

**Breaking Through By Listening**  
**Breaking Through Series Week 1**  
**Acts 6:1-7**  
**February 21, 2016**

Welcome/intro/vision

Before jump in: baptism on Easter—super excited to be offering this. Please do let me know if you or your kid is ready for baptism, going to be a great celebration Easter Sunday!

If you're a guest with us, this is the first week of a new series we're starting called Breaking Through

For the last 6 weeks we looked at how Jesus gave his first followers what looked like a mission-impossible assignment:

***“you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”***                      ***-Acts 1:8***

But in order for the message of Jesus Christ to MOVE  
from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth including to US  
here in Chatham County

It required that these people take all kinds of new risks  
and break through barriers that had separated people from God and from  
each other for centuries

And so for these next couple weeks, we're going to talk about Breaking Through

In every culture and in every country all throughout history, people have been  
divided by various barriers:  
whether it's race or class or men or women or location and where we live  
within that location

For 5,000 years of human history, there is not one culture, not one people who  
group  
that has not had tremendous barriers between people along some of these  
fault lines

And these barriers have caused untold misery and destruction and pain for people  
in every culture ever

This is, quite frankly, one of the single greatest, constant, intractable problems for all  
humanity for all time

Here in our country over the past 12 months, we've seen another huge wave of incidents along racial lines that remind us that as a country we've got a LONG way to go to real unity and healing along this massive fault line

And these events aren't inventing stuff. It's just surfacing the stuff that's always there

People all across the country are trying to solve this problem—and we've tried just about everything: we educate, we legislate, we debate about it

And while education and legislation and debate are all good and important things, none of it seems to work at this deep heart level where we all need change

And these fault lines continue to get embedded in our systems and structures as a society—even though we should all know better by now!

That's in part because I believe the issue is a spiritual problem and it requires at its core a spiritual solution with the power to match the depth of the problem .

What we see in Jesus is that he himself crashes through barriers on a regular basis  
AND THEN he gives his first followers this command that will PUSH THEM to break down some of those same barriers

Here at Chatham Community Church, we're taking all sorts of new risks in this next season as a church

because we believe that we're participating in this same mission and assignment

And in order for us to BE Chatham Community Church—a church for the whole community and not just a subset of it,

we're going to have to break through some of the same kinds of barriers that the early church had to their mission

So together, what we're going to do in these next couple weeks is see if we can break through right here in our little community, in our little part of the world

To see if we can solve a problem that millions of people before us have been unable to solve. No big deal, right? You up for that?

And today we're going see the very first step to being able to break down these barriers.

And it's a little complicated, it's a little sophisticated, but I think we can handle it

Mostly what the early church does is fumble and stumble their way across and through these barriers that they have to cross

But today, they're going to do something absolutely right that I think is pretty much mission-critical to breaking through.

If we don't learn this first lesson here from the apostles, then we're never going to have the true breaking-through experience that our world desperately needs

And that Jesus says is possible by the power of the cross and the empty tomb

If you're new today, let me get you up to speed—Acts is the story of the early church, what happened after Jesus's life, death, and resurrection

And early on the people receive this tremendous gift of the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit poured out on each of them

and the Spirit moves in powerful ways to establish this community of Jesus followers

a beautiful, tight-knit community of people who love and serve one another

This morning, we're going to look at the first place where the early Christian community faces INTERNAL problems

Acts 6:1, we'll start just with the problem:

***In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews [those are the Greek Jews, in other words they were Jews who weren't BORN in the country of Israel] among them complained against the Hebraic Jews [those are the Jews who were born in Israel] because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.***

Quick background about how this worked: the early Christians called themselves by family names: brothers and sisters, especially

And this wasn't just hypothetical—they lived it out

And so when they became Christians, the Christians so thought of themselves and understood themselves to be family

That they stepped in and filled the roles of family for these widows.

And what happens is the early church grows. And with growth comes challenges

And so far as we can tell, here's what happens in this situation:

1. **Everyone wants all the widows to get their food.** The Christian community to this point has been described as utterly committed to one another. As far as we can tell, there is zero malice or intentionality behind this problem

2. **But, as the community grows, it's harder and harder to keep track of who's getting food.** They're scattered all throughout Jerusalem, several thousand of them at this point.

And so what likely is happening is that food is getting distributed through relational networks.

The apostles, who are all Hebraic Jews, collect food contributions and then they pass it along to the people they know who pass it along to the people they know to get to the people who need it

But meanwhile, there are these OTHER networks of people, they are GREEK or HELLENISTIC Jews who aren't as connected to this network of people—so they are unintentionally getting left out

This new Christian community that has at its core this desire to care for ALL the widows in their midst

AND at the same time, all the people who are in authority and are distributing the food around are Hebraic Jews.

And so as the church grows, without any malice or intention, getting food became about who you knew.

Unintentionally, so far as we can tell. But unintentional doesn't mean it's not happening. And it doesn't mean it's not a problem.

And so the early church faces its first internal problem

And the Greek Jewish Christians have a couple of options at this point:

1. **They could say NOTHING**—you know what happens when you say nothing in the face of a genuine and painful slight or injustice against you, right? You stew on it and it does weird things to you!
2. They could **murmur and complain among themselves** but say nothing to the apostles or people who could actually do something about this.
3. They could **split off and start their own church** that made sure they were taken care of—the first church split could have happened right here!
4. They could **alert the people who were in charge to see if this issue could be resolved**

They could, in other words, complain.

Now let's talk about this word complain. The reality is this, a few of us really, really LIKE to complain

It's just something that we enjoy doing!

The REST of us, especially here in Chatham County, we don't want to be COMPLAINERS! That's like a swear word in Chatham County!

But I want to suggest to you that given this situation, and given their options, this was EXACTLY what needed to happen—every other option would have undermined the integrity of the church and the unity of the church

Remember, so far as we can tell, NOBODY wants this situation to be happening.

The early church thus far has proven themselves to be exemplary in caring for one another and in their tremendous hospitality

They all share this mutual goal of making sure that ALL the widows are taken care of

And so they do exactly what they need to do: they complain

And before we get to the response that they get from the apostles, I want us to have a moment together and do a little family business

Because this story here in Acts touches on something that we're experiencing here at Chatham Community Church as we, also grow

Here's our story: we've got a tremendous and growing small group ministry here at Chatham Community Church

And if you experience a crisis or pain or difficulty, and if you're in a small group, by and large you get what I would call outstanding care and response

My facebook newsfeed is regularly marked by people celebrating how GREAT their small group is in the midst of challenges or trials or hardships

And it brings me tremendous joy every time I see it—small group leaders, THANK YOU for how you facilitate this kind of community

So if you're in a small group, you get GREAT care. BUT if you're not involved in a small group regularly, your life could be totally falling apart and nobody know anything about it.

Or if one or two individual people DO know something about it

you don't get a larger community of people rallying together around you the way that folks in small groups do

This has happened to five or six people over the past 8 or so months. And it's a problem.

It's a problem because here's our goal: we want EVERYONE to experience the love of Christ at Chatham Community Church, especially in the midst of crisis, heartache, or difficulty

Hear me clearly—we all want the same thing:

we all want for people, whether you're in a small group or not, to experience the love of Christ and the care of our community

So if you're in a crisis, and you're not in a small group, I want to plead with you—you've GOT to tell us

First, you've got to tell us that something has happened. People often assume that I hear stuff or know stuff that I have no way of knowing unless someone tells me directly!

Here's how this works: I'm either the FIRST one to know something or I'm the LAST one to know something

If you've had a crisis and you haven't told me or told someone directly about it, then don't assume that we know about it already

One of the challenges of our context is that we gather here on Sunday mornings but then Monday through Friday we scatter in 10,000 different directions, right?

Most people commute OUT of Chatham County for work Monday through Friday and the average commute time is 26 minutes.

And that's not 26 minutes of stop-and-go traffic, is it? That's 26 mostly highway minutes as we go buckshot in every compass direction during the week

So if you're not in a small group, it's easy to not see ANYONE from the church from Sunday to Sunday.

So because YOU want care when things fall part and because we WANT to care for you when you're in a difficult situation, you've got to tell us when something's happening

AND, I hate to say this, but sometimes you've got to follow-up with us and tell us not just about the crisis but what you need in light of it.

Some people's great-aunt dies and it's not a huge deal because they weren't that close to their great-aunt. Someone else's great aunt dies and it's like losing their other mother because they were so incredibly close

Some people lose their jobs and they shrug it off, they're not that worried and they were going to quit anyway. Other people lose their jobs and it's like they lost an internal organ, it's so incredibly devastating.

If you're in a small group, week in and week out people can see how you're doing with difficult news and can care appropriately

If you're NOT in a small group, we might need you to follow-up and let us know—hey, not only did this hard thing happen to me but it's affecting me in ways that I wasn't prepared for

We all want for everyone in our church to receive great, genuine, authentic care.

I'm going to share some of the ways we're growing in our response to people and trying to shore this up for our community in a minute.

But given how spread out we all are during the week and given the reality that we're growing as a church

especially if you're not in a small group consistently, we're going to need you to tell us, just like these Greeks did, when you're in trouble and when you need help.

Now it's one thing to register a legitimate complaint, and it's another thing to have it be heard and recognized, let's see how the apostles respond to this issue:

***<sup>2</sup> So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.<sup>3</sup> Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup> and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."***

I had a roommate once after college who really enjoyed complaining—he would call the complaint phone number on the back of the box of Crest and find something to complain about

Just for the fun of it

He was charming to live with, let me tell you.

And part of what he gave as his rationale was he wanted to see if anyone would actually listen to his complaints and do anything about it!

The disciples receive a complaint in verse 1 and what happens between verse 1 and verse 2 is mission critical to breaking down barriers—let's look at their options:

**1. They could have gotten immediately defensive.**

Ever do this?

Someone comes with what is actually a legitimate gripe about something that you have some power or authority over and your knee-jerk reaction is to get defensive?

You make up excuses? You push people away? You talk about how hard you're working and how un-appreciated you are?

Maybe you blame them for being complainers and whiners?

You try to find some way to defend yourself and place whatever blame there is to go around squarely on someone else's shoulders

**2. They could have ignored it, hoped it all went away.** This always works, right?

But so far as we can tell, the 12 don't do EITHER of those do they? You know what we see them do when the Greeks come with their complaint?

Here is our big idea for this week

here is the radical, super-complicated and super-sophisticated first step to breaking through the barriers that have literally destroyed billions of lives and hundreds of cultures for all time

**3. THEY LISTEN.** They listen. They don't justify or deflect or blame. They don't rationalize or excuse. They don't dismiss them or their problem. They don't blow them off.

They listen. They listen. They listen. They listen.

Here is the completely un-complicated, completely un-revolutionary, completely old-school, not rocket-science

very first step to breaking through these massive, humongous barriers that have plagued humans for centuries

If we can't listen to people, we will never break through these barriers and we will never solve these problems.

This is NOT complicated. But man is it HARD. Right?

Listening! Not complicated.

Stop talking and attend to someone else's words and make sure that you understand them before you make any sort of response. NOT COMPLICATED AT ALL

But really listening, really hearing someone else out, that means we don't spend the time that they're talking coming up with our retort before they've even finished!

These past 8 months we've had a handful of people who weren't in small groups be frustrated with their level of care from the church.

A couple situations were squarely my fault because I knew about it but didn't act to mobilize a more broad-scale response to help meet some of those needs

And having those hard conversations has meant me being willing to LISTEN, listen, listen, and listen some more to make sure that I've heard them all the way out

Not defending or deflecting or whomping up my arguments against them before they're even done explaining what's happened and how they're hurt

Listening. This is the number one key to breaking down barriers that God has sent us to break down

If the apostles cannot or will not listen, then they will undoubtedly FAIL in the mission that Jesus has given to them to be his witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth

And if WE will not or cannot listen, then we, too, will undoubtedly fail in the mission Jesus has given us to serve ALL of Chatham County and to truly be Chatham COMMUNITY Church—a church for the whole community:

From northern Chatham, to Pittsboro, to Siler City, and to the ends of the county and to the ends of the earth

In college—a couple of friends for whom this issue was their passion. I didn't get it. My response was what I would call typical white guy response:

what's the big deal? Not that interested. I'm not racist. Why can't we all just be colorblind and move along

But over time and eventually I started actually listening: some key friends, Scriptures, and as I listened I started to see all the stuff I hadn't seen before, and realize that this was a crucial part of God's mission to restore all things

The apostles are willing to listen and they put together a plan to select 7 men to lead this ministry, here's what happens next:

***<sup>5</sup> This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.***

As I was working over the course of the fall with a couple of folks who were disappointed and hurt in our church's lack of response to pain they were experiencing

I started to ask them for ideas and invite them into finding some solutions for how we might do a better job caring for people who aren't in small groups.

Because we all have the same goal:

I want and THEY want for people to be well-cared for, especially in crisis, with the love of Christ that brings genuine healing and peace in the midst of difficulty.

And these folks were in a position to help me to think better about how we might help them and others like them

I shouldn't be the one crafting a solution, I'm in a small group! Been in small groups since I was 18 years old! 24 years of small groups changing my life forever!

We've prayed people through cancer and job transitions and marriage struggles, and it's been powerful and profound and wonderful

And we'd love for everyone to have that, but if you don't, then what kind of help do you need?

One person suggested an elder on call that people could call in case of emergency.

A simple addition, but it's a clear point person for people, especially folks not in a small group, to call to let the church know something has happened

And so in January we instituted an elder on call system  
it's in the bulletin every week, it's on our web site

If your life falls apart and you're not in a small group, we invite you to contact the elder on call

and we'll promise you three contacts to help us assess what your needs are and to pray for you and care for you for as long as is needed

One, you'll get contact and prayer with an elder.

Two, if you're serving on a ministry team here like set-up or hospitality or worship or small group leading you'll hear from your ministry leader to see how they can care for you

Three, you'll get a contact from our Congregational Care team to see if you need meals or rides or the lawn mowed or whatever during this time

Obviously, one or all of those initial conversations might lead to follow-ups and further care

And there are further conversations about creating other ways for us to connect that might help to fill the gaps and improve our connectivity so that people might not get overlooked

But all of these ideas are coming from FIRST listening to the genuine and honest hurts of the people in our community who felt over-looked

And THEN we're inviting them and empowering THEM to help us shape some structures to help us meet this goal we all have:

nobody wants anyone at Chatham Community Church to feel un-cared for in the midst of difficult situations and hardships

Here, in Acts 6, nobody wants ANY of the widows to go un-cared for. So they create a solution: these 7 people will make sure that they all get taken care of

But here's what you might not realize or notice if you're just reading this through: all 7 of these guys have GREEK names

Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas—these are all Greek guys! Opah!

They want to make sure that everyone gets fed  
so they empower the people who were previously overlooked to make the necessary changes so that their mutual goals get accomplished

When I talk about empowering the people NOT in small groups to help figure out how we need to care for other people not in small groups, that makes total sense to us, right?

Those are the people who can help us to solve this problem

BUT, when we start putting race in the mix and when the fault-lines are along the lines of ethnic make-up

You know what happens to so many of us, especially those of us who are in the majority culture? We get totally weird!

Sometimes we can feel this weird threatened, angsty, defensive, thing springing up in us almost without even trying

Our brain gets flooded with emotions and adrenaline and all this noise gets turned on inside of us

And what happens to LISTENING when you're weird and angsty and defensive and hyped up on emotion and adrenaline?

It stops completely

There's all this noise in our heads and our hearts that keep us from engaging thoughtfully

It breaks my heart when I read a really thoughtful article on-line about issues of race and ethnicity and then read the comments

Because many of the comments show that they haven't actually engaged with the article, they've just heard the topic and kicked into auto-responder mode

Listening doesn't mean you agree, listening doesn't mean you have to like how they're talking about something, listening doesn't mean you're endorsing something

Listening just means that you're actually engaging with the person, their concerns and their issues that they're raising

And if you're a Christian here this morning, when we're in that flooded state we completely forget that this is a person or a community for whom Jesus died, each one made in God's image;  
and we can forget that Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor, and even to love our enemy, which means listening to them even if it's hard for us to hear

And we can forget that the cross and Jesus's empty tomb is, quite frankly, the ONLY real hope we have in our world to break through these barriers that have disrupted human community for all time

Because it's the only thing strong enough to break through all these barriers to offer healing, forgiveness  
to call ALL people to repentance for the ways that we have sinned against one another, whether it is intentional or unintentional

THIS is the spiritual power that goes to the root of the problem!

The Scriptures declare that Jesus has already made us one in himself. These barriers that are between us have already been conquered by the power of Jesus  
That's the big promise of the Scriptures

AND at the same time on an individual level, the cross also frees us to hear criticism and critique without it destroying us!

Do you know why the apostles can hear the complaints of the Greeks and not get defensive?

Because they're under zero illusions that their whole identity rests on their reputation. Their identity rests in Jesus, is secured in Jesus, they're not being threatened, they're not turning this into a big power-struggle

It's all about faithfully following Jesus in the context of community—if something is undermining that they want to deal with it.

The apostles can listen to the complaints of the Greeks and respond faithfully because they're under zero illusions that they're perfect!

Jesus had to die for them on the cross! The whole of the Christian understanding is that we're all sinful people—none of us is perfect!

And so when someone points out our imperfections or our mistakes, we're not shattered! We're not surprised! We're not defensive! We know already that we're imperfect men and women!

We've already left behind this overly-idealized false picture of ourselves as supersized wonderwoman or superman

Having our identity and our security rooted in Christ rather than in our own competence or what others think about us FREES US to listen.

And if WE do not and will not intentionally and prayerfully access Jesus's power and the power of His Holy Spirit

That promises to bring BIG-PICTURE unity to the whole world AND that frees us from getting defensive which frees us to listen  
if we won't intentionally bring all that power to bear to this issue which is literally destroying hundreds of millions of lives all around the globe

Then there is literally no hope of these barriers ever coming down in this world and the mission that we have been sent on to bring this good news to the whole world will fail.

The hope of the entire world is hung on the work of Christ hung on the cross to forgive us our sins and reconcile us to the God of the universe who loves us and reconciles us to each other

And so Jesus commissions his people to GO and to cross all these barriers in order to bring his message

But what he has done on the cross has already broken down these barriers—before they were thick as steel, now, because of Jesus these barriers are paper-mache they have centuries of momentum but because of Christ's work on the cross these divisions do not have the defining word over us, Christ does.

Those differences can now be embraced and celebrated rather than viewed as a threat

because Christ has secured all of us, extended grace and forgiveness to all of us, called all of us to turn away from life apart from him and invited all of us to live as children of the Good and Perfect Father who loves us

Perhaps the greatest consistent failure of Christians over the past 2,000 years is our persistent unwillingness or inability to bring the spiritual power of the cross and the empty tomb

to break through the barriers and heal the fault lines between people that have plagued all of humanity since the beginning of time.

The early Christian community does a couple of things extremely well here that we can all learn from—some take-homes for each of us:

- 1. Spend some thought time this week rooting yourself in how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection can be applied to help you to heal fault lines and break through barriers.**

Remember, there's 2 levels here: the MACRO level, where Jesus says he's come to draw all people to himself, that's an already FINISHED work in Jesus

And on the individual level, if our primary identity is Christ-follower and we've accepted that what he says about us is true

that we're made in his image, that image has been marred by sin, and that we're forgiven by his sacrifice on our behalf to take away that sin

Then that FREES us from being feeling threatened when someone who's different from us says something that's difficult for us to hear

And then in light of that SPIRITUAL FREEDOM and POWER that you're tapping into:

- 2. Can you commit yourself to JUST LISTENING for the next 7 days to people who are different than you?** This is the mission-critical skill that HAS to happen if we're going to do any breaking through

For the next 7 days, what if you argued with no one, not even inside your own head, building up some sort of defense or case

And what if you didn't IGNORE or DISMISS any group of people just off-hand.

What if for the next seven days we all committed, especially if you're a Jesus-follower

to learning this mission-critical skill of listening even to people who are different from us in some way, even those that we already know we disagree with or don't trust?

And where you feel yourself getting flooded with all kinds of emotions or tirades or frustrations or anger, invite you to look to Jesus, for the power of the cross to free you to listen

If we're going to do the mission Jesus called us to do, then we've GOT to start right here.

**Will you take a listening posture for this series?** That we might learn together—to listen to the Scriptures and listen to our brothers and sisters who are telling us things that might be hard for us to hear—just like the apostles did

Nothing else will happen if we can't listen to Jesus and then figure out how to listen to the neighbor Jesus has told us to love

It doesn't mean that they're 100% right and you're 100% wrong. It doesn't mean that you have to do everything they say or think that you should do

I'm not talking about our responses here at all. I'm just talking about all of us being slow to speak, quicker to listen to attend to the people and their need around us.

This week, lets see if you and I can start to roll back this perhaps most consistent failure of Christians for the past 2,000 years

And see if we can begin to bring the spiritual power and authority of Jesus to bear to heal a broken world and break through these barriers that have plagued us for all of time

It starts with simply listening.

PRAY