

## **We're in this Together!**

1. Warm up: When you were growing up, who's the first person you remember meeting that was from a different culture or subculture than yours? How did that impact you?
2. In our mind's eye, we tend to idealize the early church – and there's much to admire about the early church. But whenever people gather, there will be tensions. Those tensions can become even more pronounced when diverse people come together in the same congregation. This week's Bible story is about that. We can learn a lot from how that first big dispute was addressed in the Jerusalem church. Read Acts 6:1-7, as printed on p. 3.
  - a. The Hebraic Jews were Jews who lived their entire lives in Israel. By contrast, the Hellenistic Jews were part of the diaspora. Their ancestors had migrated from Israel to far flung places, so Hellenistic Jews grew up in a very different culture, but then ultimately immigrated back to Israel. The original Jerusalem church was comprised mostly of Hebraic Jews, but had a minority of Hellenistic Jews. When in your own life experience have you been in an environment where you were in a minority? What was that experience like?
  - b. As Genese shared on Sunday, many of the Hellenistic Jews were elderly widows who moved back to Israel late in life because they believed that only Jews buried in Israel would be raised from the dead when the Messiah came. When many of those widows embraced Jesus as the Messiah, they joined the Jerusalem church. Because they often had no immediate family in the area and were culturally prohibited from working or owning property, these widows were often unable to fully support themselves. Verse 1 tells us that they “were being overlooked in the [church's] daily distribution of food” to those in need. Why do you suppose that was? What factors may have been at play resulting in them being overlooked?
  - c. The Hebraic Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem church could have been dismissive and unresponsive to the concerns of the Hellenistic Jews. Instead they took their concerns seriously and, as verse 5 indicates, empowered seven men – six Hellenistic Jews and one Gentile convert – to lead the effort to solve the problem. What do you think we can learn from that approach?
  - d. Verse 7 indicates that because of the way the Hebraic Jewish leaders responded to the concerns of the Hellenistic Jews, “the word of God spread [and] the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly.” Why do you suppose that was? What might have happened instead if the Hebraic leaders had been dismissive of the Hellenist concerns?
3. Genese identified three core values that guided the way the Jerusalem church successfully responded to the Hellenist concerns: (a) a deep desire to spread the Gospel; (b) a deep commitment to caring for the needs of those who were vulnerable in their church

community; and (c) a willingness to empower those who were being marginalized to lead the community's effort to solve the problem.

- a. Do you believe our church is fully embracing these same core values? On which of the three values are we strongest? On which of the three are we weakest and most in need further growth? Explain your answer.
  - b. Who are the “widows” in our congregation, not literally but figuratively? In other words, who are the categories of people who, when they come to our church, constitute a minority among us – or might otherwise be vulnerable and in great need?
  - c. Our church is aggressively inviting people to come to our church via our billboards, and many of us also personally invite family and friends. But suppose someone who's in a minority category comes to our church and doesn't feel fully accepted, valued, or heard. What happens then?
  - d. Genese spoke of creating “safe space for the vulnerable to receive the care that they need.” What do you think she meant by “safe space?” What kinds of things can make our church feel safe for vulnerable minorities?
  - e. LifeJourney has several Affinity Groups for various categories of folks within our church family. Examples include the Trans Justice Team, the Women's Affinity Group, and the Men's Prayer Breakfasts. Affinity Groups can serve as the eyes and ears that help us understand and address the needs of the most vulnerable members of our church community. Do you think it's a good idea to have these kinds of Affinity Groups? Why or why not?
  - f. Genese said, “We must remember that our Affinity Groups are not about having the oppression Olympics.” What do you think she meant?
  - g. Genese shared a vision to raise up an African American Affinity Group in our congregation, perhaps kicking it off with a Juneteenth cookout as a first event. Do you think it's a good idea to have an African American Affinity Group? Why or why not?
4. In your view, is it possible for a church to live into the fullness of the teachings of Jesus without being intentional about uplifting and empowering those who often have the least power in our society?
  5. Here at LifeJourney, we have a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Advisory Board that is helping guide us forward. In popular culture, DEI has become a hot button issue. How would you define DEI? Are you glad we openly embrace it? Do you think our church's commitment to DEI will help draw more people to Jesus through us? Why or why not?

## **Acts 6:1-7**

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."

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.