

The Power of Pentecost

(2 of 2)

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Yesterday we were speaking of Pentecost, that dramatic moment in which, through the power of the spirit, all barriers seem to come down, and the Mede and the Parthian can understand as well as the Cappadocian and the Elamite, and the Spirit is poured upon young and old, male and female.

But all is not rosy. The book of Acts makes no bones about the fact that, even in the earliest church, there were problems. Our text for tonight is one of those cases.

Let us look more clearly at the dynamics involved in the brief opening verses of Acts 6. The Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians are the leadership. That is not surprising: they are the natives of the area. They are the inheritors of the original proclamation of the Gospel. The Greek-speakers are the newcomers. That much is clear. Within the earliest church, the Hellenists are at a disadvantage.

We know that at this time there was increasing nationalistic feeling among the Jews in Judea. Thus, as conflict with Rome increased, so the Greek-speaking Jews found themselves under suspicion on the part of native Jews as being less firm about strict orthodoxy than those who spoke Aramaic. Any laxity about the Law might hinder God's granting of victory over Rome, if it came to actual battle. It is also clear that these sentiments spilled over into the reaction of

many Jews to Christianity. If all Christians were suspect, those of a Hellenistic background, with their Greek names, language, and customs, were even more so.

So, the Greek-speaking portion of the congregation is somewhat marginal within the Jerusalem church and also within the religious structure of the city as a whole.

Now the Greek-speaking widows do not feel they are being fairly treated in receiving support from the whole congregation. They are not being treated as the Aramaic-speaking widows are being treated.

These widows are not simply all the women whose husbands had died. There may well have been some widowed women who were supported by family or who had some other means of support. The widows meant here were those who had no such support and needed the help of the church. This was common in Judaism, and when some of these women became Christians, the church continued the same policy of support. Aramaic-speaking widows as well as Greek-speaking widows became Christians, and both needed assistance.

Exactly the form the support took is also not clear. The RSV speaks of a daily distribution and then indicates that "serving at tables" was the way this distribution was carried out. That takes away the ambiguity implied in the passage. The distribution could have been of money—as Judaism practiced—or of food and perhaps other necessities. Later practices included both.

"Serving at tables" can mean either assisting in food distribution or working at a money table. It, therefore, can mean that the need was for an administrative structure that would take care of the financial concerns—especially in regard to the poor widows. But whatever the nature of the distribution, it is clear that it was an attempt to respond to the material needs of the widows.

Another important point to note in this text is that the “murmuring” was directed against the leaders of the community, against the twelve. Today we might call them the bishops, the Cabinet, the Council on Finance, or the Council on Ministry. Indeed, a few verses earlier Luke has told us that those who sold properties and brought the proceeds for the relief of the needy, “laid them at the apostles' feet.” The apostles were responsible for the management of resources, and if there was criticism, it was ultimately directed at them.

So what does the leadership do? They call a meeting of the whole congregation. They did not downgrade the problem. This is a very important point. Today, some would say that the problem is that some widows do not know their place. We have already given them something. Something is better than nothing. Let them be quiet and take what is given to them or go away and leave us alone. Today we would speak of the "problem of the widows," or the "problem" of one ethnic minority or another, or the "problem" of women. But the fact is that, if one reads the book of Acts as a whole, it is clear that the widows were not the problem. The problem was the Holy Spirit, who, on that day of Pentecost, was poured on all flesh, young and old, sons and daughters, and "Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and

Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians” (Acts 2: 9-10).

The problem is not caused by the widows, but by that subversive Spirit of God, who bloweth from where the Spirit listeth, and who destroys and overcomes all our neat patterns and classifications. And, because the problem was caused by the Spirit, the leadership took it seriously and decided something needed to be done.

The “something” would involve a new administrative structure. The Twelve decide that they have the charge to proclaim the Gospel—evidently largely in Aramaic—and cannot in good conscience spend the time organizing the relief work for the widows. It is important that someone do that, however, and the present arrangement is unsatisfactory.

So, the leadership suggests that the congregation is to choose seven from among its members to carry out such tasks. And here comes the first great surprise. Today we have a solution for this kind of problem": If we are slightly enlightened, we appoint a token member to the committee dealing with the distribution of resources. If we are a little more enlightened, we set up a quota for such tokens. If we are still more enlightened, we allow those minority representatives to administer that part of our resources that we have set aside for them. But that is not what this congregation does. Those who are chosen all have Greek names. Some might be natives, but chances are most are not. At least one is listed as a proselyte from

Antioch—one who was not even a Jew who had grown up abroad, but a Gentile who had become a Jew. So, the congregation chooses leadership that empowers those who have been more marginal.

Indeed, this action is so radical that modern scholars find it hard to swallow. Therefore, some suggest that Luke is wrong and that the task of the seven was not to manage all the distribution at the tables but only that having to do with the Hellenistic widows, and that they in fact were a parallel organization to lead the Hellenists, just as the twelve were to lead the Hebrews. It is an interesting theory. It is more interesting since it makes the early church sound so much like the modern church. But it is interesting above all because it takes us off the hook.

What the text does say is that, precisely to make certain that the Hellenistic widows would no longer have cause to murmur or complain because they were not receiving a fair share, precisely so that there might be justice in the church, the entire task of managing the resources under dispute was put in the hands of seven Hellenists.

But there is more. Given the political situation, empowering the Greek-speaking segment of the congregation may well have been a courageous thing to do. It implied a sharing of leadership with a new part of the community. It gave leadership to those who might raise even more questions about the church in the wider city. It would lead to strife and conflict that might

possibly be avoided if the Apostles had refused to expand the leadership beyond their own small group.

You see, these Hellenists were not “respectable folk” in good Jewish society. One may well imagine the arguments that could have been adduced against appointing them. If the financial resources of the church are put in the hands of these outsiders, giving will surely go down! When you come to church to be fed, both spiritually and materially, do you want one of those Hellenists in charge of the table? If it were today, we could find a dozen reasons for not taking the radical steps that the early church took. And we would convince ourselves that we were doing it out of love for the United Methodist Church!

The Twelve had an alternative. They could have refused to empower the Hellenists. They could have kept the purse strings. But, had they done so, the miracle glimpsed in Pentecost would have been undone.

But that is not all. Then comes the second great surprise. The Twelve had decided that they would give the management of resources to the Seven, and that they would keep for themselves the ministry of the Word and Prayer. But then, what does the very next verse, v. 8, say? "And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." The Twelve may have decided that the Seven would not preach. But the Spirit had other plans, so that all the rest of chapter 6 and all of chapter 7 in Acts are taken up with the story of

Stephen's preaching (actually, his sermon is the longest in the book of Acts). Then chapter 8 turns to Philip, another of the Seven who was not supposed to preach. And by chapter 9 our attention shifts again, focusing now, not on one of the Twelve, nor even on one of the Seven, but on another who was standing by during the martyrdom of Stephen.

You see, the Twelve are structural conservatives. They apparently believe that their task is to preserve the structure that existed in the beginning. And so in chapter 1, even before they receive the Spirit, they attempt to elect another to fill the gap left by Judas. Jesus appointed twelve, and twelve we must be, says Peter. But apparently the Spirit had other plans, for of Matthias, whom they elected, we hear not one word more. And now, although they are willing to give up the ministry of serving at tables, they are not ready to share the ministry of preaching the Word. But the Spirit is ready. "And Stephen, full of grace and power," began preaching.

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The significance of this is enormous, for there is a tendency in every church, and certainly in our denomination, to think that there is a God-given structure and that this structure must remain forever. But no, the Twelve wanted to keep the ministry of the Word for themselves, and the Spirit had other plans.

Likewise, the Twelve ask that seven *men* be named, and the congregation does name seven *men*. Hopefully, if today we were dealing with an issue having to do with widows in the church,

we would know better than naming seven *men* to deal with it. And that, you see, is not simply the result of the modern world; it is also the work of the same Spirit who turned Stephen and Philip into the preachers they were not supposed to be.

Then, there is the third great surprise, the surprise of the entire book of Acts. Because the early church took the risk of responding to injustice by opening up its leadership, the mission progressed far beyond their own expectations. From the Hebrews to the Hellenists, from the Hellenists to the Gentiles. And who are we, but the spiritual descendants of those first Gentile Christians, outsiders brought in, not because the others really wanted them, but because the Spirit would not be thwarted?

The main issues posed by the surprises in this passage continue to this day. They continue at the level of the local congregation, and they continue at every level of the worldwide church. The first issue is simply, are we really willing and eager to bring into the church those groups that our society tends to exclude? I mean, *really* bring them in.

There is much talk about evangelism in our denomination. Our numbers are declining, we are told. We need to share the Good News. And all that is true. A church that does not share the Good News of Jesus Christ has no reason to exist. The fact of the matter, however, is that many in our own denomination who speak most fervently about the need to evangelize are also those who show the least sensitivity to the groups in our society that are growing most rapidly.

Some among those who complain most vociferously about our lack of evangelistic zeal and our loss of membership are also those who complain about the growing pluralism in our society and our church. The problem is, many who wish to stress evangelism apparently hope that the new members will be like the old ones. No new groups will be part of the congregation. At least, not of this congregation. They are unwilling to risk their status in the wider community by being members of a church jointly with others who are not recognized as equally significant by that wider community.

"They will take over the church, they say. And they may be right, for that is the second surprise that the Spirit has in store for the Twelve. The Seven may all be Hellenists. That is alright. As long as we retain for ourselves the ministry of the Word. And the same attitude appears today. Some say that the reason why we are not more successful in evangelism is that we are too liberal in our biblical interpretation. That is open to debate. But what is clear to me is that at least one reason why we are not more successful is that we are too fundamentalistic in our reading of the Discipline. Here we have a book, written essentially by white, middle-class representatives of white middle-class churches, and we expect those structures to fit any and all groups. As long as this is so, eliminating racism in the United Methodist Church will continue to be an unfinished agenda. Because, you see, what we are doing is pricing ourselves out of the poor neighborhoods in which racism has placed most ethnic minorities. There are people, there are entire congregations, that cannot afford to be United Methodists. And this, in a church that has taken the lead in the fight against redlining by banks. My friends, one reason why we are

not more successful in evangelism is that, perhaps unwittingly, we, too, practice ecclesiastical redlining.

But then, there is another vision. The third great surprise that this passage brings to mind is the surprise of a successful—costly, yet successful—mission. We must allow the Holy Spirit to subvert us—to subvert our narratives, to subvert our structures. “Then the people shall come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29).

Without the recognition of injustice within the church—especially that which is caused when various cultural groups live together—there is little chance for renewed mission. Without shared leadership and power, there is little chance that such injustice can be overcome. The Jerusalem church dealt head-on with the injustice in its midst—and therefore opened up its mission in unexpected ways: to the Samaritans, to the Ethiopian eunuch, to the Gentiles, and ultimately to us. But it was a church prepared for surprises—ready for the future that God had for it. It was a church that had experienced Pentecost and kept itself open for the renewed miracle of Pentecost in its life. Significantly, the distribution at the tables provided the opportunity for this great renewal of mission in the early church. Today, as we, too, come before the table, will we be ready to recognize and acknowledge the injustices that still exist around this very table, and in recognizing them and responding to them, open ourselves to the surprising work of the Spirit?