

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Apr 13th 2013

TWELVE DELEGATE SEVEN: IT TAKES A COMMUNITY TO HELP A WIDOW

The Acts of the Apostles is precious not only because of its account of successes of the Christian mission but also because of its stories about the internal problems of the Christian community and how they resolved those conflicts. Today's first reading is one of those passages. Here is what seems to be going on.

Among the Jewish Christians who were living the kind of communal life described in those glowing portraits in Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35, there seems to have been a cultural divide between the people called 'the Hellenists' and the people called 'the Hebrews.' The Hellenists were so called because they mainly spoke Greek, probably because they, or their parents, were immigrants from the Jewish diaspora (from Rome, say, or Alexandria) and were more at home with Greek ways and the Greek language. The Hebrews, on the other hand, were native Aramaic speakers (like Jesus himself) and no doubt experienced some cultural tension with those "different" Greek speakers, who, though they were Jews and even Christ-believers, were seen as somewhat alien—relative "outsiders."

Besides knowing who the Hellenists and Hebrews were, it is important to know why aid for widows could be problematic. Already in the Hebrew Bible, the poorest people on the land were orphans and widows—orphans for obvious reasons, and widows because a grown woman without a husband was often adrift because she was likely to lack the support of an extended family and needed help from the larger community. In the case of the burgeoning Christian community, widows depended on the generosity of that community.

With all of this in mind, we can imagine how it came about that the (rather alien) Hellenists could complain that their widows were being neglected in the community's sharing of resources. Were they being left out because the (more numerous?) Hebrews were favoring their own widows in this community of goods? That would seem to be the case. The Twelve instinctively knew that this state of affairs went against the way of Jesus, who taught that greatness among his followers lay in serving one another's needs. So the Twelve follow the advice that Moses' father-in-law gave him when he found the burdens of administration too heavy to bear. They delegate. Moses appointed 72 assistants. The Twelve create the Seven, persons that the church has long associated with the role of deacons.

And what is the takeaway for us? First, the episode illustrates how the church is meant to be a community that sees that the needy among us are met. Second, the story demonstrates that those needs

usually require more than acts of spontaneous generosity. They usually call for a sustainable structural change. A church can do this through their faith-based arrangements. A state or a nation requires legislation and savvy taxation to serve the common good.

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