

### ***“The Word of God Continued to Increase”***

In the name of him who is the Way the Truth and the Life, dear friends in Christ: In last week’s reading from the book of Acts, we heard a glowing description of the way the first Christians got along together. In the weeks and months following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, St. Luke records that *“they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers ... And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions ... and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.”* Wow. Can you imagine that? Everyone getting along together in such wonderful harmony. It sounds almost perfect, doesn’t it? Which, as you know, means that it couldn’t last.

Nor did it. And today’s reading from Acts tells us about the first major ripple on the Church’s otherwise mirror-like pond of peace. It was a complaint by the Hellenist against the Hebrews. They claimed that their widows were being short-changed in the daily distribution of gifts to the poor and needy. And perhaps a little background information will help us understand the conflict behind the conflict. You see, Jews in Jerusalem in the first century were not all of the same stripe. You know, for example, that there were rival political and theological parties like the Pharisees and Sadducees. We talk about them often. But there were other divisions; and perhaps the most wide-sweeping was the division between the Hellenist, that is, the Greek speaking Jews, and the Hebrews, who spoke mostly Aramaic – but who insisted that for Scripture reading and worship only Hebrew could be spoken. It was a situation not unlike that which existed 100 years or so ago in our own synod when there was tension between those who demanded that worship be conducted only in German, while others were moving on to adopt English, the language of the surrounding culture. It was sort of like that – but you have to multiply the intensity of the conflict by about a thousand.

The Hebraic Jews were diehard traditionalists. God spoke Hebrew. He gave us the Scriptures in Hebrew. How could we possibly address him in a different language? And this wasn’t the only thing. In all their customs they clung to the past: food, fashion, music, what they did for recreation; they wanted to preserve their ancient heritage. The Hellenist Jews were more progressive. They were open to adopting other languages and customs, and felt they could do so and still maintain their essential Jewish faith and identity. There were strong opinions on both sides. And perhaps the worst thing a Hebrew parent could imagine was having a son or daughter who went over to the other side.

But now people from both sides of this divide found themselves joined together in the Christian Church. They received the same Baptism. They worshipped together. They heard the same Word. They confessed their unity in the body of Christ. And folks who formerly wouldn’t be caught dead together were kneeling for communion at the same table and fellowshiping in each other’s homes. Amazing how the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel of Jesus Christ can break down barriers and unite people who were formerly at odds.

And yet, still, some of the old prejudices and suspicions remained. That’s the way it is with the sinful nature that remains a part of us as long as we’re in this world. And so, in the unfolding of events, it appeared to some that when distributing gifts that had been given to the

Church to support the needy, the Apostles were favoring the Hebrew widows and not being as generous to the Hellenists.

A few things need to be said about these allegations. First, there's no indication that they were true. It's highly doubtful that the Apostles would have consciously done this. On the other hand, most of the Apostles were Hebraic Jews – so they might have behaved in this way *unconsciously*. We tend to favor our own; it's only natural. On the other hand, because the majority of the Apostles were Hebrews, the Hellenists might have been overly sensitive and subject to fault finding even if there were no cause for offense. But the biggest problem was logistical. The number of Christians was growing at a phenomenal rate. All kinds of gifts were pouring in from generous givers: perishable and nonperishable food items, clothing, fabric, sandals, money, and who knows what else. The Apostles were swamped with duties they hadn't planned for. They had to figure out where to store all this stuff and how to distribute it equitably. And the lists of needy people kept getting longer. And each time a new name was added, someone had to assess what their needs were. You might say that the Apostles were victims of their own success. They simply couldn't keep up with it – not and also keep doing what Christ called them to do: namely to proclaim his Gospel, to baptize and teach, to lead worship and give the faithful the Lord's body and blood. It wasn't that they weren't being unfair; it's that they were stretched too thin and were making honest mistakes.

So this conflict that arose in the Church and the complaint that accompanied it, like so many others that arise in the Church even today, was inevitable. Where people are involved things are going to go wrong. And when they do, disputes will arise. People will complain – rightly or wrongly; but even the perception of a problem is a problem that needs to be dealt with. And this is important: a lot of people in the Church think the worst thing that can happen is for Christians to argue about something. I hear this all the time. And I've seen it, especially at our district conventions. There will be a discussion about some issue that starts to get a little heated because there are strong opinions on both sides. And then someone will rush to the microphone and wail, "Oh, brothers, please! We're arguing! Why can't we just agree to disagree and all get along?" And that trumps everything. The discussion dies on the spot. *But the issue remains unresolved*. Whatever is causing the argument is allowed to continue. And so it festers and grows. It gets worse. It's a terrible way to deal with an issue. It's like thinking that denying the toilet is plugged will make the problem go away. You'll find out differently the next time you flush. And you'll end up with a big stinking mess.

In this fallen world conflicts, arguments, complaints, and sharp differences of opinion are a part of every human relationship. They are going to happen. And in and of themselves they don't undermine the unity of the Church or cause us to break fellowship with others. No; *but how we choose to deal with them might*. That's the problem. I tell this to couples in premarital counseling. You're going to have arguments. At times you're going to fight. That's life. The goal is to argue your point of view and fight in ways that help solve the problem rather than make it worse. Satan and our sinful natures want to use our conflicts to drive us apart. And they love to use old fault lines and perceived hurts to do it. But there's no need to get nasty. We don't need to scream and shout and call each other names. We don't have to use unfair or manipulative tactics to get our way. That doesn't help. Nor do you want to pretend like the conflict doesn't exist. No. When there's a problem you want to come together and devise a solution both sides can agree to and live with so that your peace and harmony are restored.

That's what we see the early Church doing. The Apostles said, hey, we've got a problem – or at very least, the perception of a problem. Let's fix it. So they called together the whole Church. They prayed and thought about it. And then they proposed a workable solution.

Let's choose seven men of strong faith, proven worth, and good reputation and put them in charge of this task of receiving and distributing the gifts for the needy. They can focus on that, and the Apostles can concentrate on doing what they were called to do: the ministry of the Word. Everyone agreed it was a good idea. And we heard how they selected the seven deacons – all of which, by the way, had Greek names, which suggests that most of them were Hellenist Jews. There was probably some wisdom in that: choosing men from the side making the complaint to handle the problem – which they did. And thus Satan was prevented from getting his foot in the door to use this wedge to divide the Church.

In the process of solving this problem, the Church created the diaconate, that is, lay offices to assist in the ministry of the Church. They perform the business and administrative functions of running the organization. The translation in the text of what they do is “serve tables”; and that's likely to be misunderstood by our modern ears. It makes it sound as if they're waiters in a restaurant; but that's not the idea. The bankers and people selling merchandise in the market would do their business from tables they set up. When they did, they were said to be serving tables. It simply means doing business.

But what I'd have you see is that there was no clear Word of God that came down from on high about this matter. They didn't pray about it and wait for an answer from above. No, they proposed this solution because they thought it would work. They exercised their Christian freedom because there was no Word of God against it and they used their noggins, their God-given sense and reason. And there was nothing sacred about the number seven. They could have chosen six or eight or ten deacons. At the time, they thought seven could handle the job. As the Church grew they probably added more. The point is that they were free to implement the system they thought best – and were free to change it as needed. The goal was to keep the whole ministry of the Church going forward smoothly and especially to ensure that those who were called to the ministry of Word and Sacrament were able to concentrate on their duties. That was central: it's through the Word and Sacraments that Jesus makes the Church the Church. It's how the Lord calls people to faith in the Gospel, gives them his Spirit, assures them of the forgiveness of sins by Jesus' cross and passion, and unites them as one in his own crucified and risen body. The diaconate or lay offices were created to support that ministry by performing other necessary tasks.

We do the same today. Congregations appoint chairmen, elders, treasurers, secretaries, trustees, and the members of various permanent and ad hoc boards in order to conduct the administrative functions of the Church. And there's no “one size fits all” in this regard. Congregations are free to come up with whatever system they think will best get the mission done to maintain smooth operations in the organization and most critically to keep the Word and Sacrament ministry the center of the Church's life.

That's what the early Church did. They had a problem that was disturbing the peace and unity of the Church. Worse, it was interfering with the Church's primary mission. So they came together in a spirit of brotherly love and solved the problem. And we heard what the result was: the Word of God continued to increase and the number of disciples multiplied greatly.

That's what we want to happen here. And it can if we resolve not to let Satan and our sinful natures drive us apart over problems that come about. For there certainly will be problems among us – both real and perceived. They're inevitable. Therefore if something's not quite right it's incumbent upon us to voice our concerns, to raise the issues, and not just to sit silently and sulk about them so they get worse. Let's deal with them openly, honestly, and in a spirit of Christian love and concern so that we can solve the problems. No one on the outside is

going to want to be part of a congregation at war with itself. But where they can see true Christian fellowship, the members of the body of Christ truly caring for one another in love – that very well may attract them to see what it is that binds us together. And then they too will hear Gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of his perfect sacrifice and forgiving love that has the power to make them disciples too.

Shifting gears here just a bit, we see in today's text that the damage Satan failed to accomplish within the Church through internal conflict, he then tried to achieve with external force in the form of persecution. The deacon Stephan, and not one of the Apostles, became the first Christian martyr – the first to face death for confessing Jesus Christ as the Way the Truth and the Life – and the first to be received by Jesus into heavenly glory. So in this too Satan failed. The death of a believer is a victory, not a defeat. And we know that the persecution that followed Stephan's stoning only served to spread the Gospel farther and wider so that the Word of God continued to increase and the number of disciples multiplied greatly.

So may the Word of God continue to increase among us despite Satan's best attempts to thwart us through internal conflict or external force. In Christ the victory is already ours. By his cross and passion he's prepared a place for us in his eternal kingdom. Therefore come what may let not our hearts be troubled. And let us entrust ourselves to him who is the Way the Truth and the Life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***