

Continuing our summer series following the early church's narratives in Acts. Last week, Pastor Ryan unpacked the persecution of the Apostles by religious authorities, lifting up questions of power and authority, and how we use our agency. Our text for today picks up where we left off. Please listen for the word of God.

Now, during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

*This is the word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God. (prayer)*

Last week, I stumbled upon the classic 90s movie *Pretty Woman*. There was this one scene that caught my eye. Fancy business folks were gathered in a board room, planning a hostile takeover of some large company so they could reap profits by chopping it up for parts. Seated around the table are five or six men, and only *one* woman. I kept waiting for the woman to speak, but she never did. I realized she was just there to keep her head down, to listen and take notes. She was a businesswoman, but only invited into the room, only seated at the table as a silent support to those in power. It was boggling to me that this depiction of corporate America was still normative in 1990, as I began adolescence. This movie was made forty years after *I Love Lucy* challenged notions of a woman's place in the world and twenty-five years after the first woman was ordained as a full-fledged pastor in the Presbyterian Church. And yet, in the depiction of that movie's boardroom, nothing had changed for the woman seated at that table or for all the women shut out of the room altogether. By these metrics, this movie had not aged well for 1990, much less 2021. It was shocking to look back and remember the world as it had been in my lifetime, though I hadn't seen it then. It made me newly grateful for a century of advocacy and struggle that allowed women to go from being denied the right to vote, to being free to be whatever we want to be, that lets me be a mom with a professional career, to stand in this pulpit today with open-toed sandals, glittery nails and long hair, unabashedly feminine and fully ordained clergy. Those conversations around a woman's place in church and society can't have been easy conversations. I bet many of you remember them. And frankly, from my lived experience being heckled by a visitor in worship simply for being a female preacher in the Deep South and from how I have witnessed

broader society wrestling at a snail's pace to establish equal pay for equal work, craft family leave policies, and secure affordable childcare, I know our work of gender equality is still unfinished. But in church, as in society, we are so much farther down the road, thanks to those willing to air their grievances and those in power who listened, who widened the circle of representation, who made substantive changes to welcome women to the table, even when it meant giving up some seats, sharing some power.

By my reading, it seems that is a bit like what happened in today's text. As Pastor Ryan preached last week, the early church had faced deep discrimination from those in power, who felt threatened by the growing Christian movement. Within their own church, it seems those very Christians weren't sharing power very well either. Yeah, they were pooling their resources and distributing them to all that had need. But the distribution wasn't running so smoothly. There was conflict brewing between two factions of Jewish-Christians. The Hebrews, who spoke mostly Aramaic, were the home-towners in Jerusalem. The Hellenists, who spoke mostly Greek, were first- and second-generation immigrants from the diaspora outside of Jerusalem. It's almost like there was a big Our Daily Bread fellowship meal that was open to all, set up especially to help those in need. But folks started to notice the plates coming to the home-towners' tables were a little more laden, while the outsiders' plates were pretty skimpy, and sometimes, maybe they ran out of food before they got any at all. This is especially problematic for the Hellenist widows, the most vulnerable in that society. Maybe the problem was just about food. But scholars suggest maybe it was also about the unequal distribution of responsibility and honor in the church. Now, I'm sure it wasn't something anyone intended to happen. The Hebrew home-towners were well-known, good friends whom folks looked out for,

subconsciously granted a bit more privilege because they shared the same culture and spoke the same language as the apostles in power. The apostles were super busy. They would gladly wait on tables as Jesus taught them, with a preferentiality for outsiders, but they were wrestling with leaps in theology and ecclesiology and trying to make sure the oral histories we have preserved in the New Testament were being recorded for posterity, were manually copied and spread through the proclamation of the word, all as the church grew exponentially. In all this frenzy, no one was really tracking what was happening at distribution and faithful Hellenist Jewish-Christians and their vulnerable widows, who had become an important and growing part of the community, were being left out. The Hellenists finally started to speak up about the neglect experienced at their seats at the table, and they kept speaking until word got to the Apostles. The leaders could have hoarded their power and incrementally tried to fix things in their spare time, bit by bit. The church could have gotten defensive, and maybe they did a little, reminding folks of all that was on their plate. But more importantly, the leaders listened to those who had grievances. They realized there was indeed a problem they hadn't seen. Something must be done. They realized they needed to expand the leaders in the congregation. There were twelve apostles charged with the Word, but now they needed seven folks who were strictly in charge of ensuring fair distribution of goods.

But here is where text surprised me. Those put in charge weren't the Hebrew home-towners. No, they were the Hellenists, the folks who had the grievances to begin with, who maybe weren't as well known by everyone, who perhaps were newer to the system, but who definitely knew best what the problems were, problems unnoticed by the home-towners. The apostles trusted the church to select the leaders from amongst themselves, asking them to

choose leaders who were in good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom. All seven were men, but...you can't smash the patriarchy overnight, right?! It's very telling that all seven whom the whole church selected were Hellenists - not a representative sampling, not with a sprinkling of Home-towners to keep an eye on things. Nope. All of those listed had Hellenist names, which is easy for us to miss reading the text with 2021 eyes. All were likely from Jewish families, but from the immigrant ones, the outsiders. One was even specifically mentioned as a proselyte, a new convert to the faith, the most outsider of outsiders. It seems, for the early church, privilege was a real problem that had been overlooked, leading to inequality within the church. But the early church's solution was to turn over power to those who aired a grievance, to put them in charge to fix the problems they saw from up close. This is like 101 of what we know about formal processes towards reconciliation, right - lessons gleaned from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa, from post-war Germany, and in other places like Ireland, Rwanda, and Colombia? You always have to let the injured party lead the way. In Acts, representation really mattered and ceding power to the neglected was the first step to resolving the conflict. The whole community was pleased with the decision and the apostles laid their hands on them in blessing and prayer, conveying upon them divine authority to do the hard work that would mend the tears in the fabric of the early church. On the other side of the conflict, the church experienced vitality. The Word of God was free to spread. Those in need were attended equally. The leaders better represented not just the diversity within the church, but in society too. The number of disciples and priests increased greatly.

When I lay this text over our current context today, believe it or not, I don't think we should focus on issues of gender equality. I

mean, we still have gender work to do in our church and denomination, but we're certainly ahead of many. No, I opened with that issue because I have know that struggle well, and you do too. It's a grievance that is largely resolved for us, so it's helpful for tuning our ears to the text. But y'all know the Holy Spirit is not gonna let us off that easily. Instead, I want to know what grievance you were reminded of when I unpacked the text today. Maybe there's some parallel at home, at church, at work, in our city or country, where you can apply the early church's model for conflict resolution? Who are those in power? Who are the hometowners? Who are the outsiders? Maybe you cast the Hellenists as from a different race, sexuality, or religion? Maybe someone from another cultural background or generational cohort? Maybe actual immigrants and refugees? Maybe the poor and those in some need? Maybe someone has recently aired a grievance you never noticed before? Maybe it's hard to believe because their experience was so different from yours?

Right now, this congregation is in the process of nominating elders to serve on session. And I wonder, whose name have you submitted? Often, it can seem the leaders of the church selected to serve on the session come from a rotation of founding families and those with power, money, and influence. But having served on staff at several churches, I know that looks can be deceiving. We aim for our session to be a representative sampling of the church, including the married and divorced, the strait-laced and messy, folks who count their pennies and who have plenty to share, liberals and conservatives, straight and queer, from different cultural backgrounds, cradle Presbyterians and new converts. By the early church's metric, especially in time's of conflict, we simply need a balance of folks who are honest, faithful, and wise, who care and listen, who offer seats at the table to those with grievances, who have the energy, imagination,

intelligence, and love to pursue the Holy Spirit's solutions.

I wonder, in our collective and individual lives, inside and outside of the church, how well are we welcoming outsiders, newcomers? Who are we leaving out? Who is being neglected? Who has raised a grievance among us, here at church, in our homes, at work, and widening the circle - in our city, in our nation and world? How have those grievances been addressed? Were we defensive? Did we listen? Were we willing to make big changes? Were we willing to share power, to give the aggrieved a seat at the table, to give them *all* the seats, and the resources and authority to fix the problem?

When my husband and I first visited this church, no one in the pews knew I was a pastor. And yet, Ben kept remarking about how friendly everyone was to us. Warmth was a big reason that we and others joined this congregation. But after so many years in the PC-USA and as a pastor, it's not too surprising that we blended in easily. The welcome we received hasn't been everyone's experience. A few years ago, some friends in our Sunday School class spoke about how no one in the pews spoke to them when they visited. This week, in the Matthew 25 conversation about congregational vitality, I heard this lament again from faithful folks who've been visiting with us for years, who shared that they still feel quite invisible and forgotten here, not having formed many new relationships. I feel certain that our members never intended to exclude and neglect these brave visitors amongst us. I know often folks are timid about re-introducing themselves to someone who may or may not be new. Or like the apostles, perhaps we are too distracted by other tasks or content catching up with the home-towners. I am so grateful for the honesty and willingness of our visitors to stick around as we try to do better, systemically, such as through nametags in the

works and improvements already implemented in tracking care, or individually, in practicing hospitality to those around us, like inviting your pewmates to lunch after worship and following up on prayer requests. That is just one grievance that came up this week, but if we listen, I know we may hear others within the church and outside these walls. Now, I know home-towners like to focus on the positive, especially in such trying times, when it is impossible to please everyone. But hearing the laments of those Hellenists among us and outside of these walls is holy work to which we are called.

The early church was responsive to these laments. They were willing to change everything about their leadership structure and how they heard and served others to re-establish equity, so that all members, even the newest outsiders knew they were important, valued and loved. I believe that we can do it too, with God's great help. So, the next time you are seated around a table, at home, work, or church, I hope you will look around and ask, who is missing, who is not represented here and why? What grievances are we not hearing? What are we willing to change about how and with whom and where we gather in worship, fellowship, service and study? What standards of what is broadly acceptable here are non-negotiable, and which ones can we flex to be more welcoming? Are we willing to give the outsiders a chance to lead us in new directions that could bring reparative justice, addressing outstanding needs we never perceived? If we are willing to hear grievances and offer true representation by being intentional about giving the aggrieved seats at the table, the early church suggests we may experience not only a path through conflict, but congregational vitality. May it be so. Amen.