

EKKLESIA 4-A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS
ACTS 6 & 7
SEPTEMBER 2, 2018

I went to a movie recently that some people are saying could be up for an Academy Award, *Hotel Transylvania 3*. If you haven't heard of it, it's an animated Adam Sandler movie about a vampire that includes a lot jokes about bodily functions and sight gags. Okay, it isn't going to win any awards, but while I was there with my three kids, there were a couple of older ladies sitting in front of us. They thought the movie was participatory. What did the Vampire say? Why is he going on the cruise boat? What is the meaning of the old monster? I was at a movie that I didn't even care about, and still, the constant murmuring drove me nuts. When you are constantly chatting and murmuring, you mess up the whole movie.

In our passage today, an argument sprouts up in the church and the word for the complaining is *gonguzo*. The word is also translated murmur. Murmur is onomatopoeic. Onomatopoeia is when the pronunciation of the word is like the sound being made, like "meow" or "oink" or "bark." A complaining murmur is breaking out in the early church, and the onomatopoeic nature of the word lets you know how divisive it can be. The message of the gospel is getting cluttered. It is distracting the work. It is causing division, and worst of all, it is keeping people from following the story of Jesus.

A very similar theme to this crops up in the church of Corinth. Paul is writing to this church, and there is a great schism in the community over many topics. One of the biggest topics is spiritual gifts. Paul delivers an extended discussion about the different gifts people have to make up one body and then he tells them, if you don't use them correctly, it is like a distracting noise. If you aren't fitting into the larger story of your church, playing your part, so to speak, you are like a clanging cacophonous cymbal that is preventing the message from being heard. You are like a couple of old ladies talking during the movie.

Today I want you to consider what part you play at this church. I want you to consider the movie that is playing as the world watches and what they are seeing. Bigger than that, what part do you play in the larger community of faith in this valley? What role has God given you to bless those in the world around you? The divine director has given you a role, and you have to know if you are playing your part.

This is my final series at SFC, and we are discussing the importance of the church. We are calling this series, *Ekklesia*, which means “called out.” We are considering what that means to live differently as the called-out cast of God. Called out from the normal way of living life. Called out of hedonism. Called out of the rat race. Called out to do something spectacular.

Acts 6:1-7

As I have told you before, God has a special place in his heart for the widow, the orphan and the alien. This was especially true during the era of these books’ original writings. To be a widow in 1st century was quite different than it would be today. Women in this culture were dependent upon the men in their lives. They were not allowed to obtain education or training, which meant they were unable to do many jobs and the gender roles of the day and the nature of manual labor made those jobs unfeasible. If a woman was widowed and had no sons to care for her, she was largely up a creek. So very early on, God called upon his people to care for those who could not care for themselves. The early church took this charge and they tried to take care of the widows in their midst. If you’ll remember from chapter 5, people had been sacrificially giving to the church to take care of other people’s needs. Today, a complaint/ gonguzo, a murmur is bubbling up and growing louder. People are talking during the movie. The Hellenistic widows are being overlooked in favor of the Hebraic widows. We have discussed this before, but you’ll remember that there were people of all ethnic backgrounds in Jerusalem. Hellenistic is a synonym for Greek. These people were Gentiles who had converted to Judaism, and now had fully converted and were following Jesus. On the other hand, they had widows of a Hebraic ethnicity who were converting fully to follow Jesus. Sound complicated enough? All of

this is exacerbated by the fact that the church was swelling in size. The number of believers exceeded 5,000, and with life expectancies being what they were and the propensity for the women to outlive the men, it makes sense that there was a decent size group of widows, and they all needed help.

Now then, why this group was being overlooked is not clear. It could be intentional in that people were forming spiritual hierarchies in their minds and the Hellenistic believers were lower on the totem pole. Or it could be that since this group was primarily made up of people from a Hebraic ethnicity that people were naturally gravitating towards and caring for the people they knew who happened to be Hebraic. Nevertheless, whether this was intentional or not, there was a racial component to this problem. There was a financial component to this problem. There was an administrative component to this problem and more than anything else, there was a spiritual component to this problem. The murmur was growing louder. The division was growing deeper. The cymbals were beginning to clang.

In Verses 2-4, the apostles knew that their gifting and calling was to the word and to prayer. With this in mind, they made it clear they shouldn't neglect their primary calling in order to take care of this administrative function. I want you to see something here before we go any further. The apostles were not saying that this job was beneath them. They were saying that if they spent time on waiting tables, they would be neglecting their primary calling and gifting. If you'll remember, these men who are now called apostles were fishermen three short years earlier. In those three years, they were entrusted and equipped with a special calling. They were to be the pioneers. The first ones up the hill. They were to be the ones preaching and praying.

Here is the problem. For far too long, those who preach are often elevated to the top of the spiritual totem pole. They are the lead role in the movie. Since preaching is central in many churches, and since one person usually does it, all eyes are on them. This leads to this person being elevated and sometimes their gift being more highly valued. The converse of that is that other gifts are less valuable and other people have less to contribute since they do not preach.

So when the preacher gets up to preach and calls the church to use their gifts, the refrain often comes up, but what do I have to offer?

Everyone has a part to play in the ekklesia.

Here is what I want to make sure you hear today. There is an interconnectedness and interdependence within the church. Everybody has a part to play, and if only one person is playing their role while everyone else watches, we have missed the point. Everyone has a gift. Everyone has a part to play. Everyone has a contribution. To illustrate this point, Paul calls the church, “the body” in 1 Corinthians 12. He says some people are an eye, some people are the foot, but the eye can’t say to the foot, “I don’t need you,” and the foot can’t say to the eye, “I don’t need you.” There is an interconnectedness and interdependence in the body of Christ.

Paul then goes out of his way to address this spiritual stratification that sometimes happens, and he reminds them that sometimes the smallest part can make the biggest difference. One of the most important parts of your body is about the size of a pea. Your pituitary gland emits nine different hormones to your body which help promote homeostasis. Your stress levels, your sexuality, your growth as a child are all regulated by this small pea sized gland. Without it you would be a mess, but you probably don’t treasure it like you do your ears or your eyes, your hands or your feet. You need every part for a healthy body. You need every role for a complete movie.

I’m assuming all of you have heard of Ron Howard. He is a noted actor, director and producer. You probably remember him as Opie on the *Andy Griffith Show*, and Richie Cunningham in *Happy Days*. He has directed iconic movies like *Apollo 13* and dozens of others. Did you know he has a brother named Clint? Clint has acted in over 100 movies and TV shows, and you might not know him but you know him. He is one of those character actors who holds a story together. He isn’t Brad Pitt or George Clooney. He isn’t even Ron Howard. He’s just Clint Howard, but without him many movies wouldn’t have been the same.

The problem, of course, is that we gravitate towards spiritual stratification. We are driven by comparison by nature. How do I measure up to those around me? How does my salary compare? How does my success compare? How does my house compare? That drive to compare and find value is then imported into the church. Paul preaches against that and in this text today preaches against that. Waiting tables and preaching have equal value in God's eye if they are both done for the sake of the gospel. When you read the parable of the talents that Jesus tells, he evaluates performance based upon gifts. To the person who had two talents and got two more, God was pleased. To the person who had five talents and got five more, God was pleased. To the one who had ten talents and got ten more, God was pleased. He did not expect the person with two talents to get five more, nor did he expect the one with five to get five more. To all of them, he said, "Well done." You invested your gift and you got a return. You played your part and the kingdom grew. The only person he was displeased with was the person who had one talent because they buried it and did nothing with it. He was equally satisfied with all of those who used their gifts regardless of the human desire to quantify value. The only one who was rebuked is the one who did nothing.

This value system is further seen through the rest of chapter 6 and chapter 7. One of these "table waiters" was a man named Stephen. He was Clint Howard to Peter's Ron Howard. Before I go on, I have to tell you I was a waiter at a restaurant all through my college years. I am thankful for that job and God used it to provide for my tuition, but I can tell you it was often less than glamorous and definitely didn't seem that important. You could come to a table and swear after your conversation they barely knew you were human. Countless people ignored your humanity and when you came to the table, you might say, "Good evening, my name is Gabe. I will be your server this evening," but before you can finish your introduction, the diners grunt to you that they want warm bread. They would never say thank you, never make eye contact and often leave no tip. By the world's standards, this wasn't an important job, and I was made aware of it daily.

How much more so for Stephen? There were people out there preaching and healing and he was cleaning off crumbs and dealing with ungrateful families. Human perception would be that this job of waiting tables is less valuable than the apostles' work, but Stephen was about to do something none of the apostles had been able to do. Because of the faithfulness of this man, the gospel broke out from Jerusalem and began to spread to Judea and Samaria. We won't read the entire text today. I just want to summarize for you, but I encourage you to read it this week.

Stephen embraced his job and God began to work through him mightily. Miracles were happening. Lives were being changed by this table waiter. So much so that Stephen was dragged before the religious authorities for what God had been doing through him. In a moment of Spirit-filled boldness, Stephen recapped the entirety of God's story. He traced the story of the Old Testament and showed how it all culminated in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. This infuriated the religious authorities and they dragged Stephen out to be stoned to death. In one of the most Christ-like moments in history, Stephen committed his spirit to God and asked God to forgive these people for the murder they were about to carry out. This table waiter did his job faithfully. He stood up with boldness to the religious authorities. He preached the gospel and, he was stoned to death.

This moment ends up being the catalyst for the gospel to break out of Jerusalem. After this horrifying execution, the church spread out in fear. Many of them ran for their lives, but they preached Jesus everywhere they went. This faithful man used his gift. He played his role, and his bold act led to the gospel spreading far beyond the borders of Jerusalem. For eight chapters, the apostles had huddled in Jerusalem and preached there, but it took a table waiter for the gospel to spread beyond the Holy City.

Stephen, the table waiter, is the perfect symbol for the counterintuitive nature of what the world values versus what God values. Of importance and impact in man's eyes versus importance and impact in God's eyes. You have a part to play, and there is no telling how God will use it to spread his story. There are many tools out there to figure out what spiritual gifts

you have, but you probably already know what you have even if you don't know what you have. Here is what I mean. Push back against the idea of a spiritual gift being something "churchy." While some spiritual gifts are things like preaching or leading worship, many times your spiritual gift is something you were born with that God is spiritually using. You might have a keen eye for business that God has given to you. Don't try to become a preacher. Use that gift to bless others and grow the kingdom. You might have the gift of artistry and design. Don't try and become a worship leader. Use your gift to bless others and grow the kingdom. The list of spiritual gifts in the Bible is not exhaustive. Paul began a list, but I don't think he finished it. You know how I know this? A few reasons, his lists are not identical even though he mentions spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12 and Ephesians 4. If it was one list with a set of parameters, he would have repeated it. On a similar note, he never mentions the gift of table waiting. He does mention service. He does mention mercy. There are all sorts of spiritual gifts, many of them fit in some of these broader categories, but I want to de-churchify them for you. They can be "regular" gifts that God has given you that come in useful where you work, but I want you to see that he is redeeming those "regular" gifts as spiritual gifts for the sake of the kingdom.

As an example, I was born with the gift of gab. My mother figured early on that I would be a lawyer or a preacher. If I did not come to faith in Jesus, I would still have quick wit, the ability to study and the ability to deliver a presentation. God has redeemed that gift, and we would call it the gift of preaching or teaching. Your gift might not fit into a "churchy" category, but take inventory of what your gifts and passions are and ask God how he wants to use those gifts for his glory and the common good.

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, the Bible teaches us that you have a gift. You have a part to play. Whether it is changing diapers in the nursery or playing in the orchestra or building houses in Mexico or feeding the homeless downtown, you have a part to play. Are you playing your part? Look around this church. Where do you see gaps that you could fill in? Look around this city. Where do you see gaps that you could fill in? This church has never been a one man show.

So many of you serve so well here. I encourage you to keep playing your part. For those of you who have been watching the show, I encourage you to step up and play a part. Give me a call or shoot me an email this week. Maybe you want to get in on the movement, but you don't where to start. Contact me, contact another one of the pastors.

You know the craziest part of my experience at *Hotel Transylvania 3*? The ladies moved because they thought my kids were being too loud. The ladies who were talking through the movie didn't like that my kids were chewing popcorn and asking about the vampire. That's the problem with murmuring. I was so offended by theirs that I missed mine. When we all think it's a show we are watching and not a story we are a part of, we miss the point. When church is a show we take in versus a story we take part in, we miss the point. Church isn't a place, it's a people. Church isn't a performance, it's an invitation. Jesus didn't say, come watch a fishing show, he said I'll make you fishers of men. Jesus didn't say, come watch disciples get made, he called you to make disciples. You have a part in this story, and if you will step up, he will change your life. Let's see where the story takes us.