

“The Way Of Growth”

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Acts 6:1-7

CHILDREN’S TIME

Do you enjoy putting together jigsaw puzzles? I like them too, and think they can be a lot of fun. This is the puzzle that Qwynn and I did recently. There are 1000 pieces in this box. Look at them all! Qwynn, how long did it take to put this one together? Yup, eight hours. The pieces are small and different sizes, shapes, and colors and that makes it difficult to put together ... but fun!

What can you tell about the picture if you only look at one piece? Not much, eh? No, actually the pieces are not very important by themselves, but when they are all put together they become one picture.

This reminds me of the church. The church is made up of lots of different kind of people. They are different sizes, shapes, and colors.

Jesus prayed that the Church would be one family so that the world would see God's love in us.

You and I are part of that family. Did you know that you are part of God’s family? That is pretty special!

Jesus wants us to love one another, help one another, and serve one another. When we do that, we are one family, and the world can see God's love in us.

The individual members of the church sometimes have a hard time being a family. We may hear people in the church saying things like “I don't like the songs we sing” or “That preacher talks longer than I like.”

When we say things like that because we are only focused on what we like or don't like, we are no longer being the kind of family that God wants us to be. It is hard for the world to see God's love in us, because they don't see the whole family.

If you ever find yourself thinking only about yourself in the church, remember that Jesus prayed that we would be together as one family. When we think of others more than we think about ourselves, then the world can see God's love in us.

SERMON

A muffled tap is heard from the felt bottom of pieces on a chessboard. Queen to king's rook 3. Knight's pawn captures pawn. Then a mistake. An unnoticed piece slides diagonally to take the queen, and one of the players quips with a grin, "You Protestants — always forgetting the bishop!"

It sounds like the punchline to one of those jokes that begins "A Catholic priest and a Baptist pastor walk into a bar to play chess..." However, this is straight from one of the weekly good-natured chess games at Hope College between the Dean of the Chapel, Trygve Johnson, and the new guy, Father Nicolas Monco, known as "Father Nick," a Catholic Priest who now works on the campus focusing ministry with Catholic students.

Father Nick was invited to the campus because the student demographics have shifted in recent years. The school has a long-standing relationship with the Reformed Church in America (the RCA), a mainline Protestant denomination that is very prominent on the west side of the state of Michigan, where Hope is located.

Once upon a time, and perhaps still in places, there was a huge divide between Protestants and Catholics. People on both sides excluded the others from who they considered to be the true followers of Jesus. Colleges were typically drawn along those affiliation lines and many people agreed this was good.

At one time, most of the students at Hope College were affiliated with the RCA, but now, as the college is becoming more diverse, they comprise only about 10% of the student body. But 19% have a Catholic background.

With a sense of generous welcome, over years of time, the Protestants on campus created the space for who they recognized were their Catholic brothers and sisters in the faith. They not only developed relationships, but the college leadership, brought on staff like Father Nick, who could support and encourage those who want to honor specifically Catholic traditions.

In the early Church, there was a similar challenge of bringing different people together, and Acts captures the very beginning of the debate as the Church was becoming more and more diverse.

However, as with any process of growth you will have ups and downs, just as the picture on the front of the bulletin shows.

Specifically, the movement of Jesus followers, that began as a group of Jews, was now including non-jews, or Gentiles, into the faithful community.

Listen to how they handled the growth in **ACTS 6:1-7**

Last week, we talked about the rapid growth of the early Church in Acts, chapter 4. I mentioned that the growth presented some challenges. This story highlights that reality, and that it didn't take very long before there was serious tension around management and administration as the early Church grew.

This is the way of growth. It includes the ups and downs and tension points of transition.

Jesus' followers were now living in a different kind of community. They were selling their land and possessions and sharing what would otherwise have been personal resources in order that everyone in their community had enough.

They did this because they were very clear that the Holy Spirit was calling them to be one united family, no matter how diverse. In fact, the point was that they were to be as diverse as the people in the world were diverse.

They were also clear that they were to be the core of the re-unified, and renewed Israel. This was God's plan for them. This is why they had to replace Judas who had betrayed Jesus — they needed 12 Apostles, one for each of the tribes of Israel.

This also points to something they believed. They believed that if God was calling them to be this kind of community, then God would provide a way to overcome any problem or obstacle that they encountered along the way. So, they prayed for God's leading and tapped their creative juices to make it work.

Whenever you ask a great number of culturally diverse people to not only just come together, but to live together, you will have some significant tension.

They could have been, and probably were, dealing with all variety of issues, just like any of our families might.

The specific issue mentioned in this passage related to their growth was about the distribution of food to widows.

In those days, taking care of women after their husbands had died was a responsibility that fell to blood relatives. It seems that there were a good number of people who left their families of origin in order to join this new community, making it their primary family. And when their husbands died there was no blood family to care for them. Their support system was left behind in another geographic area.

In addition, the new community had not planned for an expanded welfare system to care for these people. They hadn't made it that far with their community planning.

Now, the real issue was what relative status people held in this new community based on culture, language group, or ethnicity.

What is described here is a social justice, civil rights issue that was boiling up and coming to a head. The people who were Palestinian-born Jews from Judea and Galilee would have spoken Aramaic and had more in common with one another culturally than those who came from lands further away

whose primary language was Greek.

The Palestinian Jews clearly held a place of privilege because they were on their home turf. They were holding certain rights and resources for themselves and not sharing. This excluded those who were Hellenist, the non-Jewish Gentiles.

I can hear the rumblings now. "If we are going to all be here together, do we need to pass new laws of equality? Do we need a change of leadership — maybe someone who can speak our language and represent our interests so that we might be better served?"

There were complaints from the ground level that rose all the way to the top most ranks of leadership in the community, to the Apostles.

The injustice was sufficient enough and was spoken about loud enough that it required calling a major family meeting together to sort it all out.

The Apostles response was to first of all affirm that all people within this new community needed to be treated equally, no matter their ethnicity, language, place of birth, or blood line.

Since they were not currently organized to get this job done properly, their solution was to delegate out new responsibility.

They created and empowered a new team, and set a plan for new action to address the new problem.

The people chosen for this food ministry team, we can tell by their names, were kin to the Gentiles who needed to be better served.

This was good politics. I'm sure these individuals were more sympathetic, able to relate to the very real problem, and also even more importantly, they would probably be more trusted than Palestinian Jews who were perceived to hold greater power in the new community.

This group of empowered ministers became the first Deacons of the Church. The word "deacon" literally means "servant." In this role, they humbled themselves to serve the needs of those who had been marginalized even in this brand new community.

This is the way of growth — ups and downs and struggle toward a better way.

At the end of this story, the Apostles commissioned this new team of Deacons and blessed them to go out and do this new work, and it says that the Word of God increased and the number of disciples grew by leaps and bounds.

Clearly, this affirmed that they were wise in the way that they handled the challenge set before them. They witnessed the fruit of being humble before God and wisely addressing the needs of all people.

May we do likewise.