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3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Out of Bounds”

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## Acts 6:1-15

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.' What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.' And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

## ***Out of Bounds***

This week, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder, and CEO of Facebook went to Washington to testify before lawmakers about issues of data privacy. Zuckerberg began his testimony explaining how Facebook was started in his dorm room at Harvard, and how at the time he had no idea that it would become the most prominent social media platform on the planet and make him a billionaire in the process.

Zuckerberg endured hours of questioning, and near the end of the second day, when he was before the House of Representatives, a particular line of questioning began to emerge the question of what Facebook is.

“You’ve described Facebook as a company that connects people and as a company that is idealistic and optimistic,” said one congressman. “I have a few other questions about what another kind of company it might be. Facebook has created its video series starring Tom Brady that ran for six episodes and has over 50 million views; that’s twice the number of the viewers that watched the Oscars last month.

Also, Facebook has obtained exclusive broadcasting rights for twenty-five Major League Baseball games this season. Is Facebook a media company?” Another congressman asked, “You can now send money to friends through Facebook Messenger so is Facebook a financial institution?” Still, another said, “You’ve mentioned several times that you started Facebook in your dorm room in 2004. Fifteen years, two billion users and several unfortunate breaches of trust later is Facebook the same kind of company you started with a [harvard.edu](mailto:harvard.edu) email address?”

By the end of the day, according to a journalist who attended the testimony, the overwhelming feeling in the room was, “Wow, this thing is a lot bigger and more complex than anyone realized.”<sup>1</sup> More than two thousand years, billions of adherents, and many unfortunate breaches of trust later, it’s worth asking whether the church is the same kind of community that started back in a room in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit inspired the first believers to share the gospel far and wide. From its earliest days, the church struggled mightily to figure out just what kind of community it is. It struggled mightily, not just to teach and preach but also to live the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Daily* podcast, Thursday, April 12, 2018.

In today's story from Acts, the early church is growing, which presents both opportunities and challenges. The community is divided into two groups, the Hellenists, and the Hebrews. The Hellenists were Jews who had lived elsewhere in the Greek world and then immigrated to Jerusalem, while the Hebrews were Jerusalem natives. The differences between these two groups led to all kinds of conflicts.

The conflict in today's story was that a particular group within the community a group of Hellenist widows were not receiving their daily share of food. Initially, the church responds by problem-solving: the original disciples gather everyone together and admit that they just don't have the bandwidth to do all the necessary jobs that are emerging, especially as the community grows.

So, they decide to delegate, as churches have done ever since. Different tasks in the community are done by different people, according to their gifts. At first, it seems like this delegation of responsibilities solves the problem. The disciples appoint seven people to attend to the distribution of food, and they stay focused on praying and preaching.

That might have worked, except one of the seven doesn't stick to his assigned task. Stephen turns out to have unexpected gifts; the text says he is full of grace and power and does great wonders and signs among the people. And not surprisingly, in a community of people who came together in the name of Jesus, the One whose transgression of boundaries got him killed, when Stephen goes outside his assigned role it gets him into serious trouble.

Bill Thomas was a physician in upstate New York who served as the medical director of Chase Memorial Nursing Home, a facility that housed eighty severely disabled elderly residents. Soon after arriving at Chase, Bill longed to do something to liven up the place. At first, he focused on what he could do through his professional training, ordering scans and tests and new medications for the residents. But all this accomplished was driving the nursing staff crazy.

Then, as he reflected further on what seemed to be missing at Chase Memorial, Bill concluded that it was life itself. His instincts told him that the remedy was to put more life into the facility by introducing plants, animals, and children into the lives of the residents.

Now as you can imagine, this idea was received with considerable skepticism. As far as the staff was concerned, things at Chase Memorial were fine, and they

had no interest in or capacity for caring for plants, animals, and children on top of all their other responsibilities. Bill's suggestions triggered a near-mutiny of the nursing home staff. We can imagine that after Stephen was assigned this task of serving meals to those Hellenist widows, chances are he did what he was told to do.

And we can speculate that the first time he put down his tray of food to heal someone who was sick, he may have drawn attention to himself and been reminded that this was outside the scope of his assigned responsibilities. But when he started not just delivering food to church members, but going out into the city and talking some even called it preaching about who Jesus was and what his life, death, and resurrection meant; well, this got him into even more trouble, and the religious leaders called him to account.

But Stephen kept performing wonders and signs that amazed the people, which made it increasingly difficult for the leaders to make their case. At some point, they decide they need to do whatever it takes to stop Stephen, even if what it takes is secretly instigating false accusations and recruiting dishonest witnesses for his trial. Even if what it takes leads to Stephen's death which, if you read the rest of the story, you will discover it does.

This story, and many others in the Book of Acts reveal how the Holy Spirit pushed and prodded the first followers of Jesus to expand their thinking about who would be part of the church:

not just Jews but Gentiles,

not just Hebrews but Hellenists,

not just rich but poor,

not just natives but immigrants,

not just highly educated but illiterate,

not just men but women,

not just free but enslaved.

It was no easy thing for the members of the early church to imagine, much less practice, this kind of boundary-defying community. Indeed, it cost some of them their very lives.

By continuing to lobby for his vision of what Chase Memorial Nursing Home could be, Bill Thomas eventually convinced the staff to apply for a state grant funding innovative approaches to elder care. There was a lot of nay-saying, but the leadership team and nursing staff agreed to submit a request for two dogs, four cats, and 100 birds. To their surprise, the grant was approved.

The day the birds were delivered the staff realized they hadn't thought through how to bring one hundred parakeets into the nursing home, especially when the delivery truck with the birds arrived before the truck that was delivering the bird cages. So one hundred parakeets were released into the beauty salon. When the cages arrived later that day, it turned out they still needed to be assembled. Pandemonium ensued as the staff spent hours assembling the cages and then chasing the birds around the salon and delivering them to each resident's room. It was pandemonium, but the best kind: the elderly residents gathered outside the salon windows to watch, and, according to Bill, "they laughed their butts off."

Reflecting on this episode later, Bill said, "We didn't know what the heck we were doing. Did, Not, Know what we were doing." And that turned out to be the best possible thing because dealing with this entirely new situation meant that "everyone dropped their guard and simply pitched in—the residents included. Whoever could help line the cages with newspaper, got the dogs and cats settled, and enlisted kids to help out. It was a kind of glorious chaos." And the result of Bill's idea was that it transformed Chase Memorial and drastically improved the residents' health and quality of life as well as the employees' job satisfaction..

At the beginning of the church, there was a kind of glorious chaos as the Holy Spirit gave all kinds of people the ability to share the good news of God's love. Time and again, God's people have tried to put boundaries around the chaos – but Stephen's story reminds us that this desire can be taken too far.

Last week, eight members of this community four staff and four lay leaders traveled to Atlanta to meet with area clergy and tour a downtown church, much like our own. During one of our conversations with a Presbyterian minister who has served various churches around the country for more than thirty years, he reflected on the Presbyterian ideal of "decently and in order": "The idea that we Presbyterians should always do things decently and in order has probably done us a disservice," he said. "Decently, yes, we should always strive for decency, especially in our interactions with one another. But 'in order' I'm less and less

convinced that order is what God has called us to and, from what I've seen, sometimes our desire for it quite simply gets in our way."

New Testament professor Eric Barretto observes that what we find in book of Acts is "a church that is contentious, overwhelmed, and confronting great loss." He writes, "Perhaps what we learn in Acts is not to look for a blueprint for an ideal church but instead to develop an imagination for what God does when God draws our lives together into communities characterized by unity and division, focus and uncertainty, joy and loss."<sup>2</sup>

How do we develop an imagination for what God is doing among us we who are this incredibly diverse group of people who have, individually and collectively, felt God's claim and call on our lives?

We are living through an extraordinary historical moment: a time when a nation's leader is killing his people with chemical weapons. A time when we are trying to figure out how much personal data tech companies should be allowed to know and share about us. A time when the lines between truth and fiction are blurred continuously and when the laws of our land are regularly flouted and manipulated by those who are supposed to defend them during this time, what does it mean to be the church, this community designed to break boundaries for the sake of God's inclusive love?

Today's story suggests that we start by listening to one another, even especially to those we might consider out of bounds for whatever reason. Because they are too old or too young or too eager for change or too entrenched in old ways. Or too liberal or too conservative or too sophisticated or not sophisticated enough or too much of an insider or too much of an outsider. We start by listening to each other, and we continue by remembering that this is not our church; it is God's church. And here, in God's church, everyone gets a seat at the table and everyone is called to serve. Here, in God's church, we believe that we all have a God-given gift and we must help each other identify and share those gifts not just for the good of our community, but the world.

If we can do this, decently, yes, and maybe not so in order, if we can weather the chaos that comes when we pursue radical inclusion. We will not only be a church that preaches and teaches the gospel, but we will also be a church that

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Barretto, commentary on the passage on Working Preacher for April 30, 2017: [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3040](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3040)

lives the gospel joyfully, a church that embodies the gospel promise that God's love knows no boundaries.

Amen.