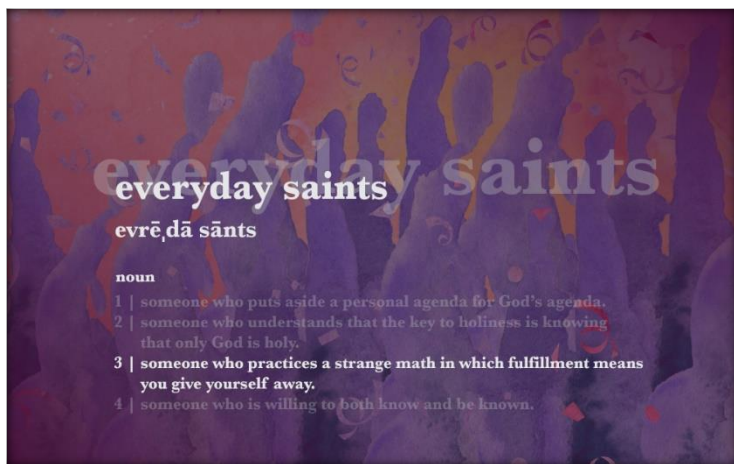


“Acts of Service”

Acts 2:42–47; Acts 6:1–7

The church was and is still built through countless acts of service

In the opening chapters of Acts, Luke gives us several glimpses inside the life of the first Christian community. The community had been born on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit arrived, empowering them all to embrace the new lives given them by Christ. We see them sharing their lives together –



eating meals in fellowship, praying, learning from the apostles, and more. We see them reaching outward as they strive to be their Lord’s hands and feet, enacting the kingdom of God. The Good News is proclaimed. A man is healed. Property is sold and money pooled to ensure that all have what they need. Even the threat of arrest and punishment has not deterred them; they pray for boldness.

Problems emerge

Before too long though, problems begin to emerge in this community of believers. We should not be surprised; Jesus has yet to return. Until he does, we live “between the times,” when God’s victory over sin and death has been won, but we still await the marriage of heaven and earth. Gordon Fee, a prominent New Testament scholar, analogized this to D-Day in WWII. Once 200,000 Allied troops were successfully landed in Normandy, the war was won. There would be much fighting and dying to go . . . but the war was won. Perhaps it is a bit like an MLB team that clinches its division title with ten games still to play. They have won, but the baseball contests go on, some lost, some won until, finally, the trophy can be lifted.

So, yes, problems emerge in this community of faithful believers. That says nothing about their faith, only that they, like we, still must deal with a sinful heart. For example, a man and his wife lie to the apostle—to God! — falsely claiming that they had turned over all the proceeds from a property sale. They had not and when confronted, they both dropped dead.

Now, a more significant problem has emerged that threatens the community’s unity, which is comprised of both Greek-speaking disciples (referred to as the “Hellenists” in most translations) and Aramaic-speaking disciples (the “Hebrews”). In other words, there were disciples even then who were originally from elsewhere in the Roman Empire. As we all know, desiring unity and living unity are not the same. The Greek-speaking widows believe that their needs are not being met for the sake of the Aramaic-speaking widows. The nature of the problem is well laid-out by N.T. Wright:

The problem came to a head over the treatment of widows. This shows that already in the early church the question of ‘living as a single family’ had clear negative as well as positive implications: normally, widows would be taken care of among their own blood-relations, but those family ties appear to have been cut when people joined the new movement. As in some parts of the world to this day, baptism meant saying goodbye to an existing family as well as being welcomed into a new one. And the new one therefore had to take on the obligations of the old. That, by the way, is why we find regulations being drawn up about such things in 1 Timothy 5:3–16. Some have speculated that the problem was exacerbated, in the case of the early church, because many Jewish couples would come from far and wide in the Jewish ‘Diaspora’ (the dispersion of Jews all around the known world) to live in and around Jerusalem in old age so that, eventually, they could be buried in the vicinity. The husband might then die, leaving a disproportionate number of widows from different geographical origins all in the neighborhood of Jerusalem.

Whatever we think about that, the distinction in verse 1 between ‘Hellenists’ and ‘Hebrews’ is probably one of those things with a variety of elements mixed together. Nobody had planned for a complex and intricate welfare system. It had been invented on the hoof when there were other things (such as persecution by the authorities) to think about. It would be surprising if such a system could proceed without difficulties. And in a complex society such as that in Jerusalem, which was both a deeply traditional culture, very conscious of its historic and religious significance, and a cosmopolitan mixture

of Jews from all over the world, it is not surprising that people would be eyeing one another to see if this or that group appeared to be taking advantage.¹

With the food distribution system having broken down, the apostles realize that they are going to need some reorganization of structure and duties. Who will do what and how to see that the needs of all are effectively and justly met? Because there are believers in the community from around the empire, we should see this brief story not merely about the community looking after itself, but, rather, as a concrete expression of our Christ-given mission to the world.

The apostles called a meeting of all the believers in Jerusalem. They outlined the problem and asked the community to select seven men, to whom the apostles would delegate the food distribution (*diakonein*) and assuredly other responsibilities. The community would select the seven, but the apostles set forth two criteria. They must well-respected and it must be clear to all that the men have been endowed by the Holy Spirit with exceptional wisdom. Seven men were chosen; their names are listed in verse five above. In front of the community, the apostles prayed over the seven and laid their hands on them, which denoted a sharing of the apostles' authoritative power. The apostles were ensuring that as they delegated responsibility, they also gave these men authority. The apostles would continue to serve (*diakonia*) but would now focus on prayer and the proclamation of the Gospel.

One of the seven, Stephen, figures larger than the others in the story of the early church. For, after the delegation of authority to the seven, Stephen was arrested, tried, and stoned to death, making him the first martyr (from the Greek word for "witness") in the Christian faith. His service to Christ and the church in life and in death became an important legacy to the movement (Acts 11:19, 22:20).

And so, the believers went forth . . . the community grew. Even temple priests heard God's call. And the "greatest upset" in human history proceeded. Upset? A few years ago, the *Atlantic* magazine asked leaders from a variety of backgrounds to name the greatest upset in history. Cass Sunstein, a prominent legal scholar and regulatory czar, wrote:

The rise of Christianity. Two thousand fifteen years ago (give or take), Jesus Christ was crucified. Whether or not you think that he was the son of God, no oddsmaker would have predicted that today the faith of billions would bear his name.

Indeed. Indeed. There is no greater evidence of the truth we proclaim than the existence of Christianity two millennia after those first disciples.

The call to serve

As those seven men were chosen to lead the community in service, so we are all called to serve and to lead. Jesus calls us to be "servants of all" (Mark 9:35). Paul reminds us that we proclaim Jesus as Lord and are to be servants for Jesus' sake (2 Cor 4:5). But what does this service really look like? Isn't it easy for our service to become self-righteous rather than true service of God? In *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster helps us to see what self-righteous service looks like so we can better grasp the meaning of true service.

Self-righteous service comes from human effort; true service comes out of our relationship with Jesus. Self-righteous service is concerned with the "big" project or "big" deal; true service does not discriminate

Daily Distribution of Food¹

Jewish practice provided a means to distribute food to the poor. One means was to distribute weekly funds to poor residents for them to purchase food. This was called *quppah*, so named after "the box" that was used to collect the funds. A daily distribution of food was provided for nonresidents and was called *tamhuy*, named after the "tray" on which foodstuffs were placed for distribution (Jeremias, 130–32). It appears that the Christian community was imitating the *tamhuy* with its "daily distribution." But does this mean that the widows were not considered "residents"? And one may ask, "Why did Christian Jews have to set up their own means of caring for the poor?" One can only speculate whether the neglect of "the widows" by the larger Jerusalem community might indicate that the Hellenistic Christian community was viewed by the residents of Jerusalem as a distinct enough group that it did not "qualify" for either the *quppah* or *tamhuy*.

1. from Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969); Gerd Lüdemann, *Early Christianity according to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

¹ Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (p. 98). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

among the opportunities to serve. Self-righteous service requires external rewards; true service needs only God's approval. Foster suggests that self-righteous service is focused only on the results, while true service "delights" in the service. Self-righteous service is affected by our whims and moods; true service carries on whether we feel like it or not. Self-righteous service can fracture a community as people strive for control and recognition; true service is selfless and heals a community.

A Servant's Service

Though we are 2,000 years removed from the first communities of Christians, our challenges are not so different. When the apostles were overwhelmed by their duties, they enlisted others, like Stephen, to help, serving the young Christian church. Paul taught the churches he founded that God gives us all gifts to use in our service to God. Some are helpers, some are teachers, some are preachers, some are leaders, some are given gifts of knowledge, or wisdom, or mercy, or giving. The point is that we are ***all*** to serve.

When we join the United Methodist Church we promise to "uphold it with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness." This is a practical expression of our commitment to be servants of God and to do his work. The question is not whether we *will* serve, but only *how*. We might serve by teaching a children's Sunday School class, or singing in the choir, or helping a nursing home resident with weekly shopping, or answering the church phones on a Sunday morning, or serving through Celebrate Recovery, or building a handicapped ramp for a senior...there is no end to the opportunities, for there is no end to the need. Make no mistake; God wants more from us than simply an hour or two on Sunday mornings—virtual or in-person! We, the people of God, are called to lives of joyful service to God and others.