

Lessons from the Hellenist widows

The evangelist Luke, in Acts 6:1-6, tells the story of a complaint made by Hellenist members of the community against Hebrew members. The problem was that the Hellenist widows were not receiving adequate “service” during communal meals.

So the Twelve Apostles called the community together in order to decide how to address the issue. The consensus was to select seven capable men who would focus on serving the Hellenist widows, which in turn would allow the apostles time to focus on their ministry of the Word.

Luke’s choice to narrate this episode demonstrates its importance in defining what it means to be a Christian community, and reflects a larger vision of community found in his Gospel and in Acts. There are three key themes associated with this vision: the inclusion of others, care for the vulnerable and table fellowship.

Including others

The widows and those speaking for them were Hellenist community members. These were Greek-speaking Jewish Christians whose faith reflected their Greek culture and tradition. In the Jerusalem Church, these Christians lived in a community dominated by the Hebrews, who were Aramaic-speaking Hebrew-oriented Jewish Christians.

Between the two groups, there were differences in the practice of their faith, in the cultural dynamics they experienced and in the language that they spoke. Those who spoke for the widows brought the complaint to the leadership of the community, the Twelve Apostles, who responded immediately, not only out of a concern to serve the Hellenist widows, but also

out of a concern that the ministry or “service” be delegated to key members of the community.

For Luke, this episode is but one example of a larger theme consisting of bringing together outsiders and insiders into one diverse but unified community. The first instance is found at Luke 4:16-30. Here Luke tells how Jesus was expelled from his home synagogue in Nazareth after proclaiming a passage from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who stated that the spirit of the Lord was upon him and that the Lord had sent him “to bring good news to the lowly and to heal the brokenhearted” (Is 61:1-2).

Commenting on this, Jesus said “today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). Jesus then recounted two Old Testament stories about non-Israelites – the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:7-16) and Naaman the Syrian (2 Kgs 5:1-14) – who were cared for and blessed by God. These stories exemplify God’s care for the “outsider.”

Another example of this theme is found in Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37), which was designed to shock listeners into thinking differently about the Samaritans, who up to that time had experienced a long rivalry with Israelites. For most of Jesus’ listeners, there was no such thing as a “good Samaritan”; yet it was the Samaritan, acting on the Old Testament commandment to “love your neighbor” (Lev 19:18), who responded with charity to the wounded man lying in the dirt on the road to Jericho.

Finally, in Acts we meet a Roman centurion named Cornelius, who was devoted to the God of Israel and whose “prayers and almsgiving ascended as a memorial offering before God” (Acts 10:1-4). Luke makes the effort to describe the non-Israelite Cornelius through colorful wording that reflects Temple offerings. Cornelius, as a Gentile and even more as a Roman soldier, eventually receives baptism, along with his whole household through Peter (Acts 10:48). These stories reflect

the early Church's concern to include as "insiders" those who were traditionally considered "outsiders."

Care for the vulnerable

This is why Luke's Gospel is known in tradition as the "Gospel of the poor," which inspired the value of taking "the option for the poor." We first see this theme in Mary's Magnificat, in which she sings about a God who "has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty" (Lk 1:52-53).

Serving the 'widows' in our midst

Reflecting on the community life of the early Church, here are some suggestions for including others, caring for the vulnerable and sharing meals to build community in your parish:

- Volunteer at your local food pantry or soup kitchen
- Invite another family over for dinner, especially if they are new to the parish
 - Visit a local nursing home and play games with the residents
- Make cards for homebound parishioners who are unable to come to Mass
- Introduce yourself to one new person after Sunday Mass each week.

In his birth narrative, Luke has Jesus born into poor circumstances, for example, showing him first placed in an animal feeding trough (Lk 2:7). Further into the birth narrative, we learn that Joseph and Mary, at the presentation of Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple, offer the more affordable turtle doves instead of a lamb for the sacrifice (Lk 2:24, see Lev 12:8). Into Jesus' public ministry, Luke's Sermon on the Plain lists Jesus' first beatitude as "blessed are you who are poor" (Lk 6:20).

When it comes to our narrative in Acts 6, Luke certainly knows that the neglect of widows resonates with the Old Testament tradition of caring for the poor of the community. In the book of Deuteronomy, a repeated covenant command is to care for "the resident alien, the orphan and the widow," three of the most vulnerable and marginalized members of the ancient Israelite community (Dt 24:17-22).

That this command to care for the poor is part of covenant means that it is not an option. It is an indispensable part of

being in relationship with God. Thus, the new covenant Jesus instituted at the Last Supper (Lk 22:20) carries with it a social dimension emphasizing care for the vulnerable. In short, the command to the Israelites to care for “the resident alien, the orphan and the widow” carried forward into Jesus’ fulfillment of this covenant to become the practice of the Christian community.

Table fellowship

Finally, the concern expressed for the Hellenist widows takes place within the context of table fellowship. In his Gospel and Acts, Luke repeatedly shows the community gathering for a meal. Scholars have long noticed that in Luke’s Gospel Jesus is frequently found at table and that some of his most important teaching moments happen during a meal.

It is noteworthy that Jesus teaches about inclusion and care for the poor during meals. The “sinful woman” finds forgiveness in Jesus as he sits at meal with a group of Pharisees (Lk 7:36-50). Zacchaeus, the wealthy but hated outsider, a tax collector, resolves to care for the poor as Jesus stays at his house, which likely included a meal (Lk 19:1-10). Acts 2:42-47 depicts community life not only in terms of sharing goods, prayer and receiving the teaching of the apostles, but also in breaking bread together.

Lastly, Peter’s vision, in which he sees “unclean” animals and is told to “slaughter and eat” because “what God has made clean you are not to call profane” (Acts 10:9-16) again emphasizes Luke’s concern for unity between Jewish and Hellenist Christians during community meals. For Luke, what was at stake was not only care for a vulnerable part of the community, but also the very occasion during which the community expresses its sense of *koinonia*, or being together as a family.

In community today

The Greek word *diakonía* used in Acts 6:1 to describe the needy being neglected (literally, “the daily service”) has led to an association of this service with the role of the deacon in modern church communities. In Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, the laying on of hands by the Twelve upon the seven worthy “deacons” associates this episode with the apostolic succession of bishops. But this should also be a powerful reminder to the whole community of a covenant responsibility for the needs of the vulnerable among us. That the widows are Hellenist is a reminder that the responsibility extends concern to people that are not easily considered “insiders” or part of the community. This includes not only social, but racial, cultural, ideological, political and even religious dimensions.

Who are the Hellenists, widows, orphans, immigrants, Samaritans and tax collectors among us today? Our political landscape challenges us with a number of divisive issues, including immigration and universal health care. Christians can have valid disagreements about specifics of these policies, but we all can learn from the example of early Christian communities.

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