

2020 Great Plains Annual Conference Closing Worship Service and Fixing of Appointments
"Catch Fire for Justice, Mercy, and Truth"
Acts 6:1-7

Saturday, May 30, 2020

STARTING AT ABOUT 3:40 OF THE VIDEO.

Invocation Prayer from St. Anselm of Canterbury

Teach us to seek you today and reveal yourself to us as we seek. For unless you instruct us, we cannot seek you, and unless you reveal yourself, we cannot find you. Give us the desire to seek the fire of your Holy Spirit for justice, mercy, and truth as your Church. Enable us to love you and bring us into your perfect love in finding you. Amen.

Message:

Friends, our Wesleyan missional identity is unique. It involves four distinct but interrelated aspects that enjoin our inner life with our outward life. We are a people of vital personal piety and social holiness that extends beyond the Christian community into our world.

Conference Themes: If you remember, in 2017, our annual conference theme was, Therefore, Go: Love God. In 2018 our theme was, Therefore, Go: Proclaim Christ. Last year, 2019, our theme was, Therefore, Go: Serve Others. And this year our theme was set to be Therefore Go: Do justice.

Although the theme for our 2020 annual conference is now Catch Fire, I invite our congregations to focus our missional efforts in the coming year toward Catching the Fire of the Holy Spirit for works of justice, mercy, and truth-telling in our Church and our world.

The Scripture I read has provided abundant material for teachings and sermons about humility, servanthood, the distinction and interdependence between the work of the clergy and the laity, prayer, discernment, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and about the establishment of the order of deacons.

But this morning, I'd like to approach the scriptures from the perspective of the discriminated Hellenist widows with a particular focus on the Church as a counter-cultural community that is committed to justice, mercy, and truth-telling to sanctify and make Holy a prejudiced, biased, polarized, and unjust world for the glory of God.

Luke's Widows: Luke mentions widows several times in his gospel and the book of Acts. You may remember some of the widows he says.

The first one mentioned by Luke is Anna, an eighty-four-year-old widow who spends all her days and nights at the temple, not only to pray and fast, but probably to also receive her distribution from the Temple food pantry whenever it opened for service (Lk. 2:36-38).

Then there is the most famous widow of all, Mary, the mother of Jesus. Joseph, Mary's husband, and Jesus' adoptive father disappears soon after the beginning of the gospel. Scholars suppose that Joseph died before the start of Jesus' public ministry, leaving Mary to be a widow (Lk, various references).

Luke next mentions, through the words of Jesus, the widow of Zarepath in Sidon, who hosted and fed the prophet Elijah during the famine and whose dead son was brought back to life by Elijah (1 Kings 17:7-16; Lk. 4:26).

Luke tells the story of the widow of Nain, who is on a procession to the cemetery to bury her only son and source of income. Jesus sees the grieving mother and has compassion on her. He touches the coffin and the widow's son comes back to life. He then gives the son to his mother (Lk. 7:11-17).

Luke also mentions the parable of the widow that kept persistently going to an unrighteous judge demanding justice against her opponent until the judge eventually grants the justice she was entitled to and demanded (Lk. 18:1-8).

Then there is the hypothetical seven-times married widow used as a test case meant to test Jesus' doctrine of the resurrection (20:27-33).

This story is followed by the poor widow putting in two small copper coins into the Temple treasury (Lk. 21:1-4).

The widows Luke mentions in his writing are destitute, dependent women vulnerable to exploitation from corrupt authorities (Pharisees, Scribes, and Judges) and thus deprived of essential economic, practical, social, and emotional support.

Church Life: Luke shows us in the first five chapters of the book of Acts, the best of what life in the Church could be.

We read about new Christ believers gathering for prayer to seek the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We read about the Holy Spirit convicting and forgiving people of sin, turning to and putting their faith in Jesus Christ, being baptized, and added by the thousands to the early Christian community.

We read how the early Church enjoyed unity, mutual care, table fellowship, and how the Church enjoyed the goodwill of all the people.

We learn about the gifts of extravagant generosity, healings, the tormented delivered, and how the Church is accountable.

And we read about the spiritual boldness of the apostles to tell the people the whole message about the life of Jesus and life in Jesus.

Everything was good. The Church was exploding with new growth and dramatically increasing in number.

Discrimination: Then, it happened. A disagreement arose that threatened to disrupt the unity of the Church. One group started murmuring against another. Luke writes that the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.

Roots of Prejudice, Bias, and Discrimination: Ed Rickard, in his commentary on the book of Acts, outlines the issues between the Hebrew and Hellenist widows. He says widows were normally left without a means of self-supporting income. With no work opportunities, widows depended on the support of relatives and alms for the poor. But these sources of assistance often failed to meet a widow's needs. Sometimes a widow's relatives were poor or unwilling to help. The weekly public charity was barely sufficient to sustain healthy life until the next scheduled allocation and distribution.

As a result, widows sank into poverty. Some of the Church's widows may very well have been cut off from family member income because of their Christian testimony, which alienated them from their usual sources of assistance.

The Church accepted the responsibility to provide for the widows. The widows in the early Church were from two cultural groups, the Grecians and Semitic Jews. The Grecian widows were loyal to their Hebrew traditions but were distinct in many ways from Jews.

One difference was language. The Hellenists spoke Greek as their language of choice. If the Hebrews knew Greek, they preferred to talk Hebrew or Aramaic instead of Greek.

Another difference was culture. The Hellenists adapted to the Greek culture. They were probably more acquainted with Greek thought and religion than with Judaism. They dressed differently, had different dining habits, and conducted business differently.

As a result of the distinctions, the Hebrews distrusted and held Hellenist Jews in contempt. We can imagine the two groups segregated when they gathered for worship, study, prayer, and table fellowship.

Response: Luke does not mention the cultural composition of the committee that controlled the distribution of food, but we can suppose that the food pantry committee was probably

made up mostly by Hebrews that did not hold the Hellenists and widows among them in high regard.

An established pattern of food distribution was firmly in place that revealed a break down in the support system of the Church. The problem was that the distribution system was prejudiced and biased against the Hellenistic widows.

Soon after an amazing start, the Church in Jerusalem began manifesting the same brokenness of relationships normalized in the world.

Something needed to be done to mirror Christ's reconciling work and remedy the injustice and the emotional harm, the pain of disrespect, and the deprivation of provisions the Hellenist widows believed they rightly had equal access to as part of the Christian community.

This dispute could have quickly boiled over into anger and aggression by the offended party in the service of justice that could have divided the Church at the beginning.

To the apostle's credit, they listened to the advocates for the Hellenist widows that spoke their truth and quickly acted to resolve the injustice and inequity by creating cross-boundary dialogue and a spiritual discernment process to dismantle the wall of fear, suspicion, and discrimination that separated both groups.

The Selection: The apostles call together the whole community of the disciples and tasked them with removing the prejudiced and biased food distribution practices through the selection of new unbiased leadership. The qualities of those to be selected were more important than the actual job description itself. These persons were to be in good standing and full of the Spirit and wisdom.

The Church chose seven men that fit the apostle's social and spiritual criteria. Justo Gonzalez, a Cuban American historian and theologian, points out that the seven selected and anointed to distribute the food were Hellenists, not Hebrew. Stefanos, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, are Greek names.

Almost unimaginable, isn't it? It's counter-cultural for the powerful Hebrew majority group to give up administrative control of the distribution of food resources to the Hellenist minority! But that is what happened!

Results of the Response and Resolution: This episode in the life of the new Church gives us insight into the commitment of the Church to inclusivity, justice, mercy, and the truth that God makes exception of no one, and neither should God's Church. The new administrative reordering responded to the community's injustice by organizing itself to ensure the equitable distribution of provisions for the most vulnerable needs in their community.

This incident and its just resolution also fill us with hope. We are hopeful because we trust that the Holy Spirit is still at work among us, tearing down walls of hostility and cleansing the Church and the world from the sin of prejudice and biases people have toward each other.

We are learning from the COVID-19 pandemic: Friends, the coronavirus pandemic, has revealed the strength and resolve of our great country. We are a resilient nation, and we have the collective will to come together for the greater good.

In the past few months, we have seen people everywhere come together to take care of their neighbors. Teenagers are driving meals to elderly individuals who can't travel to the store. Young couples are virtually homeschooling other children, and college students are remotely tutoring Jr. and Sr. High School students. Some individuals and companies are making face masks for health care professionals. And some people are playing house concerts to stave off growing loneliness.

People everywhere are partnering with people, and businesses are partnering with companies to share resources, develop solutions, and reduce barriers that limit access to food, health care, and housing.

We know that we will learn from our experience and recover as a nation while, simultaneously, we will develop and install safeguards to mitigate the spread of future pandemics.

This global pandemic has heightened our awareness that we all live on a tiny planet in a remote corner of a vast universe. We are learning of our global interdependence and we are seeking ways to strengthen our interconnectedness and cross-sector collaborations for goodwill.

This pandemic has also shown us as a nation that the most vulnerable in our community are disproportionately impacted. We find that not everyone – especially children out of school - has a smartphone, computer, internet access for communication, working, shopping for essentials, or online learning.

We realize that children depend on our school systems for their daily food and nutrition. We learned that many people have to wait for meals, addiction services, and mental health counseling. And we have learned that people are lonely and isolated.

We have learned that our seniors are vulnerable populations, that a significant number of our families live paycheck to paycheck to paycheck, and that too many in our country are uninsured.

We have also learned that racial and ethnic minority groups in the US are bearing a disproportionate burden of COVID-19 illness and death due to dense living conditions, over-representation in jails, prisons, and detention centers and because they work in essential industry environments. Many do not have paid sick leave and access to health insurance, so they have had more physical exposure to the virus. A large number of our racial and ethnic

minority groups live with chronic conditions brought about by poverty and because of systemic inequalities.

Migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in the US live under enormous stress while they invisibly exist on the margins of society. Many of these persons perform menial tasks for starvation wages; they work in appalling work conditions and are always under threat of discovery and deportation. These persons have no legal protections and suffer a variety of forms of discrimination and have no access to unemployment or financial relief benefits, legal support, or even basic information about legal processes.

These persons have fled poverty, violence, and war in their countries. Now they face difficulties for the right to live and work in the US as their country of refuge.

Friends, these persons are essential and vital to God. They are essential and crucial to our local economies, vital and indispensable to the employment of school personnel, and vital and essential to our Christian spiritual formation in the Wesleyan tradition.

Called to Catch Catch Fire: I believe the Holy Spirit is calling us as United Methodists to Catch Fire for a Spirit Justice, Mercy, and the truth of God's love in Christ for all people.

I believe that the Holy Spirit is calling us to Catch Fire to be the voices for the voiceless, the vulnerable, the silenced, and the exploited in our communities.

I believe the Holy Spirit is calling us to Catch Fire as we commit ourselves to advocate for the dignity, value, and essentialness of people that live among us, but that live on the margins of our society.

The Spirit of God is calling us to a critical analysis of the causes and consequences of marginalization. The Spirit is calling us to carefully and thoughtfully wade through distorted information and educate ourselves about essential issues that negatively impact the lives of the vulnerable among us.

The Spirit of God is calling us to be a counter-cultural community of faith committed to inclusivity, justice, mercy, and the truth of God's love for the least of these.

We are not naïve. We already know this is spiritually demanding, complex, and often unpopular work. But it is God's moral work in the world through God's Church.

The work of justice, mercy, and truth-telling will not be easy, and it will not be for everyone. Work that seeks to unchain the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke, to share our bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into our house; and cover the nakedness and vulnerabilities of people we see in the world will not be easy (Isaiah 58:5-8).

This work was not easy for the prophets. It was not easy for Jesus. It was not easy for the early Church. It certainly was not easy for John Wesley when he spoke up in his day for the slaves and the mistreated in society. And it will not be easy for us. But it is a necessary aspect of our discipleship together with Loving God, Proclaiming Christ, and Serving Others.

But here is the promise of God, "Our light shall break forth like the dawn, and our healing shall spring up quickly; our vindicator shall go before us, the glory of the Lord shall be our rear guard. When we call, the Lord will answer; when we cry for help, God will say, Here I am" (Isaiah 58:8-9).

The Holy Spirit enabled the early Church to deal swiftly, prayerfully, and forcefully with the manifestation of prejudice, bias, and discrimination against the Hellenistic widows.

I believe the Holy Spirit is going to catch our water baptism on fire in a more profound way this coming year as we accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.

Catch Fire for Justice, Mercy, and Truth-telling Great Plains!

Come Holy Spirit, Come!

Rev. Dr. Ruben Saenz Jr.
Bishop, Great Plains Conference
The United Methodist Church