

# 2018 Spring Bible Study – Act Justly

## Week 7 - Racial Justice

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### **Introduction**

Seeking justice for people from all racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds has been a part of the life of the church from the very beginning. Read this story from Acts 6 and think about the implications for today.

### **Reading the Word - Acts 6:1-6**

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

There was a problem in this early church community, and it had to do with race. The widows, who in any ethnic group would have been dependent on others to care for them (because women at that time had very limited opportunities to create wealth), were not experiencing equal treatment across racial lines. The widows who were being taken care of were Hebrew, and those not being taken care of were Greek. The leaders of the church appointed 7 others to do a job: ensure justice.

The men who were appointed to this task had an ethnicity, too: their names tell us they were Greek. The same ethnic group which was being treated as less-than-human was the group empowered to right that wrong. And now the Hebrew widows, who had perhaps gotten used to the privilege of being treated better than their Greek sisters, were now being helped exclusively by those who were Greek. The presenting problem of hunger among the widows was addressed, but the power differences that were the foundation for the problem itself were also turned upside-down.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Contemporary Example**

The painful history of the US includes this: since its beginning, those in positions of power to make laws, to invest wealth, to create systems like education and transportation and health care, have relied on racial differences as a way to differentiate between those who can and cannot flourish.

When settlers first arrived on the continent, they exploited and exterminated the people who were native to the land. Later, people in Africa were treated as commodities to be stolen, bought, and sold so that powerful individuals could create and amass vast wealth. The first law that gave shape to U.S. immigration policy was to prohibit legal immigration to Chinese people.<sup>2</sup> After the Great Depression, people who “looked Mexican” were sent to Mexico regardless of whether or not they’d been born in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> The results of this worldview carries on today. We know that black students are suspended

<sup>1</sup> See *The Heart of Racial Justice* by Brenda Salter McNeil

<sup>2</sup> <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/exclusion.html>

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican\\_Repatriation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican_Repatriation)

and expelled at three times the rate of white students.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. incarcerates more black men today than there were enslaved people at the height of slavery's practice.<sup>5</sup> The median wealth of white households is 20 times that of black households, and 18 times that of Latino households.<sup>6</sup>

Racial difference has long been a powerful tool to build wealth and power for white people, and it has perpetuated a deep and harmful lie which is counter to the gospel: that some people bear the image of God more completely than do others. Those who follow Jesus are also called to see, name, and work to change the ways that dehumanization of people of color has made its way into our individual attitudes and thoughts, and made its way into our church communities and our friend groups. That is what the early church did.

### Responding to the Word and our Context

- 1) The "Greek widows" were the ones who were new, different, "other" to the faith community which had adapted to include more than just the Hebrews. When you think about your community -- your church, your friend group, Calvin as a whole -- who do you think feels like they are new, different, or "other"? Who do you think you classify as new, different, or "other"?
- 2) Are there people who are being neglected in your community while others are privileged? Where do you see that?
- 3) What can we do?
  - a) *Learn more:* Whose ideas or perspectives could enrich your life? Think of the authors of the last 10 books you read or who you follow on social media. How much racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity is represented? How can you be intentional about learning from the voices that are missing from that list? (*The Very Good Gospel* by Lisa Sharon Harper, or *I'm Still Here* by Austin Channing Brown are great places to start if you're looking for more.)
  - b) *Invest in Relationships:* How can you pursue knowing (and being known) by those who you believe are "other" from you?
  - c) *Become an Advocate:* How are you using the power that you have in order to effect change in the inequities that are experienced because of race? Subscribing to OSJ Action Alerts from the Office of Social Justice of the Christian Reformed Church in North America ([justice.crcna.org/connect](http://justice.crcna.org/connect)) is one way to begin the practice of advocacy as part of the expression of one's faith.

### A Closing Prayer (A prayerful reading of this passage from Revelation 7:9)

"After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands."

God, we long to experience this multitude -- the diverse community that is our future -- in this present day. Convict us of the barriers that exist to this kingdom vision, and the ways that we perpetuate them. Lead us to truly repent, Lord, because we understand better and are thus able to live in new ways. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> 2017 Brown Center Report on American Education: Race and school suspensions by [Tom Loveless](#) Wednesday, March 22, 2017

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/12/michelle-alexander-more-black-men-in-prison-slaves-1850\\_n\\_1007368.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/12/michelle-alexander-more-black-men-in-prison-slaves-1850_n_1007368.html)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/09/28/black-and-hispanic-families-are-making-more-money-but-they-still-lag-far-behind-whites/?utm\\_term=.b2f6932a4080](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/09/28/black-and-hispanic-families-are-making-more-money-but-they-still-lag-far-behind-whites/?utm_term=.b2f6932a4080)