

6 About that time, while the number of disciples continued to increase, a complaint arose. Greek-speaking disciples accused the Aramaic-speaking disciples because their widows were being overlooked in the daily food service. 2 The Twelve called a meeting of all the disciples and said, "It isn't right for us to set aside proclamation of God's word in order to serve tables. 3 Brothers and sisters, carefully choose seven well-respected men from among you. They must be well-respected and endowed by the Spirit with exceptional wisdom. We will put them in charge of this concern. 4 As for us, we will devote ourselves to prayer and the service of proclaiming the word." 5 This proposal pleased the entire community. They selected Stephen, a man endowed by the Holy Spirit with exceptional faith, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 The community presented these seven to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. 7 God's word continued to grow. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased significantly. Even a large group of priests embraced the faith.

8 Stephen, who stood out among the believers for the way God's grace was at work in his life and for his exceptional endowment with divine power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Opposition arose from some who belonged to the so-called Synagogue of Former Slaves. Members from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia entered into debate with Stephen. 10 However, they couldn't resist the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. 11 Then they secretly enticed some people to claim, "We heard him insult Moses and God." 12 They stirred up the people, the elders, and the legal experts. They caught Stephen, dragged him away, and brought him before the Jerusalem Council. 13 Before the council, they presented false witnesses who testified, "This man never stops speaking against this holy place and the Law. 14 In fact, we heard him say that this man Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and alter the customary practices Moses gave us." 15 Everyone seated in the council stared at Stephen, and they saw that his face was radiant, just like an angel's.

7 The high priest asked, "Are these accusations true?"

2 Stephen responded, "Brothers and fathers, listen to me.

44 "The tent of testimony was with our ancestors in the wilderness. Moses built it just as he had been instructed by the one who spoke to him and according to the pattern he had seen. 45 In time, when they had received the tent, our ancestors carried it with them when, under Joshua's leadership, they took possession of the land from the nations whom God expelled. This tent remained in the land until the time of David. 46 God approved of David, who asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who actually built a house for God. 48 However, the Most High doesn't live in houses built by human hands. As the prophet says, 49 Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. 'What kind of house will you build for me,' says the Lord, 'or where is my resting place? 50 Didn't I make all these things with my own hand?' 51 "You stubborn people! In your thoughts and hearing, you are like those who have had no part in God's covenant! You continuously set yourself against the Holy Spirit, just like your ancestors did. 52 Was there a single prophet your ancestors didn't harass? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the

righteous one, and you've betrayed and murdered him! 53 You received the Law given by angels, but you haven't kept it."

54 Once the council members heard these words, they were enraged and began to grind their teeth at Stephen. 55 But Stephen, enabled by the Holy Spirit, stared into heaven and saw God's majesty and Jesus standing at God's right side. 56 He exclaimed, "Look! I can see heaven on display and the Human One standing at God's right side!" 57 At this, they shrieked and covered their ears. Together, they charged at him, 58 threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses placed their coats in the care of a young man named Saul. 59 As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, accept my life!" 60 Falling to his knees, he shouted, "Lord, don't hold this sin against them!" Then he died. **-Common English Bible**

Heidi Neumark wrote a beautiful memoir about her ministry, perhaps it was her first call, at a Lutheran church in the South Bronx at a time when poverty and suffering was at its height there. Early in her book, "Breathing Space," she talks about the weariness and fear of the community when she arrived. She likened this aging, Puerto Rican congregation, to Sarah and Abraham, who had long since given up hope of ever birthing new life. But she also likened them to Sarah and Abraham because when three strangers showed up to visit Sarah and Abraham they showered them with hospitality and generosity. This was the nature of the welcome she, a young, anglo pastor received from this elderly congregation. They adored her. They wanted to build an iron fence around the church to protect her; she politely declined. She formed relationships with kids in the neighborhood and invited them into an art class. The kids painted and repainted the doors of the church broadcasting a message of life and energy to the neighborhood. The kids eventually brought their parents, and other friends. The congregation was changing, growing more diverse culturally and generationally. And this was exciting. Exciting like early pregnancy. And just as nauseating.

Neumark shares that Puerto Ricans call "morning sickness" "malabarriga," which literally translates into "evil belly." Neumark experienced her first pregnancy in the early years of her call to this church and frequently had to run from the altar to the church kitchen, in the midst of worship, so strong were the hormones coursing through her. Her congregation loved her through this, bringing her herbal teas, and sharing wisdom from their own experiences. As she looks back on those years she

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realizes the congregation was experiencing “malabarriga” of their own as the congregation grew and changed, as new life grew within them. She writes, “The typical signs were there: discomfort, upset, and fatigue. There were complaints about the noisiness of the children, the irreverence of the teenagers, the instability of the adults. If only I had had the wisdom then to know that these were indicators not of something gone wrong, but of something going right. There was new life in the body of Christ and the body needed time to adjust.”

Neumark's vivid metaphors came back to me as I sat with the representation of the early church that we see in Acts 6 and 7. At other moments in Acts we're given these idyllic pictures of a rapidly growing community that is sharing everything in common and no one among them is in need. But a theme all throughout Acts is that of growth emerging from conflict. Or perhaps it should be stated more cyclically, conflict emerging from growth and growth emerging from conflict. Today's reading is a perfect illustration of this. After the day of Pentecost thousands had been added to the fold and the community of Christ's disciples was not culturally homogenous. There were Aramaic speaking disciples and Greek speaking disciples. I believe all the Apostles were Aramaic speakers; Aramaic was the version of Hebrew spoken by Jews in Jerusalem and surrounding areas in the 1st century. However, Greek was the common language of business and government in the Mediterranean world at this time. Many 1st-century Jews were bilingual to some degree. But some Jews who had migrated to Jerusalem from distant lands would have been more fluent in Greek. It does seem that at this moment in the church's development, the community is a diverse fellowship of culturally variable Jews.

This is a foretaste of an even more radical diversification of the church that lay ahead, but it was enough diversity to bring on the malabarriga. Greek speaking disciples complained to the Apostles that their widows were being neglected in the daily food distribution. All Jews knew that it was their covenant duty to care for the most vulnerable in their community, named repeatedly in their scriptures as the widows and the orphans. The neglect of any widows, was a Jewish problem and a Christian problem; remember this community sought to meet all the needs within it. The neglect of widows, the neglect of the vulnerable, is a problem for people of

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faith. It's possible that the widows who were being overlooked were just not known by the leadership of the church at the time, this happens in times of rapid growth and cultural diversification; people can fall through the cracks.

But the people who did know spoke up. They brought their complaint directly to the Apostles and asked for a remedy. And the Apostles agreed it was a problem. But didn't think themselves the right candidates to remedy the problem. They asked the community to call forth seven well-respected men, well endowed with wisdom by the Spirit, who could attend to this concern. The community thought this a marvelous solution and they called forth seven men with Greek names to serve in this role. It's important for a community's leadership to represent the diversity within the community. The community intuited this and with their selections brought some balance to the early church leadership. Out of this moment of conflict, we're told, came more growth; even priests were being added to the fellowship.

Officially these seven men were charged with table service, making sure the hungry, all the hungry, are fed. But we see quickly that the Spirit leads them to take on ministry quite parallel to that of the Apostles. The Apostles say they can't fix this problem because they need to focus on proclaiming the Word, but the Deacons, as these seven men are typically called, do both. Or at least Stephen did. Stephen worked signs and wonders, too. If you read earlier chapters in Acts you'll find the exact same phrase used for the work of the Apostles. This is the thing with the Spirit. The Spirit cannot be controlled, confined, limited. Perhaps the Apostles thought they were laying on hands for one purpose only, but the Spirit of God opened up more possibilities than they likely ever imagined.

We only ever hear much about two of these seven Deacons, Stephen and Philip. And of course, what we read today is all we'll read of Stephen. But you get the impression that the power of God's Spirit was flowing through him in a remarkable way. And this was threatening to others. Perhaps folks were jealous of it. Perhaps it was irritating. No one could win a debate with him. Often when someone has a lot of success very quickly, others try to knock them down or slow them down. This happens a lot. The tactics of Stephen's opponents got quite unhealthy, underhanded, and Stephen ends up dragged before the council.

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Having so recently read through Luke's telling of Jesus' passion I'm sure that you were hearing resonances between the experience of Jesus and the experience of Stephen. In case you missed it we had excerpts from that passion today. False charges are made against him. In response to a question from the high priest, "Are these things so?" he preached a powerful sermon. He opened the Hebrew Scriptures for those who were gathered and demonstrated all the ways that God's Spirit had been at work throughout the history of the Israelite people working in unexpected ways time and again, revealing Godself as a savior in the most unlikely of ways again and again. Stephen also demonstrated how the people of God had rejected God's self-revelation again and again, making and worshipping idols, rejecting the God-given leaders sent to them, and then eventually seeking to confine God to the temple when God cannot be confined for that is what the history of the Israelite people suggests—that God is beyond limitation or confinement, but the people of God try to limit and confine God again and again. He ends his sermon with an accusation of the stubborn unfaithfulness of the leaders on the council. And we saw what came of this. Stephen, like Jesus, met a brutal end. But somehow Stephen remained at peace and, like Jesus, extended forgiveness even as he died.

So much can be said about this story, but I want to note that what happened to Stephen is another manifestation of the conflict that emerges in times of growth. It is quite predictable that when things are changing, particularly when powerful things are happening, a comparable force of resistance will emerge. In systems thinking this is called the change/change back force. And sometimes this resistance is underhanded, cruel, even violent. Sometimes this resistance bubbles up in us; we become agents of resistance. Sometimes it is directed at us. But it is definitely a normal phenomenon.

Neumark says she wishes she could have interpreted all the rumbling in her congregation as signs of the new life taking shape. But it just felt awful at the time. And it does. Often when conflict emerges in a community it feels awful. We can feel shame about unmet needs brought to our attention, anger about hostility unfairly directed at us, grief about things passing away, and really.... Evil belly. That uneasy, queasy feeling in the gut. Something is very wrong. Many of us fear that conflict will

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destroy us, undo us. But our scriptures suggest that growth can come from conflict. And I believe this is true. Particularly if we commit to managing our conflict in healthy ways: more like those who brought their complaint to the Apostles and were willing to call forth leaders to meet the needs they were naming; less like those who accused Stephen, who were trying to undermine faithful ministry.

But I think we can learn something from Stephen; he spoke hard truths, challenging truths; he bore consequences; he extended forgiveness. These are faithful ways for us to manage conflict, too. I do think that Stephen could have spoken more respectfully to his opponents. A few “I statements” might have saved his life. But he was human; he was under pressure. And on balance, there’s a lot we can learn from this first Christian martyr.

Did you catch the reference to Saul holding the cloaks of the people stoning Stephen? If we read one verse further we see Saul mentioned again, it says, “Saul was in full approval of his murder.” This is the Saul who became Paul. Paul who did more to extend the reach and diversity of the Christian fellowship than anyone else. Augustine, one of the great, early Christian teachers, suggests that Stephen may have been in Jerusalem for the Passover at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion and that he may have heard Jesus pray for the forgiveness of those who were crucifying him, a prayer which functioned to convert him and thousands of others on Pentecost. He then prayed the same prayer upon his death and it may have played a part in the conversion of Saul a while later. And we know that the conversion of Saul into Paul resulted in a ministry of vast outreach and an emphasis on grace. Though at a moment of persecution it may seem nothing good can come, if we can pray for those who persecute us, asking for God to forgive them, we will be amazed of what will come. But we need to always remember that we ourselves are forgiven sinners, and pray that others will receive this grace too.

Sources in addition to Scripture that influenced this sermon:
Heidi Neumark. *Breathing Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.
The knowledge of Augustine’s understanding of the role of prayers for forgiveness in later conversions was conveyed to me by J. Patout Burns, Augustine scholar, and one of my former professors and current mentors.