

Deacons in Church
Acts 6:1-7
July 16, 2023 West Valley Presbyterian Church

I've always liked this passage. Here's why: the church had just sprung into being at Pentecost; thousands of people believed and were baptized, more and more every week; there were miraculous healings; there was strong opposition from the Sanhedrin; the church members were selling property so that the money could be used to support the poor; God demonstrated the importance of truthfulness in financial matters; and Peter and the rest of the apostles got arrested and flogged by the Sanhedrin. And yet, with all of this going on, what does the church choose to deal with? A language and cultural issue within the congregation! That may not sound like much. But, had the issue not been dealt with, there would have been a split within the congregation. And preventing a split was the apostles' top priority. So today we're going to study Acts, chapter 6, vv. 1-7.

SLIDES

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews^[a] among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ²So 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. ³Brothers 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 ⁴and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

⁵This 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. ⁶They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. Thanks be to God.

If you've ever volunteered at a food pantry – which I'm guessing many of us have – this sounds like a simple math problem. The head of food distribution figures out how much food they have, and how many impoverished households there are, and how many people are in each of these households. Then each widow registers how many people there are in her household; and she gets the amount of food that has been decided on for the size of her household. That's how food distribution operates at Interfaith in Tuolumne County; and I'm guessing it's similar here. A math problem, right? Simple to solve.

Well, no. The actual problem described in Acts 6 wasn't just about food. That was only part of it. The bigger problem was, how do two communities, each with their own language, their own culture and their own social issues, get along within one church?

In Peter's day, Jewish people lived, not only in Judea and Galilee, but also in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), Egypt, and Rome. If you were Jewish and you lived in what's now the middle East, you spoke Aramaic, and you read the Scriptures in Hebrew. If you were Jewish and you lived in what was considered the civilized world, such as Egypt or Greece, you spoke Greek and you read the Scriptures in Greek

And it wasn't just language differences between the Hebraic Jews and the Hellenistic Jews who were all living together in Jerusalem. There were also substantial cultural differences. Most of the "civilized world" back then – including Rome – had basically a Greek culture. An educated person spoke Greek as a first or second language; the Greek gods were renamed and taken over by the Romans; Greek philosophy and mathematics were widely regarded as being the best. But in what we would now call the Middle East, most people considered Greek culture as wimpy at best, and blasphemous at worst.

And then there were some social differences as well. Some Hellenistic Jews believed in the resurrection; and they often moved to Jerusalem in their later years. They believed that the resurrection of all the dead would begin at Jerusalem, so they wanted to be first in line. And if there are older immigrants in your church, then there will be more widows; and they will need the church's support because they won't have the family network in place that would have supported them back home.

I think we can understand the situation that the church was in. We too live in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural society, where most people came to Cupertino from somewhere else and don't have the social network that they would have had back home. But we mostly don't have bilingual and bicultural churches. Either churches are monolingual, or, they have different worship services and different staff for each of the different language groups within the church. That works fine for us; but that's because the church has been in business for 2000 years. We have the luxury of lots of different kinds of Christian churches, and people can go church shopping to find the one that works best for them. The early church didn't have that luxury. There was just a single church, in one place, at a time when there were temples to many different gods all over the "known" world. If that single church had split in its earliest days, it might not have survived. They needed everybody to stay together and pull together. That's why the apostles put aside everything else they were dealing with, and addressed the complaint of the Hellenistic Jews. Pastoral care and financial assistance have been essential parts of the church since its very earliest days; and it's part of what holds a church together even today. That's why deacons are so important.

The apostles were no doubt guided by the Holy Spirit in figuring out that the problem wasn't just about who gets how much food. The deeper problem is, how can we stay together as one body, if our native language, culture, and social supports are different? How can we work things out when there's a conflict? As we know, that's not easy! And the apostles were right in saying that they shouldn't neglect the ministry God had already assigned them, in order to settle this conflict. As they put it, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables", which in Greek is diakonos. Enter the deacons.

The congregation chose the seven men who would become the first deacons. And that was the right thing to do, because the problem was congregational, and so therefore the congregation should choose who would settle it. And look at their names: Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, who was converted from paganism to Judaism and from there to Christianity. What do you notice about their names? Those are all Greek names, so hence, these are all Hellenistic Jews. The Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked; so the whole congregation, both Hebrew and Greek, chose Greek-speaking men to settle the problem. That's very wise. They chose people who spoke the same language and shared the same culture, with the people who are being overlooked. And the apostles ordained their choices by praying and laying hands on the first deacons.

That is still how we choose and ordain elders and deacons to this very day. We have nominating teams to come up with candidates; but it's still the congregation who chooses them by voting. And it's still the pastors, along with the previously ordained elders, who do the ordaining, which is still done by praying and laying on of hands.

In Presbyterian churches, the elders and the pastor govern the church. But the deacons have a major role in ensuring that there is a church to be governed. The deacons provide pastoral care. The deacons make sure no one is overlooked. The deacons come alongside when you're sick or grieving. And yes, there is a deacon's fund, to this day, to assist with financial emergencies. In an older church like ours, the pastoral care that the deacons provide helps hold the church together.

I'd like to point out a major difference, though; the first deacons were all men. Our deacons are all women. Ideally, deacons would be both men and women, since both men and women need pastoral care. For that reason, the early church moved from all-male deacons to a mix of male and female, within just twenty years. For example, in Romans 16:1, Paul commends Phoebe as a deacon in the church.

SHOW SLIDE

And in 1 Timothy 3, Paul refers to women as well as men when he's talking about deacons. So, they were both male and female. And that makes sense. Both men and women make up the church, right? If deacons are essential in holding the church together, through times of conflict or disagreement, then we need both male and female deacons. Men get upset too, the same as the Hellenistic Jews who were complaining back then about their widows being overlooked. So, men, when vacancies come up in the deacon board, and someone comes to talk with you about serving as a deacon, I hope you will sincerely pray about it. Maybe that is God's calling on your life.

One of the many things I love about West Valley is that we've been together long enough that we're used to each other, and mostly we tolerate each other pretty well. If one member does something that another member doesn't like, the usual response is something like, "Oh, well, that's just what they do." Usually, there's no fighting, no biting.

But, we will have some decisions to make in the next few months. The church planters are planning to move here in November; and they have come up with a 5 year ministry plan and budget,

which has gone to the Session and the Transition Team for consideration. You'll be hearing about it soon, I hope. One thing I can tell you is that the new church plant is going to need the support of the other churches in our Presbytery, as well as support from us. And each of our churches has its own different culture. So it's possible that there could be some lively discussions. Which can be a good thing, IF there is good pastoral care to help us hang in there together. The early church had much tougher issues to decide than we will have; they did it, and we can too. They prevented a split between the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebraic Jews; and they came out of that conflict stronger and more unified than they ever had been before.

So I'd like to end by doing two things which will help to draw us in to the example of the early church – and, I hope, will help to keep us unified in the days ahead.

First: Would the deacons who are currently serving this congregation please stand? Let's pray for them.

O God of grace, you have called these people to serve you in this congregation as deacons. You have called them to see and to serve wherever there is need; and because sometimes it seems that there is always need, we pray for them. Strengthen them in faith and hope and love. Give them openness to your Holy Spirit's leading. Grant them times of rest and replenishment. In everything, give them the mind of Christ, who did not grasp at greatness but emptied himself, to become a servant of your reign. Give them joy in their walk of faith, and support them in their ministry in the days and weeks ahead. Grant this through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

You may be seated.

Second, would Dennis and Karen Campbell please come forward? (Grab handheld mike) This will be their last Sunday with us, as they are moving to _____. (Ask - Could you tell us a little about your new home?) I'd like to send you out to your new neighborhood as if you were heading to a new mission field – which, in a sense, you are. So let's all pray for you.

O God of every place and every time, we pray for Dennis and Karen as they move to _____. We thank you for their many years of faithful service to you here at West Valley Presbyterian, especially for their service in teaching and in financial management. We thank you for their honesty, for their dedication to you and to this church. We thank you for Karen's skill in quilting, sewing, and in teaching children, which she used for the building up of this church; we thank you for Dennis' accuracy, financial knowledge, and willingness to ensure that every donation of any kind is accounted for and is used according to the donor's wishes. O God, our hearts ache as we say goodbye. May they be as much of a blessing to their new church and their new neighborhood, as they have been to us. By the power of your Holy Spirit, lead them to new ministries, secure in the faith that binds us forever in the body of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

And now, I'd like to ask those who are able, to come up and escort Dennis and Karen back to their seats.

Let's sing to God!