

Socially-Integrated Spirituality: Acts 6:1-7

2 kinds of Churches: >Word Churches >Deed Churches

Jesus has a vision in mind for his church of a **spirituality that is socially integrated**

What do I mean? Our spiritual lives are legitimate only to the extent that they are leading us toward "Neighbor-Love."

Is your Christianity expression, understanding, practice leading you toward Neighbor-Love?

IOW, Christianity does not stop at introspection, meditation, rigorous religious practices of certain disciplines.

Christianity has a context for where it is lived out, and it is in the vast web of relationships in the local church and beyond. **There is a social dynamic of a biblical picture of christian spirituality. And that social dynamic is the environment that we move toward spiritual maturity.**

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- 2 Great Commandments: [Matthew 22:36-40](#) "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."
- IOW, the life that we have with God - that Jesus purchased for us on the Cross and in His resurrection and session at the right hand - is a life of love for God and for others. A deep love and care for others.
- 1 John could not be more clear when it says:
 - [1 John 3:11-18](#) "For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."

Context of Passage

This is ultimately what this passage is about. It is about how Christian theology works its way into the very fabric of our lives where we begin to live authentic lives of love.

- God is doing a wonderful work in the church in Jerusalem.
 - [Acts 6:1](#) "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number..."
 - God was adding to the church daily. It was greatly increasing. There was a lot going on. Imagine the organizational complexity of this early church. There were 12. Then there was 120. Then there was 5000. It was very complex. Yet, God was blessing this ministry and movement of Jesus in Jerusalem.
- In this early church though, [Acts 6](#) shows us that the concerns we have about people from different cultures and different lands and ethnic groups of all different ages and stages of life are legitimate. Cross cultural ministry in the local church is hard today. We have experienced that at many points. And it was hard for this church as well.
- The Apostles are preaching the Word on a daily basis, but things are not all well. Ministry was becoming normal and people are getting disgruntled, because the message that is being preached is not the message that is being lived out.
 - [Acts 6:1](#) "a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution."
- The early Christians professed to believe in a Gospel of reconciliation in every sense of the word, Yet they discriminated against others who looked and acted different than them.
- The Early Christians believed that the only identity that mattered now was the inheritance they had received in Christ, YET they did not care for their fellow sister who were widows of equal standing in God's Kingdom.
- They did not affirm the image of God on this certain group of widows, even though they were made in the very image of the God that they worshipped and believed in.
- So the apostles see this and acknowledge these things:
 - The Ministry of the Word will be hindered by the social environment of those who believe it
 - The answer and solution is not to stop their daily preaching so that they can provide food for widows. That would solve a problem but would lead to a host of other problems.
- So they direct the church to bring their best men forward: men full of the Holy Spirit, of good reputation (above reproach), Wise.
 - These men are appointed through the laying on of hands to be those who get the privilege of serving these widows.

- And the scripture ends with saying that the number of disciples increased and the ministry of the Word continued greatly in the city of Jerusalem and beyond.

MPS: Our Church is only spiritually vibrant to the extent that we are socially aware and engaged in what God is doing in the World.

- One Encouragement from this Passage: This passage is beautiful because it shows that we are not missing something in our christian experience by not naturally moving toward a life of love.
- That fact that these apostles and early church struggled to care for this marginalized ethnic group with everything else that they are carrying should show us that this struggle that we experience does not delegitimize us. But we need to hear the black-white nature of 1 John and see how the love of Christ compels us toward one another.

It is not “Either-Or” but “Both-And”

- Apostles did not see their need for social engagement as an addendum. It was a priority. It was as if God and His Word - and the extent of its ministry in the World was on the line in how they handled this situation. How they responded to the discrimination before them was not trivial. Instead, it indicated how the community of God in the church understood who He(God) was.
- But it was not either-or: What do I mean? They did not lay down their calling to “serve tables” and make sure everyone was fed. The church is not a group of social activists
- It was both-and. This is what I mean when I say “**Social-Integrated Spirituality.**” The Church is a space where the Word of God is prioritized, preached, loved, cherished, and as this ministry goes forward, it is a place where the love of God is felt and experienced through the social implications it cultivates.
 - The Hope of the Church is Christ. Christ in his Life, death, Resurrection, and Life now at the Right Hand. And the life that is to come for those who place their trust in him.
 - The Church also understands that the greatest need that anybody has is spiritual in nature. We are hostile to God by doing evil deeds and living without a knowledge of God in the World
 - As we believe this Hope, we lead lives of love. It is both-and.
 - You could say that, in a sense, Neighbor-Love is at the heartbeat of the biblical message.
 - In this way, God saves us and calls us out of darkness into a life of love for God, and for those around us.
 - To proclaim and cling to the Word is to prioritize and cultivate lifestyles of love and care for others, and especially for the poor. How we care for the poor is central to our understanding of the Gospel.

Our Greatest Privilege as Disciples of Jesus is Gospel Care of others, especially the poor and marginalized.

- Defining this marginalized Group
 - They were Widows: In a male dominated society, to be widowed would have meant economic, financial, relational, social devastation unless they were redeemed according to OT law (exploring this more in Ruth next month). And there was even question about whether or not these laws/customs were still able to be practiced with the Jews being under Roman Rule. Needless to say, for widows, their future in this world was uncertain and hard.
 - Greek-Speaking Jew (Hellenists): These widows did not carry on the cultures, traditions, mainly language of the Hebrews. They did not embody the culture of the Hebrew-speaking jews. It is reasonable to think that they were seen to be nominal Jews at best because of some of the compromises that they made with how they lived. But when you trace the history of Israel throughout the Bible we know it is much more complicated than that.
 - YET, This was clearly a huge deal to the Hebrew-speaking Jews. It was a big enough deal that they would have actively discriminated and chosen not to tend to the needs of these widows because of their culture.

What this passage is ultimately doing in light of these details is showing us what type of power the Gospel is in our world. It transcends these deep cultural wounds and hurts. It transcends the marginalized cultures of people and gives them dignity, respect, honor. It is the very power of the Gospel that does this.

Thus is the kind of ministry that the church is called into:

- Culture Care in a world of discrimination
 - Kintsugi Pottery - Broken shards of pottery. Through a delicate process of collecting pottery that was broken, tending to it, and when the time was right, remaking it into something beautiful. Makoto Fujimara is a modern day artist who has carried this form of art on.
 - In line with this art form, Fujimara has pioneered this idea in recent years of “Culture Care.” As an artist, he paints and does other forms of art with pieces of raw materials from his japanese heritage and culture. For example, he released a series of paintings recently that were made from decades old piece of Japanese paper.

Really fine expensive paper that he transformed into a beautiful piece of art that communicated deep biblical, redemptive truths of God in Christ.

- Fujimara says that as Christians this is the kind of work that we are called into "Culture Care": The Gospel did not destroy the cultural identity of these Greek Jews. The Gospel celebrated and transcended their cultural identity.
 - They are beautiful widows who are deserving of care and love for exactly who they are as God's children.
- The poor, discriminated against, marginalized people in our world - and especially in the church - should receive our highest honor and greatest efforts
 - [Acts 6:3](#) "Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty."
 - Notice how this was not trivial to this church. What was happening among the widows was questioning the very legitimacy of the Word of God.
 - Their spiritual lives were integrated deeply to where for the Gospel to be true, it meant that their best were going to serve those who had nothing to offer them.
 - The Catholic Worker Movement - Dorothy Day - promoted the idea of "personalism," emphasizing this:
 - There is dignity that every individual has because they bear the very image of God. And therefore, it is important that we directly and personally engage with those who are suffering.
 - Christianity is the only understanding of humanity that leads to this. Humanism is empty. There is not real truth that humanism builds itself on that leads to this type of care. Only through a belief in the image of God do we have real reason and motivation to love the unloveable, to welcome the sojourner, to give the immigrant a home, to clothe the poor.

Implications

- Ultimately, what I am getting at is if we say we know and understand God's love for us, then how can that not propel us into the world? Not as social activists but as disciples of Jesus.

Conclusion - Gospel Care Unhinders the Word of God

Our care for others who have nothing to offer us (But beyond that, our care for others period), a care that is motivated by the love we have for God through Christ, is a love that does 2 things:

[Acts 6:7](#) "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."

- Gospel Care (1) Unhinders God's Word by (2) Prophesying the New Creation
 - It takes the social stumbling blocks out of the way of people seeing and believing in Jesus.
 - Because as we embody the social implications of the Gospel that lead to Neighbor-Love we give people a vision of the life they could live through repentance and faith
 - Think about how this vision for our Christian lives would change the dynamic of our mission as a church. How compelling would Christ be if they not only heard the message of Christ but they felt the message of Christ.
- Prophesies the New Creation
 - Fujimara was asked "how do you have hope faced with a world that is so desperate?" [He responded by saying] I still have hope in the One who taught me to be with the poor and marginalized, and to create beauty standing on the ashes of Ground Zero, and to wrestle with his words to "love your enemies". If you read the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not promise security in dangerous times, but gave his Presence and tears, and that our "mustard seed of faith" will take root to shelter for generations to come, and exhorted us to create into the fissures of our times, to invest our creative energies for the New Creation to come.
 - I think this is ultimately what is happening in the world through the Church. The redemption of God is breaking in to the world through the creative energies of the church working toward the new Creation to come.