

“MAKING SPACE FOR NEW MINISTRY”

Isaiah 43:1-2, 18-21; Acts 6:1-7

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The church has never been perfect. It was not perfect fifty years ago when sanctuaries were overflowing on Sunday morning, baptisms were a regular occurrence, and youth programs were bursting at the seams. It was not perfect when mission trips were an annual occurrence in most congregations. It did not become perfect when we started recognizing the gifts of women for ministry or when welcome was extended to all people regardless of sexual orientation.

The church wasn't perfect when it began advocating for civil rights in the sixties, when it stopped telling abused women to return to their husbands, or when it stopped complaining about the noise that children made during worship. The church did not become perfect in the reformation when it rediscovered the priesthood of all believers, corrected the practice of selling indulgences, and restored the Bible to the laity.

There are some who believe in the sanctity of the early church, who think that if we returned to the practices of those days, we'd be alright. But the church has never been perfect. The problem mentioned in Acts in today's reading seems minor next to the first problem that Luke reported in chapter five. That story at first glance seems more relevant to a stewardship dedication service. There were some who had sold their property and given the proceeds to the faith community. Ananias and Sapphira had done this but withheld some of the proceeds for their own use. For lying to the community and appearing to be more generous than they in fact were, they are rewarded with death. Thankfully we don't see these things happen today, but more than one pastor has used this story to nudge their congregations to greater generosity.

Let me reassure you, that is not my intention in mentioning the story. Ananias and Sapphira are simply the first illustration of a church that is not perfect. Living in a generous community was no guarantee that people would miraculously become generous themselves. In some respects I consider that story less consequential than today's, though.

Certain widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. We might minimize this problem by suggesting that this was simply some administrative oversight, but then we're told that the "Hellenist widows" were neglected while the Hebrew widows were attended to. It's not just oversight. It's discrimination. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews and the Hebrews spoke Aramaic. They were all Jews, but they were culturally divided by language and background. The Hellenists had left Jerusalem a couple centuries before under intense persecution. Some of them were recently returned. Some had been back for a while. But they belonged to their own synagogue and were regarded as second-class Jews in the same that some people think about immigrants today. It's

perhaps not an accident that the apostles were Hebrews. When the two groups came together under Christ... well, they didn't *quite* come together.

The early faith community gathered around Jesus was not perfect. Failure to take care of the widow was a serious offense and failure to welcome the stranger was a violation of Jewish law. So this is not a little thing.

To the credit of the twelve leaders of the community, they respond quickly and propose a solution. With the consent of the community, they appoint seven men to take charge of the distribution. They all appear to be Hellenists, but the whole community seems pleased with the solution. From my armchair two millennia later, I can see problems with the proposal. In the first place preaching or serving the word is separated from serving at tables, something Jesus would never have approved. And it seems that no attempt is made to address directly the discrimination that lies at the root of the original problem

Of course, they don't care that I'm not happy with their solution. It doesn't matter to them that I think they could have done so much more. The community is pleased. A new ministry is established, a ministry in fact that we see as the basis for the ministry of our deacons today.

But something else unexpected happened. In verse 8, we are told that Stephen, one of these new deacons, began doing great wonders and signs among the people. Several weeks ago I talked about Phillip who was out preaching among the Samaritans and sharing the gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch. When the apostles surrendered their authority to serve at tables, at least these two of the new deacons took it as permission to "serve up the word" as well. Whereas the twelve separated the two functions, these Hellenists preserved the teaching of Jesus in holding them together.

In making space for new ministry, the apostles got more ministry than they'd intended or imagined. Stephen will soon become so bold in his words and actions that he will be the church's first martyr, and Phillip's success will pre-figure Paul's (also not an original apostle) amazing mission to the gentiles.

I'm sure it doesn't always work like this: the church discovers a flaw, it attempts to address it in inadequate ways, and a new wholly unexpected ministry flourishes in its wake. In fact, we've seen enough disasters stem from the church's imperfections. We've seen the gospel constricted by the church's hierarchical structure. We've seen "infidels" slain in the crusades, and "heretics" burned at the stake. We've mistaken faithful women for witches, thought of anyone who wasn't white as inferior, and declared a variety of "sinners" to be destined for hell. But sometimes, grace happens and God works in spite of us.

You all know that the church isn't perfect, and here you are! Many of you will pledge money to this flawed institution. Some of you will even increase the amount you give. Those contributions will make new ministries happen in the coming year. I don't how amazing or significant those new ministries will be; but I believe that in this imperfect place we call the church, if we will have the courage to face our flaws, if we come together as

a community to address them, and if we live out the authority granted to each of us by the gospel of Jesus Christ, we can expect some pretty amazing things to happen.

Courage, grace, and calling: these things make space for new ministry and by the way, can inspire generosity. The church... it's not perfect. If it were, God wouldn't need to be about the business of making "a new thing." We'd be fine doing things just the way we've always done them. Even though we're not perfect I'm not giving up on this "new thing" that Isaiah talks about God doing. I'm looking forward to seeing a path through the wilderness and a river through the desert. Amen.