


**Pentecost:
Unity in Justice**
(2 of 3)



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Northern New Jersey UMC Annual Conference
New Jersey

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Justo: Two Sundays ago, we celebrated the feast of Pentecost. Pentecost is the celebration of unity, hope, and joy. It is the time when we speak of how the Spirit heals the brokenness that separates people from each other. That brokenness, symbolized by the confusion of languages at Babel, is now overcome by the work of the Spirit, so that when the disciples speak in the power of the Spirit all people, no matter what their ethnic or cultural background, can understand them. Pentecost is the feast of understanding. It is the feast of visions, of old people having dreams, and young people having visions. It is the feast of inclusiveness, of sons and daughters prophesizing. It is the feast when we proclaim that somehow, across all human barriers of cultures, language, class, or gender, we can understand each other by the power of the Spirit.

And then, three weeks after Pentecost, we come together to meet in Annual Conference. There is joy in our meeting, yes. It is an opportunity to see old friends whom we rarely see. It is a time to learn of the exciting programs that our United Methodist Church has to offer. It is a time to gather for study and worship, as we now do.

But it is also a time of business. And business brings tension. There is the business of appointments and apportionments. There are committees working in between sessions—and sometimes even during sessions—determining budgets, policies, priorities, etc. And around

each of these committees, there is an entire cluster of groups and individuals with particular interests, pet projects, reasons for discontent, axes to grind. And so, tension arises. And we wonder what has happened to that spirit of Pentecost that we celebrated just three weeks ago.

In this experience, we are not alone. Indeed, Luke tells us of events that shortly after that first exhilarating Pentecost the nascent Christian community had to deal with similar problems. Therefore, what we propose is that this evening we look at one of the texts in which those problems were discussed and see what we can learn from it for our day and for our deliberations here..

Catherine: That text is in the sixth chapter of Acts, verses 1 – 7:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. (2) And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. (3) Therefore, my brothers and sisters, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. (4) But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (5) And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. (6) These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them. (7) And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Justo: As we look at this text, the first thing to be noted is that the problem is the direct result of Pentecost. It is easy to see the contrast between the murmuring that takes place here and the joy of Pentecost. But we must not forget that the reason why there are these different

groups in the early church is precisely the openness that Pentecost brings about. Had it not been for Pentecost, and for the communication of the Gospel across cultural barriers that took place there, there would have been no problem between Hebrews and Hellenists. The members of the church would all have belonged to the same group. Thus, although we might think that the problem shows that the spirit of Pentecost has been lost, one could also say that the problem is the direct result of Pentecost. It is because of Pentecost that there are Hellenists in the church. It is precisely the indiscriminating inclusiveness of the Holy Spirit that has caused the problem in the first place.

Catherine: Before we go further, however, it is important to clarify the nature of the problem. First of all, one must point out that all these people were still Jewish Christians. It is not until later in the book of Acts that the church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, will come to the conclusion that the Gospel is also for Gentiles. Here the division is between two groups in the Jewish community of Jerusalem.

These two groups our text calls the "Hebrews" and the "Hellenists." Those whom the text calls "Hebrews" probably spoke very little Hebrew—or they used it only in religious matters. They were the Jews from Palestine, who had spent all their lives there, and whose ancestors had also lived there. Their common language was Aramaic. But in general, these Palestinian Jews considered themselves more orthodox and purer than Jews from elsewhere, and therefore they called themselves "Hebrews." The others, those whom our text calls "Hellenists," were not

Greeks. They, too, were Jews. But they had grown up in other lands, as most of their ancestors also had done. Whether or not they knew Hebrew depended on the quality of their religious upbringing. But their common language was usually the Greek that had become the *lingua franca* of the eastern portion of the Roman Empire. They were called "Hellenists," not because they were Greek but because their culture and traditions had been more influenced by the culture and traditions of the Hellenistic world, and probably because they often spoke Greek in preference to Aramaic.

Justo: We know that at this time there was increasing nationalistic feeling among the Jews in Judea. Eventually, this would lead to a great rebellion and to the invasion of the land by Roman legions that in the year AD 70 destroyed the Temple. But even before there was a general uprising, 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. The Scriptures made it quite clear that when the people strayed from the commandments of God, God often would respond by handing them over into the hands of their enemies. Thus, 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

was somewhat marginal within the Jerusalem church—and also within the religious structure of the city as a whole. Their widows did not feel they were being fairly treated in receiving support from the whole congregation—as fairly as the Aramaic-speaking widows were being treated. It was the language or the culture that was the barrier—not their status as widows.

Catherine: Before we go further, however, we must ask: the widows—who were they? 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, both as a general policy of giving financial assistance to widows and a specific policy in Jerusalem to assist widows from the Diaspora to come and finish their days in the Holy City. So even before the advent of Christianity there were Greek-speaking widows in Jerusalem, receiving alms from the official Jewish religious community, administered by the official religious structure.

Now, when some of these women became Christians, the church continued the same policy of support. Aramaic-speaking widows also became Christians and needed assistance. The church may well have given assistance to a variety of people who needed help. But the widows provided a special case and did so for several decades. There was no counterpart of widowers. Men had their livelihood whether married or not, but women generally were economically dependent upon their husbands or male relatives. Being widowed often left women without

resources. Furthermore, when the church was in a first-generation situation, the continued involvement in the life of the church on the part of a widow might require that the church support her. The alternative of support by a son or a remarriage might well place them outside the community of faith.

The church, therefore, supported such women. A few decades after this account in Acts, we know of widows who formed a significant part of the ministry of the church, in return for their support. By the early second century, the virgins had been added to the widows, creating a certain amount of competition. Eventually the roles coalesced.

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 other necessities. Later perhaps practices included both. "Serving at tables" can mean 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 financial concerns, especially in regard to the poor widows.

In any case, it is not at all surprising that a dispute should arise when two language or two cultural groups, both needy, had to rely for assistance on a leadership that spoke only one of those languages or belonged to only one of those cultures.

What is described here is not a major quarrel, only murmuring, unhappiness, a sense that something was unfair.

Justo: Clearly, it is possible to look at this entire episode and decide that the original enthusiasm and commitment of Pentecost did not last long. That, however, would not be a proper interpretation. At the time that the book was written, there was always the danger that Christians would have to pay for their faith with their lives. In that context, the book was written, not to show that from its very beginning the church had been declining in its commitment but rather to show that from its very beginning, and throughout its history, the same Holy Spirit who came down at Pentecost continued to guide the church through its difficult decisions. Thus, rather than focus on the disagreement as a sign that all was not well in that early church, we need to look at what the church did about the disagreement, which may give us some directions for our own time and for the manner in which we transact business here, a mere three weeks after the celebration of Pentecost.

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

So, what did the leadership do? They called a meeting of the whole congregation. It would be interesting to imagine whether the language difficulties were such that they could not really understand each other, and whether the Aramaic-speaking Twelve had an interpreter--exactly how this meeting was conducted.

But one thing is clear: They did not downgrade the problem. They took it seriously and decided something needed to be done. The "something" would involve a new administrative structure. The Twelve felt that they had the charge to proclaim the Gospel—evidently largely in Aramaic—and could not in good conscience spend the time organizing the relief work for the widows. It was important that someone do that, however, and the current arrangement was unsatisfactory.

The congregation was to choose seven men to carry out such tasks. Here, the picture again is muddy. The men who were chosen all had Greek names. Some might have been natives, but chances are most were not. At least one is listed as a proselyte from Antioch--a Gentile who had become a Jew. So, the congregation chose leadership that empowered those who had been more marginal.

What were the tasks of these seven? We are accustomed to calling them "deacons," but that term is not used as a title for them in this passage. There is some thought that they were actually a separate structure of leadership for the Greek-speaking portion of the community. We

know that no matter what the twelve thought about the preaching of the Gospel being their own particular responsibility and prerogative, soon both Stephen and Philip, both members of the group of seven, begin to preach to other Greek-speaking people, and carry the Gospel to them. Their responsibilities did not end with their charitable work within the church.

Catherine: As we look at the entire passage in the context of the situation that prevailed in Jerusalem at the time, it becomes clear that, given this 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.

Had they done so, however, the miracle glimpsed in Pentecost would have been undone. But the miracle continued. The language and cultural barrier remained. It was made worse by tensions in the world outside the church. But love and trust found ways to overcome its impact. Love and trust found ways to share leadership and empower new groups within the church. It caused trouble but the kind of trouble the Gospel is always causing in this sinful, divided world. It presaged the even greater diversity that the addition of Gentiles would make, under the leadership of Paul.

The early church took a serious risk in giving these seven Hellenists positions of authority and responsibility. First of all, there was the inner question of the authority of the twelve over against the authority of the seven. The twelve represented the old guard, the old culture, the old traditions, those who had been with Jesus himself. The seven represented new directions, a new cultural background, people who either had never seen Jesus or had not been his close followers. Indeed, the twelve may have tried to retain "the ministry of the word" for themselves. But the succeeding chapters in Acts tell us that that didn't happen and that at least Stephen and Philip took up that ministry by the power of the Spirit.

Then there was the outer pressure. Hellenistic Jews were suspect in Jerusalem. Christians were also suspect. To give leadership to Hellenistic Jewish Christians would make the church doubly suspect. (We know that persecution would soon break out and that the Hellenistic Jewish Christians would bear the brunt of that first persecution.) But, despite all this, the twelve saw the justice of the demand coming from the Hellenistic widows and agreed to grant positions of leadership to these seven, chosen by the congregation.

Justo: The issues posed in this passage continue to this day. They continue at the level of the local congregation, and they continue at every level of the world-wide church. The issue is simply: Are we willing to see leadership in the church going to groups that have formerly been excluded from such leadership, or whom the rest of society does not consider apt for leadership?

We often think of this issue in terms of what had traditionally been called "the mission field." It is not necessary to belabor that point here. There are voluminous treatises on the process of indigenization and on the need for self-government on the part of the younger churches. In any case, although the process has often been painful, in recent decades the world-wide church has made great strides in that direction.

Therefore, it is probably more important that we ask the same question in a context that comes closer to home. Have we learned for ourselves the lessons that we speak of in far-away places? Allow me to illustrate what I mean with a personal experience. Some years ago, I was listening to a distinguished theologian—indeed, one of the best-known theologians of his own denomination—speaking about the uniqueness of his denomination. In the course of his speech, he boasted: "For our denomination, our theology, and our form of government are so important, and so refined, that it is virtually impossible for anyone who is not born into it to fully appreciate them and to attain positions of leadership in the church."

My reaction? I am not surprised that there are so many complaints among members of that denomination about its lack of evangelistic zeal. I would have a hard time inviting other people to join an outfit in which they will forever remain second-class.

The fact of the matter, however, is that many in our own denomination feel the same way. And many of them are among those who complain most vociferously about our lack of evangelistic

zeal and our loss of membership. 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. No leadership will be shared. They are unwilling to risk their status in the wider community by increasing the number of members and leaders who are not recognized as significant by that wider community.

There is also the risk that such shared leadership will mean mission—successful mission—to that same previously excluded group and upset the balance of power even more. Precisely at the time when many of our churches in this country are facing the problem of changes in populations, decreases in the traditional ethnic compositions of their church and increases in new ethnic groups, the issue of bilingual and multilingual churches, shared leadership, and new mission is important. It often appears that the new people are needed in order to help meet the bills in a situation where the older congregation is dwindling. But no shared leadership is anticipated or desired.

Catherine: It is interesting to note that the whole change in structure leading to the election of the Seven stems from the experience of injustice within the church itself. (One wonders what would have happened if they had named seven widows to the new posts, but that apparently was not either the expectation or the option of the time!) The murmurs of discontent were heard, however, and dealt with. Out of that experience came a new empowerment for mission

to non-Aramaic speaking Jews, and eventually to Gentiles. The multicultural situation was seen as desirable, as positive, and therefore the unhappiness was willingly dealt with.

Without the recognition of injustice within the church, especially that which is caused when various cultural and ethnic 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 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.

Justo: In our church today, almost twenty centuries after the first Pentecost, and but a few weeks after the last, the experiences of that early church in its walk with the Spirit remain surprisingly relevant. We, too, are faced with the joys and the tensions brought about by the pluralism of our communities. We, too, are perplexed as to what shape our mission is to take in years to come, under the guidance of the Spirit. Some of us, deeply pained by the decline in our membership, by our lack of evangelistic and missionary zeal, are tempted to cry out: "Forget about all those issues of inclusiveness and justice. Get on with the task of proclaiming the Gospel. Mission and evangelism are the call of God to us today." Others, equally pained with the injustices that still remain in our midst, with the unequal distribution of resources among

various parts of our constituency, with the degree to which the divisions and the inequities of the world find their way into the church, are tempted to cry out: "Forget evangelism and mission to those who don't believe. Begin by doing justice at home. Seek to be a truly inclusive church." From one side of the debate and the other, we preach sermons, we write books, we organize committees, we murmur against each other.

In the midst of all this, and in this season of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes to us once again, reminding us through this text that these are not really two separate issues, that the dichotomy between the two is false. Justice within the community of faith leads to the renewal of mission. Mission faithfully carried out can lead to new problems of justice within the life of the church. The two issues go hand in hand. To separate them—and choose only one to work on—would ultimately defeat both goals. The Spirit who led the infant church at Pentecost still leads us today to a mission that creates a fuller and more just church.

