

“Handle with Care: Adaptability”

2 Corinthians 5:16-19; Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16; Acts 6:1-6 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 28, 2026

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might grow in trust
and trustworthiness. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

And so today – the culmination of the season of Pentecost! In most churches, Pentecost is one day, and then they're right back into that long stretch of Ordinary Time that lasts up until Advent begins. But here at VLM, regardless of whether Pentecost lands in May or June, it always extends through the last Sunday of June, because our new ministry year begins July first, and so this is the day when we install our lay leaders for the year that is about to dawn. We want to be sure that we are calling upon the power of the Holy Spirit as enthusiastically as we can for these folks, so why not keep up the red banners and paraments, to remind ourselves of that fire?

This year, we've been working through a sermon series titled, “Handle with Care!” The focus of the series is spiritual maturity, and that title is to remind us that spiritual maturity is vital for congregational health, because the way we carry ourselves in church often has greater impact than our behavior in other contexts, because people are often at their most vulnerable when they're at church and will sometimes associate what happens here with God, whether our conduct is godly or not. We must take care in all that we do and say, for, as we read in James a few weeks ago, “the tongue is a fire,” and not in a positive, Holy Spirit kind of way!

As we've moved through this series, we noted that there are more fruits of the Spirit than the nine listed in Galatians three. We touched on the idea that spiritual maturity is vital, not just in the interpersonal context of congregational life, but also on the broader scale of communal and global relations, where it is essential to justice being enacted. We spent a week on trust and how to maintain and cultivate it. We gave a week to transparency, also known as honesty, and how it's required for healthy functioning of the body of Christ. Last week, we explored how important it is to share the load, so that no one person is overwhelmed and nobody is left out of what God is doing here.

Along the way, I think we've learned some subtle lessons about scripture too. It is true that there are some good examples in the Bible, including most obviously Jesus himself. But we experienced how sometimes scripture can be a cautionary tale too; some of the stories we've read showed us people behaving badly, even the people who were supposed to be the "good guys." In a culture where some people try to argue that the Bible is unquestionable, always virtuous, entirely infallible, it is liberating to declare that we can, in fact, use our Spirit-given powers of discernment to see where even the apostles and the gospel writers often fell short. We can learn more from scripture if we're willing to engage with the complications and nuances, than if we just try to pretend every passage obviously makes sense and uplifts us unconditionally.

Today's story is good example of this. Our theme today is "adaptability." If you're not fully convinced that should be a word, think of it as "flexibility." The point is that this story shows the early church confronted by what we might call "growing pains," a problem that arose as their numbers and diversity increased, and how they found a new way of doing things that addressed the issue. Part of spiritual maturity is keeping our eyes open to what's happening and what's shifting and being willing to adapt so that we can respond appropriately.

But in the details of this story, there are some less impressive moments too, and glossing over them would deprive us of important insights. So let's go through this story slowly, and notice in each moment whether the people involved are operating from a place of spiritual maturity or not – or maybe a combination of both!

The story begins, "Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in numbers, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food." So what do we know? The church is growing. We now have two distinct cultural groups included in the community – the Hellenists – or Greek-speaking Jewish Christians – and the Hebrews, Jewish Christians who also spoke Hebrew or Aramaic. Our Spidey senses are already telling us that things are ripe for tension, right? And of course, they are, and that's why the word "complained" comes up. You don't complain unless you're unhappy with something. Then the stakes are made clear: this isn't just superficial, cross-ethnic misunderstanding; it's about the widows, the most vulnerable people in

the community, and it's about food distribution, which means it could be a matter of life and death. This problem matters.

So let's think about what's happening here and who is doing what. It doesn't seem as though the widows are advocating for themselves, although we can't totally rule that out. Someone among the Hellenists has enough confidence to name the problem. They were probably well aware that if they raised the concern, they would be seen as complaining, and they were. But they did it anyway, because the widows were going hungry. That, to me, is an example of spiritual maturity. It required the empathy and courage that we named as fruit of the Spirit a few weeks ago. It was clear that everyone was going to see this problem as an ethnic clash, which had the potential to heighten the drama. But they did it anyway.

As with many of the stories from the early church, there are a lot of details we'd like to have that simply aren't included in the narrative. In the very next verse, the apostles are moving on to solving the problem, which I guess means we can assume they agreed it was a problem, even though nobody ever says so outright. Here is how the writer puts it: "And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.' " I don't know about you, but this is where I start to feel a little judgy. "Wait on tables"?!

Really?! There are widows going hungry, and the apostles diminish that injustice to a wait staff issue?

Before we get to our own Service of Installation, let me be clear: the duties of the Elders and the duties of the Deacons are two different things, but they are both equally vital to the life of the church; neither one is more elevated than the other, regardless of the prejudices of certain apostles who were allowed to remain nameless. I'm calling one point off for the apostles in this scenario.

But the story isn't over yet. Despite the apparent snobbiness in that opening sentence, there is another thing going on there: the apostles are realizing that they can't do it all. They are recognizing the necessity of sharing the load. That's good; that's maturity. Rather than adding food distribution oversight to their own to-do list, they asked for help. So one point back.

And in the next sentence, we can see that the twelve do actually take this problem seriously. They begin by clarifying that a haphazard solution is not good enough; the community must be intentional and thoughtful about how to solve this issue. So they propose a plan: appointing "seven men of good standing" to take on these new responsibilities. The fact that they insisted that the people assigned to these roles needed to be "full of the Spirit and of wisdom" shows that they did, in fact, understand that ensuring equitable distribution of resources, especially in the face of ethnic diversity, required integrity and insight. Good job, you twelve! One point off for attitude, but overall, a solid example of mature community problem-solving.

This was the second major shift in leadership that the early disciples had dealt with since Jesus ascended back to heaven. The first time was the problem of how to replace Judas, because they were clear that there needed to be twelve lead disciples. In both cases, they carried out these transitions in an orderly but swift manner. Those of you who have been involved in bylaws revisions are probably a little envious of the speed with which they concluded this process!

But the lesson here is not just for bureaucratic questions of structure. If the church is alive, the church is changing. And if we're not responding appropriately to those changes and the challenges they bring, we are not contributing to the church's growth, but rather hindering it. What's more, as we've tried to remember throughout this series, the interpersonal issues we deal with within the congregation are reflected on a larger scale in the world beyond our doors. And the world is also constantly changing. If we, as a church, don't recognize and respond to the changes going on in our world, we will make ourselves increasingly irrelevant.

There was a hymn I almost had us sing today, but I decided not to make you trudge through the lines about martyrs and "Jesus' bleeding feet." The part I wanted us to hear comes after that gory bit. It's the second half of the second verse of #634, if you want to look at it. The hymn lyrics were written less than 20 years before the onset of the Civil War, and it seems that it was trying to get people to notice that a moment of decision would soon be upon them. It was time to find a new way to respond to the way the world was shifting. James Russell Lowell wrote, "New

occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth; they must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth.”

It’s exhausting to live in unprecedented times. I know. And we’ve been doing it for six or seven years now; you’d think it might get easier, but it hasn’t. But just as Lowell reminds us, just as the twelve modeled for us, faithfulness requires that we continue learning those “new duties” these “new occasions” are trying to teach us. “Everything has become new!” we read in Second Corinthians. You say that like it’s a good thing, Paul! And it was. And it is. Not an easy thing, but a good thing. God is constantly making the world new. God is constantly making us new. God does desire our comfort, but that doesn’t mean God wants us to get too comfortable.

Complacency is not one of the fruits of the Spirit. Creativity is not found in doing the same thing, the same way we always have. Spiritual maturity is having the courage to recognize what’s new about the current moment and finding innovative ways to address the challenges and blessings that moment has brought to us. Whether that requires us to complain, or ask for help, or say Yes to a new responsibility, we need to lean into the Spirit for guidance as we move forward into that new future. We must handle all of our work with care, for it is the ministry of Jesus Christ that we have banded together here to share. May we open ourselves to the presence of the Holy Spirit as we follow the path God has set before us! Hallelujah and Amen!