

Delivered: Saint Paul UMC (Lincoln, NE) on May 9, 2021 (6th Sunday of Easter)

SERMON: A UNIFIED COMMUNITY

Series: "A Resurrected Community"

Text: Acts 6:1-7

By *Jed Linder*

OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray... Gracious God, we thank you for this time together to worship, to pray, and fellowship with one another. Pour out your Spirit upon us now, and prepare our hearts and our minds for your message to us this day. In Jesus name we pray, amen.

I. INTRODUCTION: LIVING AS A RESURRECTED COMMUNITY

Well, this year's Eastertide is nearing an end, and Pentecost is just a couple of weeks away. And although we will remain in the Book of Acts through Pentecost, our current focus on this first, church community will end with today's message.

Our focus has been, of course, what the Easter event meant for the church 2,000 years ago, and what it means for our church today. And we've been stressing how that empty tomb back then changed everything. How it changed the lives of those Jesus' followers. How it changed the society in ancient Jerusalem. And, ultimately, how it changed the trajectory of history forever, as the world was introduced into a whole new way of life, a Christ way of life, a resurrected way of life, coming from this the very first resurrected community.

Specifically, we've been focused on this first church's flourishing as it devoted itself to four practices that distinguished this group of Jesus' followers as the resurrected community... all of which are mentioned in the verse Acts 2:42, which reads [SLIDE: Acts 2:42, without my comments in the brackets]:

⁴² The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching [that's one], to the community [that's two], to their shared meals [that's three], and to their prayers [that's four].

Now we've talked about number 1, and the courageous teaching and witness that the Apostles and the early church had demonstrated throughout the city. This was a witness that led directly to the powerful Jerusalem authority's attempts to silence anyone speaking in Jesus' name, including with verbal threats, prison time, and violent beatings. We also talked about number 2, and the believer's devotion to one another in the community, particularly evident in a radical generosity that provided for everyone in the church, leaving no one needy. And, last week we talked about number 4, and their strong devotion to prayer.

For this final week, then, we'll look at number 3, and this nascent church's devotion to sharing meals. Remember, this church shared everything back then, from possessions and money to worship and time. They were, among everything else, unified. And this unity was vital for all of their practices, but particularly for their sharing of meals... sometimes called table fellowship.

II. TABLE FELLOWSHIP

After all, when people sit down to share a meal with one another, you can't help but getting to know each other. It's a place for sharing the news of our lives: our triumphs and failures, our hopes and our dreams. It's the place to tell a classic joke, recount a favorite memory, or tell someone you love them for that very first time. And it's a place to comfort one another in periods of grief and pain, reminding them that they are not alone. Why do you think a meal is often the first thing people do after a funeral?

A table is a place for prayer. A place to enjoy God's grace and abundance. And a place to share God's love with others. People have known this for centuries, including the first church... including Jesus, himself. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright put it particularly cleverly when he wrote [SLIDE: NT Wright Quote]: "When Jesus himself wanted to explain to his disciples what his forthcoming death was all about, he didn't give them a theory, he gave them a meal."

Sharing meals is a time of formation and growth for the community, and it helped lead to this early church's strong bond – this powerful unity. And unity is, most definitely, a resurrected community practice, and a practice this first church, in its very beginning stage, did quite well. Despite the trouble and threats they'd been facing coming from outside their community, inside, they remained of "one in heart and mind" (Acts 4:32)... at least until our passage for today.

SCRIPTURE

I invite you to listen as I now read from Acts 6:1-7 [Begin SLIDES of the scripture]:

¹About that time, while the number of disciples continued to increase, a complaint arose. Greek-speaking disciples accused the Aramaic-speaking disciples because their widows were being overlooked in the daily food service. ²The Twelve called a meeting of all the disciples and said, "It isn't right for us to set aside proclamation of God's word in order to serve tables.³ Brothers and sisters, carefully choose seven well-respected men from among you. They must be well-respected and endowed by the Spirit with exceptional wisdom. We will put them in charge of this concern. ⁴As for us, we will devote ourselves to prayer and the service of proclaiming the word." ⁵This proposal pleased the entire community. They selected Stephen, a man endowed by the Holy Spirit with exceptional faith, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶The community presented these seven to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷God's word continued to grow. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased significantly. Even a large group of priests embraced the faith.

III. DISUNITY

So that, there, is the first major, internal problem in the church, and, you might say, it ends the Easter Honeymoon period of the first church. So, what happened?

Some people suggest it was a growing numbers problem. In other words, the church had been growing so much that the current church leadership – the apostles – were unable to keep up with the demand the community had when it came to food. And while this is certainly a problem churches can face when they grow, and while it may be part of the problem back then, this, alone, doesn't explain why it is just one, very particular group that is being overlooked. So

beyond any infrastructure issues, there actually seems to be a problem here of systemic discrimination! Discrimination coming out of a prejudice against the Greek-speaking widows.

Now, the text says Greek-speaking widows for a reason... Back then, there was a division between what are called Hellenist and Hebraic Jews. Remember, as far as we know, the early church at this point is made up entirely of Jews – they are Jews following the way of Jesus. But just because they are all Jews, it doesn't mean they are all the same. Initially, the church was made up of Hebraic Jews: men and women who lived in Israel and spoke Aramaic. This is what Jesus and the 12 apostles were. But after the outpouring of the Spirit – which occurred when everyone was at the dinner table, I might add – Jews from all different backgrounds and geographies began coming into the church. These people spoke Greek, which was kind of the universal language back then in the Roman Empire, and they usually came from outside of Israel. But the language they were speaking was emblematic of so much more than just the ways they communicate! Language is tied together with traditions, cultural imaginations and ways of life. Language even leads into how people perceive the world around them.

Such differences, though, can also lead to other things, and one of those things, all-to-often, is prejudice. A prejudice that can make both negative and positive assumptions based upon someone's people group, and a prejudice that can lead to the problem of discrimination. And this is a huge problem for the first church... Greek-speaking widows represent both the "widow" and the "immigrant," who are two of the three most vulnerable groups (the other being orphans) that the prophets and the Scriptures continually demand receive special care and consideration from all people who follow God.

This was a problem that is incompatible with the promise of resurrection, incompatible with the way of Jesus Christ, and a problem that was threatening to destroy the unity of the first church, as well as its continued growth!

Thankfully, though, the apostles actually listened to the complaints, and the community made changes to bring about justice.

IV. A UNIFIED COMMUNITY

Specifically, they appointed 7 men from the community who were, quote "**well-respected and endowed by the Spirit with exceptional wisdom**" (v. 3) – and wouldn't it be something if those were the job requirements for some of the jobs of today?! Not what is your background, not where did you go to school, and not what are your qualifications? But, instead, are you a good person or not? (well, maybe not necessarily doctors...)

And, perhaps most notably, the 7 who were chosen all had Greek names. In other words, the community chose from the group being discriminated against, and lifted them up to power, into leadership positions. For who better to confront systemic discrimination than those who are facing it every day?

And the church found some measure of unity again. All the people had food to eat, and tables to eat at together. And both God's word, and the resurrected community, continued to grow.

And this whole thing soon leads the church into its next missionary field, because these new leaders take the good news of Easter beyond the walls of Jerusalem, into the rest of the Greco-Roman Empire. First to the Greek-speaking, Jewish communities, i.e., the Hellenist, and then, finally, to the Gentiles... which includes all of us here at this church.

V. CONCLUSION: SOMETHING TO SAY

And so, what does this mean for our church today? And how should we, as a resurrected community following Jesus, share this with the world around us?

I have said from the very beginning of this series that we, as a church, as a group of Jesus' followers, have a unique, alternative message that we need to send to the world around us. A message of unity, generosity, justice, and love for all, to counter all the messages of division, selfishness, domination, and a refusal to forgive others. And I do believe this is the case. And right now that message of unity and coming together is just as important as it ever was. It's a message that *should* draw people together of all different languages, backgrounds, races, ethnicities, genders, politics, you name it! We should be the remedy for what ails this country, and what ails this world!

Sadly, of course, we seem to be just as divided as everybody else. All too often we, figuratively and literally, refuse to eat with those who speak, think, and act differently from ourselves. Our churches are divided, they are often segregated, they reject people with different backgrounds and political beliefs, and they just keep dividing further... But it doesn't have to be this way, and it doesn't have to stay this way.

Being a part of the church, a part of the resurrected community, and following Jesus, is an awesome thing, and we are privileged to be a part of it! We are blessed to be part of a community who cares for one another, who gives generously to others, who prays with one another, and who is, I hope, looking for more ways to come together as a unified body of Christ.

And so, as we move towards Pentecost, and as we go forth into the rest of the year, I invite everybody here in this building, and online, to start telling people about all of this. Be courageous, and start telling people about these alternative messages coming from the resurrected community, and even invite them to come visit our own resurrected community here at Saint Paul. Because the good news of Easter, the good news of Christ, and the good news of being a part of Jesus' church, Jesus' resurrected community, is worth being shared!

Amen? Amen.

PRAYERS

And now I invite you all to join with me in a time of prayer, together...

Gracious God, thank you for this time of Easter. A time to remember what you have done for us all, and a time of refreshment, imbuing us with the hope that sustains, and the love that encourages. Empower us now with courage, and equip us with messages of unity, generosity, and compassion, all with a zeal for who you are and what you will.

Thank you, also, for the mothers of the world. Mothers, whose faith can move mountains, and whose prayers can change lives, and whose love can heal wounds. May all people find such figures in their lives who can play such a role, regardless of their blood or birth.

And thank you for Saint Paul. Lead us as we go forward, and hear our prayers, as we join together and say the prayer you taught us 2,000 years ago:

[SLIDES of the LORD'S PRAYER]

OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN,
HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME.

YOUR KINGDOM COME.
YOUR WILL BE DONE
ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN.

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD,
AND FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES,
AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US,

AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION,
BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL.

FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM,
AND THE POWER, AND THE GLORY,
FOR EVER AND EVER

AMEN