

It's Both/And
Acts 6:1-7
June 7, 2020
Farmville Baptist

Over the next several weeks, we'll be in the book of Acts, looking at some of the challenges the early church faced, then we'll parallel those with challenges the universal church faces today, and look for principles and innovations that might be helpful here as we prepare for the next chapter of ministry. All three groups — the early church, the universal church, and Farmville Baptist are in a time of significant transition these days — so let's see what we can learn together. As we begin, I want to be very clear -- the innovative examples of churches that I will share with you throughout this series are meant to be descriptive, not prescriptive. We have no idea, yet, what God has in store for Farmville Baptist, that is work we will do under the guidance of the Spirit. So please hear these stories as ways to get us thinking, not recommendation for this particular congregation.

Before we dig into today's text, and see how it might be relevant for us, we need to set the stage. Chapter 6 begins, "In those days..." So our first question should be "What days?" The early days of the church were a whirlwind. Two weeks ago we read the Pentecost story when the spirit fell on the disciples and the church was born. But despite the empowering presence of the Spirit, it was not all smooth sailing for the fledgling church.

The disciples were preaching and teaching, they were able to heal the sick and even raise the dead, and the church was growing rapidly. However, the leaders of the church were threatened and on more than one occasion, the disciples were subject to imprisonment and beatings. At the same time, some in the Jerusalem church decided that they wanted to live in community and share their goods together. This was all well and good until Ananias and Saphira

deceived the community and each fell down dead when confronted with their deceitfulness. I don't imagine that folks were lining up to join the church at the end of those services, do you? Great growth, persecution, dissent and disagreement among the membersí . . . in those daysí . . . today's story occurs.

Today's story is yet another challenge for the early church. It appears that the church in Jerusalem was diverse ó and one group, the Hellenists or Greek Christians, complained to the church leaders that their widows were being neglected when the food was distributed. This is a particular problem when you share all things in common and trust those you live in community with to be fair and equitable. In Acts 4 we find the community's rule of law, and it appears that everyone was committed to sharing and caring for one another in principle, but not in practice. Unfortunately, as in any growing organization, it is the most vulnerable ó the widows, the orphans, the resident aliens, the poor and the powerless ó that get left behind. This is problematic in any group, but it is particularly problematic for the church. If we read the OT prophets, we are reminded that the way Israel treats the poor and powerless is an indication of their relationship to God ó and when they have not treated others well and later repented, the result was often a renewed covenant with God.

In today's passage, Luke is concerned because the infrastructure that worked in the beginning is no longer sufficient to meet the needs of everyone in the community. Prior to this point, conflicts seemed to result in removing offenders from the community. But now, for the first time, we see the introduction of a process to resolve congregational conflict.

The first thing the twelve disciples did when they learned about the issue was to call together the whole community of the disciples. Some scholars believe that this was not the entire church, but the most mature among them. The twelve acknowledged that there was a

problem ó the bottom line for the church leaders was that the community had grown to the point that they couldn't do the administrative work of food distribution, and preach and teach effectively. They admitted that they needed help and they asked for it. They laid out three qualities they were looking for in this new category of servant leader: they had to be of good standing in the community ó their character and reputation mattered, they had to be wise ó mature if you will, and full of the Spirit. Choose seven men who meet these qualifications, they said, and we'll commission or ordain them to meet the needs of the widows. Instead of creating an either/or situation for the existing leadership ó preaching and teaching or doing food distribution; sharing the load creates a both/and solution for everyone.

This decision is critical not only because the church acknowledges a problem and adapts their structure to meet the need. It is also important because this is the first time in the early church that we see the original twelve sharing their authority with the next generation of leadership.

Like the early church, North Grafton UMC in MA found itself needing to change their structure about eight years ago. Unlike the early church ó they were declining not growing, and they found themselves down to just 5 members. After much prayer and conversation, they decided to sell their building, and they had no idea what would happen when they did. The wind of the Spirit blew, and a year later they reopened as a church plant called Simple Church. Simple Church is what is known as a Dinner Church. On their website they say, we don't have a steeple, we don't have pews. We have a table and we'll set a place for you.

At Simple Church, 30-40 people gather every Thursday for dinner. Members bring potluck contributions and they receive in-kind gifts of meat and vegetables from a local farm where the pastor volunteers each week. This Thursday evening meal is similar to what early

Christians likely shared in 1st century house churches. The upside? Members often find it easier to invite friends to a weekly dinner party than to a traditional worship service.

The group gathers in the fellowship hall of a local Congregational Church. On a recent evening, the pastor was stringing up garden lights while others lit candles on tables set for 8. The evening begins with everyone standing in a circle and passing the Lord's Supper bread to one another (a timeless tradition restructured and honored in a new way). The evening ends 90 minutes later with everyone clinking their glasses before drinking together the juice of the cup. In between, prayers, and simple music join with guided conversation that becomes the sermon. The model is working so well that this Simple Church planted a sister congregation in central MA and they have Simple church in a local park each week for the homeless.

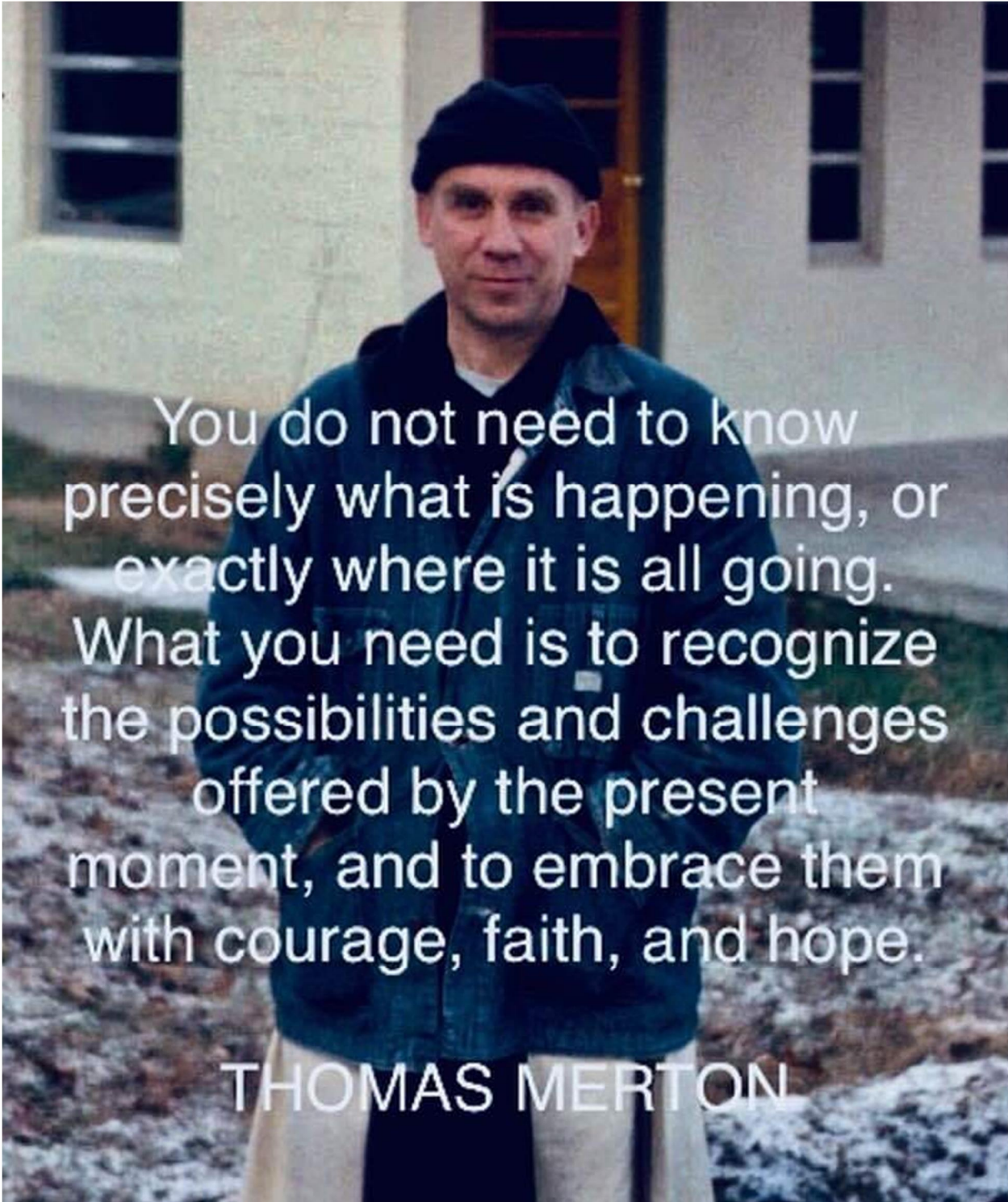
Simple Church does something else that may seem innovative to our congregations; they bake and sell bread, build church websites, perform carpentry and cater corporate events to help pay their bills. Just like Paul made tents, and monks, for centuries, have made everything from jam to furniture, the church leaders engage in market place ministry to generate proceeds for their ministries. The best part is that they partner with Grafton Job Corps, a vocational training program for youth ages 16-24 to bake in a kitchen they rent from the Congregational Church. They sell their crusty loaves, that cost about \$1 each to make, for \$7 to subscribers at local farmers markets. "It buys us credibility," says LyAnna Johnson, Simple Church's church planning apprentice. "At farmer's markets, people can't believe that pastors are out there in the heat selling bread that they baked themselves. People are so distrustful of institutions that it really helps." It's a both/and structure where they fund their own ministry and meet people out in the community.

Although our nation is not a church, I would be remiss this morning if we did not pay attention to the parallels between what was happening in Jerusalem to what has been happening

this week. All across the country, groups have been crying out for justice and full participation for those who are vulnerable and have been left behind. Now, more than ever, we must all work together to challenge and change the structures in our society that have never allowed the needs of all to be fully met.

Let's be honest, change is rarely easy or comfortable. But when done under the guidance of the Spirit, and with the right motivation, it will change things for the better. In Acts, the early church continued to grow after they changed their structure. The Simple Church model has been adopted by a number of other churches across the country. Like Farmville Baptist, churches everywhere have changed and adapted their infrastructure and continued to worship and study virtually during COVID-19. Most say they are reaching new people and people they have not seen in their buildings for years.

In this season of Pentecost and this time of transition in the life our church and country, I pray that we will continue to be willing to adapt as the Spirit moves so that we may grow and expand our outreach in Farmville and beyond. Come Holy Spirit Come.



You do not need to know
precisely what is happening, or
exactly where it is all going.
What you need is to recognize
the possibilities and challenges
offered by the present
moment, and to embrace them
with courage, faith, and hope.

THOMAS MERTON