

## **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. 2 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 on tables.[a] 3 Therefore, brothers and sisters, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, 4 while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” 5 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. 6 They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

7 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.

8 Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. 9 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. 10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit[b] with which he spoke. 11 Then they secretly instigated some men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” 12 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. 13 They set up false witnesses who said, “This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law, 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth[c] will destroy this place and will

change the customs that Moses handed on to us.” 15 And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

### **Charge to Deacons:**

It’s only August, but it’s been a whirlwind quarter for the disciples. Easter wasn’t even four months ago, and its transformative events alone are hard enough to process. But then there’s an Ascension, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. And the disciples, once followers, who traveled in a group of no more than a few dozen, are now apostles, leaders of a few hundred people, maybe even a few thousand. The Jesus movement is a full-blown movement. Personal change, internal change, organizational change are imminent.

But change doesn’t stop there. Our text describes the Acts Community that lived as a faith cohort sometime in the late 30s or early 40s of the First Century. Our text is written by an author living among a faith community sometime around the beginning of the Second Century, or roughly 50-70 years after these events. But either way, there was external volatility. In the 40s, the Roman Empire began a decades-long triple feature of the following emperors: Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. Debauchery, scheming, and insanity are not a recipe for stability. At century’s end, it’s not much better. Domitian was an emperor whose vanity was unrivaled: “Please call me *Dominus et Deus*,” he’d say. Master and God. Oof.

My point is that during the First Century, Rome had evolved from a republic to a full-blown empire/monarchy, and this century represents the height of its power, greed, cruelty, and utter dominance upon the world. It’s hard to imagine an era where the government could be more

inserted into every aspect of life. And it's also an era that coincides with deep persecution of not only Jewish people, but the earliest Jesus followers as well.

To recap: four short months after the greatest revelation in their lives, the disciples are reckoning with a faith community that extends beyond the household level, and a world where Hellenistic culture envelops their surroundings. And they wonder: How will we maintain the sense of intimacy we experienced in those first days traveling with Jesus? How can we stay true to a faith culture that seems to be constantly assaulted by a secular culture? How is the Holy Spirit gonna move in us, and in all future disciples, in such a way as for us to be Jesus in a changed world?

And here's what they realize, or rather, what their congregation discerns for them. The Apostles cannot do everything. They are so burdened in trying to accomplish both their ecclesial and administrative duties, that they are failing to honor each.

But here's where I want to be careful. The apostles say they don't want the waiting on tables – that is the feeding, caring, serving on the gathered – to inhibit the sharing of the word, and the distribution of prayers. They seem to be thrilled at becoming specialists. And in too many traditions their role is presented as being hierarchical rather than lateral or collaborative.

Let me say that while some persons are set apart for pastoral ministry or the word-focused work...none, none, none, no matter how eloquent, are ever set apart from people. Because the prophetic is always partnered to the pastoral, and both live among the people.

And what our text tells us, in the example of Stephen, is that those who live with the pastoral spirit – that is the caring for and the serving of others – they embody the work of God. Stephen, not separate from, but among the apostles, and indeed the entire community, heals, is full of grace and power, and performs many signs and wonders.

This is an amazing story. The wisdom of the congregation not only discerns a response to the winds of change, but becomes co-creator in the gospel experiment. And even more impressive, despite Rome's grip, despite the volatility of the world, despite the murkiness of the future, this movement creates a space of lasting mutual care. Rome, the greatest empire ever conceived survives roughly 700 years. The Acts Community approaches a longevity three times that amount.

And while this is a story that happened a long, long time ago, it's one that could have happened yesterday, and perhaps, one we can still make possible today.

You see, there is today, a great grift upon nearly everything that has grounded us. Those institutions which have been bedrocks of integrity, truth, and virtue have been changed – the levers of power have been manipulated to sully the air we breathe, the content we consume, the policies we implement, the pedagogies we teach, and in some corners, even the God whom we choose to worship. Our driveways, our classrooms, our dinner tables, our bodies, our safest spaces have not been immune to a partisanship and politicization that sucks the marrow from life.

And that alone would be enough to make our heads spin. But the grift doesn't exist in a vacuum, because it's accompanied by new post-pandemic realities, and a post post-modern world, perhaps we might

define it as an uber modern world, where new attitudes about work, and faith, and family, and neighboring are rapidly deconstructing the ways humanity perceives itself. Oh yeah, and there's the onset of artificial intelligence, and expedited climate change. Maybe the most concise explanation of this phenomenon is this: Kodak, the maker of film and cameras that have been woven into the fabric of every household in the last century and a half is contemplating closing its business. And honestly, such news isn't the least bit surprising. New things are seizing relevance.

We are processing seismic change, Millbrook Baptist Church, a change every bit as overwhelming and daunting as the first Jesus-followers.

And yet, I have hope, because here we are, y'all. Here. Gathered. Again. One of the last places I get to be a part in this world that is still tethered to something greater than the feckless antics of power-grabbers, and the endless ramblings of spin cycles seeking one more dollar, one more rating point. This place. This experiment. This Millbrook is real, y'all. Real because we have never, not once, asserted that a person's desire to dissent is a strike against their personhood. We value, always, a chorus of varied voices and ideas gathered in the sacred presence of God's goodness.

We call ourselves open, seek to live out an openness. Not open as in we all adhere to some doctrine or specific way of thinking that is infinitely more righteous or correct than the church down the street. But open, because we, all of us, remain willing to listen for the movement of the Spirit, however They appear; willing to believe in the ability of each community member to add to the divine expression; willing to believe in the unlimited possibilities of God's love, however they are revealed.

I believe our experiment in faith is needed, has value. I believe, wholeheartedly, Raleigh, NC can't be Raleigh, NC without Millbrook Baptist Church. And I believe the fullness of my life, your lives, our lives, is integrally-tied to the existence of this community.

Just like the Acts Community, we are living through unparalleled change. And just like them, we find our resources stretched, our structure challenged as we seek to be fed by the Word, to share in the fullness of life with one another, and to help bring about the kingdom Christ bid come. And just like the Acts Community, we have leaders, deacons, with gifts, and voices, and love to help us discern our needs, and better still, allocate our spiritual resources to achieve our desired end.

And that is your calling, good friends. To know Millbrook. To observe her needs. And to give your honest assessment of how her needs can be met. All, while being the You God created you to be.

I love how well each of you know us. Chandler and Grace have grown up here. Reggie and Kim have raised their children here, Jackson is raising his here now. Audrey has been an active member for more than 15 years. I have heard each of you speak about the importance of cultivating a community where people feel cared for and have an opportunity to explore their faith.

And you haven't been shy in sharing about the value Millbrook has for you. Audrey, I love how you've told me about the way your Sunday School class has cared for you, been a system of support. And I've seen you reciprocate this care through Dorcas, through Oak City Outreach, ushering, to name a few. But you've also been quick to tell me about

the components of worship that have resonated with you. You have been eager to share in Millbrook.

Grace, I love seeing you in action. You've added an energy to the preschool, but also online. It's pretty cool to have a regular worship attendee from Waco, and the Netherlands, and next week, Boston. Thank you for imagining not just new ways do/be Millbrook in 2025, but also new ways to lead us.

Kim, we need people who will speak their mind about what it means to be Millbrook. You do that so well. With such energy, with such joy. I also want to thank you, because in the last year, you've volunteered to do several behind-the-scenes activities that have made an enormous difference, and freed Jessica and myself up to lead several events. Please, keep doing your thing!

Jackson, thank you for filling all the awkward silences that have resulted from my pulpit humor. Your laugh is a great care to me. But thanks also for your wisdom. You speak and write with the voice of someone who is paying attention to the world around them. I hope you'll keep speaking and writing to us and for us.

Chandler, you are part of four generations of Hatchells and Parks that have shared their lives with us. I love how you, like your whole family, bring your home into this home. We welcome your presence, your hospitality, and your servant spirit into this body.

Reggie, you've done just about everything at Millbrook, even playing the whole of our handbell set by yourself if memory serves correctly. Thanks for your openness to this new season, and for your willingness

**Charge to Deacons**  
**Pentecost Ten, 8/17/2024**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Acts 6:1-15**



to think about what it means to be reinvented as deacon, and as Millbrook.

Deacons, you know us, and you love us. And we know you, and we love you. We know your giftedness. We know your capacity for imagination and compassion. And we know there's no limit to what God's people can do together.

We offer our thanks and gratitude in advance for all the remarkable ways you will serve this place. And for all the sacred change we will experience.

Amen.