

There have been countless times in my years since graduating seminary where someone asks me something along these lines ... “So are deacons a new thing?” or maybe “I’ve never heard of a deacon before, what ... is that?”

Well – deacons have been around since Acts 6. Which is to say ... pretty much since the start of this whole Christianity thing. Now there were 5 chapters in the book of Acts that didn’t have any deacons – so not **EXACTLY** the whole time. But ... pretty close! To be fair, the universal church hasn’t always celebrated or encouraged the work of deacons – so I understand why it seems to be a new thing.

Our stories from the Acts of the Apostles connect deeply with the ministry of deacons in the early church. Last week, you heard of Deacon Philip and the inclusion of all. Today, we’re backing up a bit in the narrative to when Philip and the other deacons were first set apart in the ministry.

We hear specifically about Deacon Stephen – who has perhaps the sweetest-Bible-Superhero-tagline behind his name, “Full of Grace and Power”. As well as the other deacons selected by this early Christian community. As we really dig into these deacon stories, I am proud to be part of the movement of deacons, which we sometimes call the diaconate. It feels awesome to be connected with Deacon Stephen-full of grace and power. And Deacon Philip who has such an important

and fascinating story included in the book of Acts. And if I'm really honest, it's disappointing that we go from these amazing, life-changing and powerful stories of deacons in Acts – who were **so vital** to the early church ... to today. Where the leadership and importance of deacons is often misunderstood, not always celebrated, or where the serving in the diaconate is seen as something “in progress” to becoming a “real” minister.

Maybe you have similar thoughts about the early church. Like – people were so on-fire for the Jesus-movement that they were selling all their property and turning it over to the church. Folks were preaching and traveling, and crowds were experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit. There were so many baptisms, and healings, and miraculous things. It's so exciting to read these stories and just get **caught up** in the energy, the electricity of God's spirit moving and changing things. And with all this focus on these fabulous stories from the book of Acts – it may seem like the church today is ... missing something. Or not like **it was** back then. Or not as Spirit-filled and on-fire as it's supposed to be.

This week – by either sheer accident or the leading of the Holy Spirit – I stumbled upon an article by journalist and author, Helen Russell on “Declinism.” Had you asked me last Sunday what declinism was – I would have stared blankly at you.

[SLIDE]

But as I learned this week, “Declinism is the belief that a society or institution is getting worse. It's a predisposition to view the past more favourably and the

future more negatively. And it's nothing new."¹ Whether we're talking about the Minnesota Twins, or the economy, or the church. The attitude that things 'aren't like they used to be' or fondly recalling 'the good old days' is pervasive in our culture. And it's an easy slip to put on our rose-colored glasses to view the past. When I learned about this – I realized this is where I got stuck – thinking back to the good old days when deacons were the great heroes. Days I never actually have experienced, by the way. We all can get **trapped** in these kinds of ideas. We think things used to be so great and simply stop engaging in what is happening **NOW**. Declinism is a kind of cognitive bias. When we get wrapped up in declinism, our thinking and mental processes can essentially disconnect. We can stop perceiving information. We lose the ability to reason and may even create our own 'subjective realities'. ***Sigh* Ok that doesn't sound good.**

So please, dare with me ... to remove those rosy glasses on the past. Let's open ourselves up to what the scriptures **actually** have to say and make some important cognitive connections for today.

What Helen Russell generally calls Declinism, New Testament scholar Dr. Eric Barreto calls, "theological nostalgia ... if only we could do church the way it used to be done, we would be in a much better place"² But our story today, when read **without** our rosy-glasses doesn't really describe a perfect church community ... at all. For one, widows who spoke Greek weren't receiving food. It's not that the

¹ Hellen Russell, "Why declinism is the enemy of happiness" accessed on 6/20/23 at <https://mshelenrussell.substack.com/p/why-declinism-is-the-enemy-of-happiness>

² Eric Barreto, "Lectionary Commentaries for April 30, 2017: Stephen's Witness" workingpreacher.org. Accessed 6/19/24.

widows were simply left out or that there wasn't enough food for everyone. The Hebrew widows were receiving their food just fine. So, it seems that even here ... pretty much at the **very beginning** of the church – was division. Whether it was based on prejudice or fear or some sort of cultural hierarchy. There **was** division. And there were folks grumbling about issues in the church. AND, rightly so – that kind of preferential treatment of some is not fair or just – but grumbling is usually **NOT the sign** of a perfect community. Then another problem is - we have early church leaders who are “too busy to deal with the distribution of food to the widows.”³ The apostles seemingly couldn't be bothered with trying to fairly feed all the widows in their church – so they came up with a new organizational chart and a new job description in the church – to care for those on the margins.

The church we are encountering in the book of Acts is not a perfect community. It is not necessarily something that we should set as a model or even seek to emulate.

As Eric Barreto describes it, “In short, this is a church that is contentious, overwhelmed, and confronting great loss. Perhaps what we learn in Acts is **not to look for a blueprint** for an ideal church but instead to **develop an imagination** for what God does when God draws our lives together in communities characterized by unity and division, focus and uncertainty, joy and loss.”⁴

³ Barreto.

⁴ Barreto.

What I notice in Acts 6 – is that in the midst of an imperfect but vibrant young church – God acts. God sends people to serve the community. Folks to reach out and feed. To share their faith and to proclaim the word of God. These first deacons are sent to teach and preach, baptize and evangelize. They are filled with God’s Spirit – and **do the work that needs doing** in their community.

No one listening to this is part of a perfect church. I believe we are part of a vibrant congregation – but not a perfect one. We disagree. We have dear people on both sides of almost any issue you can imagine. We have ministries charging forward and ones sitting in discernment and uncertainty. We have folks here today who are barely holding back tears of grief – and those who are barely containing their joy. BUT we are here. Together. **God is at Work!** God has drawn us by the wild leading of the Spirit to be in community together. To share in life together. To be in Faith together.

When I look around this church – I see a congregation of folks called into service. Filled with the Spirit. I see you who show up so the person who sits next to you won’t be alone. I see those of you who fought toddlers or teenagers for longer than you’d care to admit to make it here today. I see you who do the behind-the-scenes organizing or volunteer because there is a need and you think you might be of help. I see a church **full of people** who serve their neighbor and their community. I see a people “full of grace and power” to share God’s love.

I'd like for you to look around. Look at the person on either side of you. The person in front and behind you. If you are listening or watching at home, consider someone who has impacted your faith. Look at this person – and recognize that they are “full of grace and power”.

We are an imperfect church. Filled with imperfect people. But also filled with people who God has called to be witnesses by sharing mercy and love.

You, dear ones, who struggle with belief.

You, who don't feel worthy.

You, dear ones, who feel broken. Or alone. Or a burden to others.

You, who think you haven't earned it.

You, who think I couldn't possibly be speaking of you ...

YOU are full of grace and power. God is at work in YOU.

God has called us into THIS community together to share in the work that needs doing. So that all might know the power of God's love and grace. God's spirit is poured out on us in mercy.

Isn't it **incredible** what God has done in this place? Isn't it **amazing** what God is doing here? **Imagine**. Imagine what God has next for us.

Amen.