of fear, but of radiance, triumph, and serenity.

When I first attended POW, there was this woman who opened with announcements. Betty had this beautiful smile. I wondered, is this happiness for real? Week after week, there was that same smile. Frankly, it somehow annoyed me. When we get annoyed by others, there isn't anything wrong with them. They are who they are. I had to ask myself, what from my upbringing or past experiences is causing that feeling about this person? God has a sense of humor. He decided to put her in my small group. And what I discovered was, that smile could kill, kill you with kindness. She was as genuinely sweet, and loving as that smile portrayed. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and it was evident at her celebration of life as stories were told about how she impacted the lives of her friends and family. That smile was like a face of an angel.

Let's pray: Thank you, Father, for this small, but mighty lesson in this chapter. Thank you for the reminder that we all have limitations and that we can't and shouldn't do life alone. And when it's warranted, we should express our concerns, but not without the wisdom of your Spirit. Fill us with the Holy Spirit. Help us to have a heart like our sweet, loving beloved Betty. As we walk through life, may we have a face of an angel like her. In Jesus' name. Amen.