

“Problems with Family Living”

Acts 6:1-7

June 14th, 2020

Second in Series God @ Home

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“That no one should be neglected...”

- Acts 6:1

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, help us to see all your people that we may respond and so share in the abundance of your grace. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Sermon Message

Some of the most important conversations I have had in my life have taken place around a dinner table.

From a young age, I can remember the dinner table as the place where we as a family would share about what was happening in our lives. I can recall how we would talk about sports and school. We would discuss the latest happenings in our community or at the church. We would learn how our parents’ work was going.

It was at the dinner table that we made decisions. For example, I would decide where I would go to college and what I would do in the future. It was at the dinner table that my sister would choose Kansas State to play volleyball. It was at the dinner table that we would pray and talk.

I can also remember the dinner table as a place where I struggled with algebra and where we would discuss issues – sometimes difficult issues.

I believe dinner tables are places where most of life’s important conversations take place. It is one of the few places left in our society where people can talk and listen – at least I hope that is the case. For how we share at our tables says a great deal about the kind of people we are.

I have often wondered, though, if many of the problems we are facing today is a result of, or and symptom of, the loss of family time at the table. I have no

proof of this, of course. And I am not trying to be a romantic. That's not the case. I am not sure how we would measure such a thing. Rather, I am simply wondering if we have lost something with all our busy schedules and constant movement.

What happens when we lose our connections as families around a table?

I can only speak for myself here, of course. The days of gathering with our children around the table are less frequent now. Our children have scattered around the country. Though I can remember the days when we took our children to and from activities, and when we were challenged to find time to eat together. It was important to gather around the table and eat at least one meal as a family.

And yet, if I am understanding what has taken place since March, during the outbreak of COVID-19, we have seen a shift with how families have had to contend more with family time, with being together! We have had no choice! Though we also know that many persons have had to contend with this virus outbreak alone and isolated.

It's a paradox, isn't it? More time at home, but less face-to-face contact with others, unless we Zoom or hangout on Google!

God @ Home Series

It is why our sermon series on *God @ Home* is meant to look at how we are dealing with this whole new set of circumstances. As Pastor Jenothy shared last week, many folks have made their homes into offices and playgrounds and gyms and studios – all in an attempt to adapt.

At the same time, we are also very much aware of how many home-life circumstances are not good. For example, since March, we have seen the number of domestic violence cases rise. We also know that the number of persons dealing with addictions has gone up. Home is not always a place where people receive support and encouragement. Home is not always welcoming.

This should not surprise. If we read the Scriptures carefully, for example, we read how home is not always a place of blessing, but also of challenge. I am thinking of the home of Mary and Martha, two followers of Jesus. In this particular home, Martha was so busy doing the household work that she could not listen to what Jesus was saying (Lk 10:38-42). She needed to stop and listen.

I am also thinking of the home where one son returns after spending his inheritance and the other son complains about the father's forgiveness. It was a conflicted household from beginning to end, fraught with challenges (Lk 15:11-32). Home can be complicated – even when Jesus comes over, as Zacchaeus discovered when Jesus ate dinner with him (Lk 19:1-10)!

Early Church

It's an important point, because in our passage today from the Acts of the Apostles, we learn about the importance of family living in the early church (Acts 6:1-7).¹ Luke, the author of Acts, wants to tell us about the way the apostles dealt with problems at the table and the way they sought to resolve those problems so as to continue Christ's mission (Acts 6:1-7).

What is interesting, though, about this passage is that it comes just a few chapters after Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured out on the disciples (Acts 2:1-10) and when the apostles shared “all things in common” (Acts 2:42-45).

Here, in Chapter 6, the apostles find themselves in a position with more and more people coming to faith in Christ and joining the church (Acts 6:1). The church is growing, and family living is changing.

But with this growth came new problems, with many people coming to faith from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. They spoke different languages; they had different outlooks on life (Acts 6:1-3).

This is the background of this text: a problem occurs when widows of Greek-speaking Christians are not receiving what the Hebrew-speaking Christians are receiving when food was being distributed (Acts 6:1-4). It was as if some were not being allowed at the family dinner table.

Now remember that since the Day of Pentecost the church had been sharing “all things in common,”; they had been working on sharing their resources with everyone as anyone had need (Acts 2:45). Remember, too, that the early church had adopted many of the practices from the synagogue, assisting widows and caring for the needs of the most vulnerable, for instance, just as the Law had commanded and as Jesus had done in his ministry (Deut 14:28-29; Lk 14:12-14).

¹ N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone – Part One* (Louisville, KY: John Knox/Westminster Press, 2005), 111.

But what we see in this passage is how the apostles find a creative way of addressing the problem. To be sure, we don't know how the problem arose. It may have been the result of racial prejudice. Or it may have happened as a result of greed on the part of one of the groups. Maybe the food was running out. Or maybe the apostles had just neglected the process of distribution. Maybe they just were failing to keep up with all the growth that was taking place. Or maybe it was good intentions run amuck.²

Whatever it was, it would not be the last time the church would have to deal with tensions between Jews and Greeks, between “haves and have-nots.”³

Balance in Ministry

It would also not be the last time the church would have to deal with issues of balance, or between the preaching of the word on the hand and serving the needs of others on the other. That's really one of the main issues here: how will the church continue to preach and share the gospel, but also take care of the needs of others?

Think about it! So many times, at least as far as I can recall, churches can set up a false choice between preaching and sharing the gospel, which they see as spiritual, and serving the material needs of others, which they see as social, between soul-work and mission-work, if you will. And it's a false choice.

I suppose that's one of the reasons I find Methodism attractive: at its best it tries to balance the two – between Word and sacrament, between the personal and the social, between the inward and the outward; between the head and the heart; between the caring for the soul and caring for the body. Methodism seeks to address the whole person, to strike a balance.⁴

What we see in Acts is how the apostles tried to find that balance; and to find that balance, they raised up new leaders to address the concerns of the widows while they continued preaching (Acts 6:2). Both were needed.

It was not as if they were trying to pass the buck and not deal with the problem. It was how they were addressing the problem as part of the mission.

² James E. Harnish, “What a Serve!” based on Acts 6:1-7 at www.esermons.com.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Paul Chilcote, *Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001).

But note something: they realized that they had a problem, and then they were able to make amends and decisions to correct the problem, even to the point of increasing the number of family members! In fact, Luke tells us that even priests were becoming obedient to the gospel (Acts 6:7).

It wasn't either-or; it was both-and.

Closing Marks

I can't help but think of the lessons here for us. In fact, I mentioned a moment ago how Methodism at its best is a balance between the social and the personal. It has the explosive capacity to address the problem of sin and the hope of salvation on many different levels.

But I also know Methodism at its worst, as when it has not served the widows and orphans and the most vulnerable, and when it has not come to the assistance of persons of color, for example, or when it did not even recognize the problem. It is not always good history. Indeed, it is a complicated history.

But it's a history I know, and it's a history I have often shared around our family table, where we seek to make room, and where we try to understand.

To be sure, it's not a perfect table. What family table is? What family doesn't have problems? Family systems are complicated systems.

But if I understand the work Pastor Jenothy has done on the role of shame, I realize how important the table is to address the problems we face and do so in ways that recognize the value of all God's people, regardless of status.

For as Christians the table we gather around is ultimately a table of abundance, not scarcity. It is a table where we seek to share, not neglect – a table where, when God abides, people receive and are fed – a place where we welcome and, in doing so, proclaim the gospel! Amen.