

Sermon by Bishop Daniel Arichea Jr.,

Resident Bishop, Baguio Area

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Text: Acts 6:1-7; 11:19-26

You look so different from here. You look so vast and your faces look so small. This is not a usual congregation. This is only the second General Conference I have attended, so I am a novice compared to many of you. This is also my first and probably my only opportunity to speak at General Conference, so while I have the floor I will not give it up. I have also bad news for you, my wife was supposed to be here. Her name is Ruth, but she has not been able to come because of visa problems in the Philippines. You Americans are terrible when it comes to visas for Filipinos. And so today I come to you as a Ruth-less bishop. Well, we don't have all day.

For the past week we have been concentrating on unity. The theme of our conference is, "We who are many are one body." And we have used the Ephesian text, especially chapter 4, for there is so much focus on unity. Probably it is good for us to remember Chapter 4:4-6 all the time, for the seven-fold unity of the church is emphasized. There is one body, one Lord, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and finally one God who is Lord of all and above all and through all and in all.

Now, we would have wished that all this unity is always present and visible in the church. That would be heaven for us. But as you Americans would say, "It ain't so." There are crisis situations that threaten, undermine, but hopefully, strengthen this unity. Now one of these crisis situations is in chapter 6 of the Book of Acts, which is our text for the morning. In this particular case, the problem was not earth shaking; it was not a problem of heresy or theology or immorality in the church. The problem was simply dry, or dinary. It was the problem of food. Some of the women in the church were being neglected in the distribution of food.

Now, as we look at this problem, though, I have the suspicion that the problem of food is simply a façade for deeper problems. First of all, the people neglected in the distribution of food were women. And you women in the audience, in the congregation, in the General Conference, would see this as an example of violence against women, and rightly so.

There is, however, a much deeper problem: namely, the relationship between two groups in the church. Sure, the church started as a Jewish movement, and even at this time all the members of the church were Jews. But now we are told there are two groups of Jews, one group being Hebrew-oriented in terms of language and culture, and the other group being Greek-oriented in terms of language and culture, and the Hebrew group is the dominant group. After all, they were the leaders of the church, and the Greek-oriented

group felt discriminated against. They were not part of the leadership, and they were not part of the decision-making.

So, here was the situation: a possible crisis within the church that could cost the church problems in its mission and ministry to the world. Now come the 12 apostles who are the leaders of the community of faith, and they are confronted with a crisis situation which needs crisis management. What should the leaders of the church do in this kind of a situation? First of all, we need to pay attention to what they could have done but did not do. They could have ignored the problem simply as unimportant and as sour grapes by a small group within the community of faith. We in Asia use this method a lot; we call it "the grace of time." If you wait long enough, the problem will go away and will be forgotten. The problem is, it does not go away.

Or the apostles could have solved the problem in a hierarchical and dogmatic way by issuing a decree or a pronouncement by telling the congregation, "This is what you must do." As a bishop in the church, I receive so many letters from members of the church, and I'm sure the other bishops receive these letters as well. These letters are urging, prodding, even commanding bishops to come out with pronouncements, authoritative decrees on their stand on issues that are considered as life and death issues in the church. And if we can only issue those decrees, everything will be solved. Well, the apostles did not issue a decree, so why should we?

Or, the apostles could have formed a task force or a committee to talk about the problem—headed by one of them, of course—to talk about the problem and solve the problem to the satisfaction of all. This would be the United Methodist way of solving it.

Now let us note what the apostles did. First of all, they reexamined their priorities. Confronted with a crisis in the church, they came to a greater awareness of their main task as leaders of the church within the community. Look at verses 2 and 4: "We should not give up preaching God's message in order to serve at tables. We can spend the time praying and serving God by preaching." They considered their main task to be the proclamation of the gospel. They were spiritual leaders. Confronted with a crisis they reexamined their priorities.

And you say our church, The United Methodist Church, is in crisis? Well then, if it is in crisis let us examine our priorities. Let us not allow any crisis to undermine our efforts to be faithful to our main task and mission as a church. Let us never major in minors.

Secondly, the apostles called a meeting, not simply of the aggrieved party, but all of the accused party, but of the whole congregation, the whole community of faith was called to meet. This is probably the first congregational meeting of Christians. Here we have democracy at work within the church. Here was an assertion of the importance of the grass roots, the importance of the ordinary members, the importance of lay people within the church.

The church, after all, is a lay movement. This is an assertion of the importance of the pew and those who sit in the pews and, who, in their own way, support the work of the local churches and beyond, and without whom the church could never exist or survive.

Third, the apostles issued a suggestion to the community. The Greek word used here is “*logos*,” *word*, which saying *utterance*, but in this case simply means a *suggestion*. The apostles did not say “This is what you should do.” The apostles said “We suggest this for your consideration.” And the suggestions of the apostles we are told in verse five “pleased every one.” And they decided to put it into effect and they elected seven *men* as the leaders of this new community.

Now let us look at what the...let us look at the solution for awhile. There are two unfortunate things about this solution. First, it is rather unfortunate that all seven leaders selected were men. Would it have been good if one of them was a woman? It would have been the beginning of the solution to the problem of the proper place of women within the church, in this early stage of the church. Would you have wished—sometimes I do—that the first Christian martyr was not a man named Stephen but a woman named Stephanie? That would have been great.

Secondly, it is unfortunate that scholarship has taken this passage as the beginning of the Order of Deacons in the church and that the seven men selected were the first deacons. Some 35 years ago when I wrote my dissertation on this topic, I, too, advocated this position. I confess to you I was wrong. The seven were not clergy. The seven were lay. They were lay members of the church who, as the text says, were “full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” There is always need for dedicated and educated laity as leaders of the church.

Now, what is the significance of servant? Before this time we have heard of 12 or 72. The number 12 stands or depicts a traditional Jewish approach. It is a number that was appropriate when Christianity was primarily Jewish, traditional Jewish. But when the church began to move beyond the boundaries of traditional Judaism, it needed a new structure. And, therefore, the number seven stands for the new approach within the community of faith. It is a recognition that the Christian movement could not simply remain within the context of one culture and one language. By the very nature of the message that it proclaims, the Christian community had to recognize and accept diversity and inclusiveness as vital parts of its nature.

Have we forgotten, perhaps, “Go into all the world?” For God loves the world so much. The gospel was not intended for only one group of people but for all peoples. And the Christian community formed out of that proclamation of the gospel must reflect the diversity and inclusiveness that is demanded by the gospel message. Let us also note that all seven were Greek-speaking members of the community. Not one of them came from the Hebrew group. They all came from the aggrieved party. This is very obvious in the fact that all seven had Greek names. This development was, of course, a great sacrifice for the Hebrew group. But you see, all of them were committed to solving a problem that could undermine the mission of the church and its witness to the world. And so this desire for effectiveness in mission led the accused party to consider sacrificing themselves for the sake of the greater good.

A further observation: the solution led, of course, to representative democracy. Obviously it was not possible for the whole Christian community to be making decisions all the time. So instead of dealing directly with the problem, the community was given the task of electing its own representatives.

There are so many implications of this short passage for me, for you and for the whole church as we consider the challenges that be set us in this day and age and even during this General Conference. For instance, how do you deal with diversity within the community of faith? Often diversity is used to define who is in and who is out. But in Acts, the faith community saw diversity as an element that would enrich the believers, enrich the fellowship, and as a tool for mission and evangelism that opens up the church to more and more people with diverse languages, cultures, and eventually, and eventually, inevitably, diverse interpretations of the same gospel message and its application to individuals and to society in general.

The church could have become monolithic, you know, it could have become a fellowship of one language. Then we would be reading and speaking Hebrew in much the same way that our Islamic brothers are reading and speaking Arabic. There would not have been any room for the Greek New Testament. Thanks to the apostles and to the early church, this did not happen. Instead of affirming only one language, we can now affirm many languages and, in fact, affirm all languages of the world.

Language is important, not as a way of dominating people, but as an instrument of proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We should rejoice! We should rejoice that at this General Conference the delegates, your delegates represent so many languages, so many language groups, and your action to provide adequate translation for all peoples here has affirmed both the importance of language and the importance of every delegate in this General Conference.

I worked for the United Bible Societies for 26 years as a translation consultant, and our experience in Bible translation is, that whenever the Bible is translated in one language,

any language, that language gains honor and prestige because it becomes an appropriate instrument for the proclamation of the gospel. And people begin to take pride in their own language.

To day, the Bible is translated into over 2,200 languages. Can you imagine that 2,200 groups of people can listen and can read the gospel message in their own heart language and are able to understand the gospel message? Not as some thing strange or foreign, but as some thing that really becomes incarnate in their midst.

The church could have become monolithic in terms of culture, but thanks to Acts 6, we can now affirm all cultures. Culture is important, not as a way of dominating people but as an effective instrument in the proclamation of the gospel message in such a way that it begins to affect people's lives; touch them where they are, as they are, without waiting for them to become something else. You see, the church could have been authoritarian and hierarchical in its leadership, but thanks to Acts 6, we now can see what happens when the leaders of the church trust the Christian community.

Subsequent events as reported in the Book of Acts proved that development; in Acts 6 were right on target. When persecution came, as in Acts 11, it was the Greek-oriented Jews who were persecuted. One of their leaders was stoned to death. The Greek-speaking Jews were dispersed. In Acts 11, we see them not in Jerusalem but in Antioch, the center of the church, when it began to move into the Greek and Roman worlds and to be confronted with diversity of greater intensity and to face the challenges of language and culture.

But the church has learned its lesson and learned it well. Or has it? The gospel message is not threatened by diversity. In stead, it is enriched. It is made more relevant and it becomes more effective. Listen my friends, this desire, this tendency, to become monolithic is a temptation in the church that comes back again and again and again. We're all for unity, and unity is interpreted as uniformity, doing things the same way, saying things the same way, believing things in the same way. This is unity by groaning. One of the greatest fears I had in becoming a bishop—boy, I had a lot of fears—but one of the greatest fears of being elected bishop was this preconceived idea that I had (I don't know where I got it) was a preconceived idea I had that all these bishops come to meetings in their clerical vest and clerical collars, all looking the same. I am glad I was wrong, for even a tie is uncomfortable for me.

Do you ever think that the bishops of the church are united in a monolithic, uniform way? Let me tell you something that you already know about your bishops. There is diversity in nationality. There are bishops from Africa, from Europe, from the Philippines, from Puerto Rico, from the United States, and even from Texas.

There is diversity in gender, well, a little, because there are only seven women in the council. But let me tell you, the seven women can outdo all of us men. There is diversity in

height. Bishop Looney is the tallest at 6'6". Some of us are not even five feet. There is diversity in weight. I'm not naming names here. I might lose some friends. More seriously, though, there is diversity in our perception of the gospel message and how this impacts the church and its mission to the world. But that doesn't matter. Despite all this diversity and because of this diversity there is one thing that we are sure of. We bishops love the church. We love the church, as I am sure you do. And we trust the Christian community. We trust you, as I am sure you trust us. So to borrow an expression from Bishop Nacpil in the magnificent Episcopal Address, "Will you now join your bishops in celebrating our diversity and in affirming our love, commitment, and dedication to Christ and his church?"

I think we have a lot to learn from Acts 6. The Christian community showed so much wisdom in what they did. They gave us a beautiful, wonderful model for our life and work together. So somehow we would wish that Acts 6 would be the end of the story. But we go, we read on; we get to Acts 9, and Ananias doesn't want to go to Saul. And we get to Acts 15, and the people in Jerusalem, the mother church, are now spreading the news that non-Jews, Gentiles, should be circumcised before they can become Christians. That means that they have to become Jews before they have to become Christians. It does seem to me that conversion has two aspects, and we have forgotten the second one. Conversion has a vertical aspect: by God's grace, God accepts us. But the horizontal aspect is because God accepts us, we accept one another. And Ananias, to be truly converted, has to be converted to Christ and converted to Saul. Often our conversion leads us away from people rather than towards people. Some times our conversion sets us apart from people rather than making us a part of people. Some times our conversion leads us to a position of exclusion rather than a position of inclusion.

But aren't we glad that the model in Acts 6, triumphed again in Acts 15, the leadership of the church did not allow the community of faith to go back to a stance, the position of exclusivism, but instead emphasized a position of inclusion? There is room for diversity. There is room for differences as long as we hold on to the center of our faith, namely, Jesus Christ our Lord. And, somehow, I would wish with you that our church would truly become inclusive: that somehow all signs and symbols and expressions of exclusion would be removed from both our words and our actions so that we can truly demonstrate God's love for us and our love for one another and our love for all peoples and our love for all creation. To paraphrase a popular Greyhound Bus blurb, it is such a comfort for us to love and leave the judging to God.

And as I look at you now, you are the fulfillment, the realization of this dream, this vision of unity and diversity—different colors, different attires, different nationalities, different languages, different cultures, and lest I forget, different genders. I also celebrate with you the persons in our midst of delegates and representatives from non-United Methodist communions, Wesleyan and Method

ist churches outside The United Methodist Church. They affirm for us the globality and inclusiveness of our fellowship as Methodists around the world. You and all of us in this General Conference are a replica of what the church can be and what the church is and what the church can become.

So what the writer of the book of Revelation is talking about in Chapter 7 (9-10). "After this I looked," John writes, "and there was an enormous crowd. No one could count the people. They were from every race, every tribe, every nation, every language. And they stood in front of the throne and of the Lamb, dressed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands. And they were calling out in a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb'."

A stanza and the chorus of a hymn expresses much better what I am trying to say to you this morning. I wish my wife were here so she could sing it to you, but she's not, and I won't sing it to you. But I should tell you that before I got married I thought I was a singer. I'm not saying any more. Well, any way, here is the hymn: "God of many colors, God of many signs, you have made us different, blessing many kinds. As the old ways disappear, may your love cast out our fear. Many gifts, one Spirit, one love known in many ways. In our difference is blessing, from diversity we praise one Giver, one Lord, one Spirit, one Word known in many ways, hallowing our days. For the Giver, for the gifts, praise, praise, praise!" I ask you, where are you, where are we in all of this?

Think about it. Amen.