

Acts 1:15 In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, 16 “Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— 17 for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”

Acts 1:21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” 23 So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. 24 Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

CHOOSING A NEW LEADER

In just a few weeks I will leave for Pittsburg to represent our Presbytery at this year’s General Assembly. (My wife will go with me to buy extra Maalox and keep me calm. That will be a full time job for sure.)

Anyway, one of the first tasks at the Assembly will be to hold an election. We will elect a Moderator, and this year we will also elect a Stated Clerk.

I’m not sure if things have changed but at the last Assembly I attended these elections were a really big deal. It was almost like a mini presidential campaign, right down to the buttons and signs.

The church does need to elect leaders. But, what criteria do we use? How do we determine if a particular person is right for the job?

Long ago the church faced this issue. They needed a new apostle because Judas betrayed Jesus and had committed suicide.

The risen Jesus had just given his disciples a big job to do. He told them that they should proclaim the gospel to the whole world. But, before they could begin this task they should wait upon the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And then Jesus ascended into heaven leaving the disciples alone.

So, the disciples got together (the Bible tells us there were about 120 of them in those days), and Peter stood up and said, “Well, the first thing we’ve got to do is replace Judas.”

There’s something good about this. This little band of disciples did not despair at such treachery. Instead, they saw it as something that would be overcome by the overarching power and purpose of God.

They even find some Scripture that suggests the betrayal of Judas was all a part of the plan. Peter quoted a Psalm that said, “May another take his place of leadership.” (Acts 1:20)

I think it’s also significant that it is Peter who wants to hold this election. Peter knew more than most what it meant to betray Jesus. Peter had denied Jesus with an oath and had wept bitter tears.

But, Peter had also been restored by the gracious actions of the risen Christ. And so Peter more than most had hope in this time of uncertainty. Peter knew that the will of God couldn’t be defeated, even by the worst betrayals and denials. Peter was “exhibit A” when it came to the power of God’s grace.

But, how should they go about the election of a new apostle? What criteria should they use in selecting him?

Well, if they were to be Jesus’ witnesses in the world it stood to reason that they needed someone who had been a witness to the whole ministry of Jesus, someone who had seen and heard everything that Jesus had said and done.

And so that was their criteria. They wanted someone who had been with Jesus from the time of His baptism until His ascension.

There were only two people who fit those criteria. One was a man named Joseph who was called Barsabbas by his friends. And the other guy was named Matthias.

WAITING ON THE SPIRIT

But, which one should they pick?

That’s a good question. When we have more than one qualified candidates for leadership in the church, how do we decide between them?

(I have seen pulpit committees agonize over the selection of new minister. In fact sometimes they struggle so long over their choice that their top choices go to other churches!)

But, in this case the disciples don’t take a lot of time with their selection. They pray about the matter and ask the Lord to show them who should be the 12th apostle. And then they do the equivalent of flipping a coin.

They cast lots. Heads we pick Matthias. Tails we pick Barsabbas.

Heads it is. Sorry about that Barsabbas.

Congratulations Matthias. You are now an apostle. And this is the last we hear of Matthias.

Now to be fair, we don't hear anything about many of the other apostles after this either. For all we know Matthias did great things for the church. Maybe it just wasn't recorded. And in the Old Testament God's will was often determined by the casting of lots.

But, I've always been a bit skeptical about this election by chance. To me it always seemed to smack of superstition instead of faith. Yes, it's true that the lot may have fallen to Matthias because he was God's chosen. But isn't it equally possible that the lot fell to Matthias because of pure luck?

I wonder if this story is at some level an example of how Jesus' disciples are often reluctant to wait upon the leading of God's Spirit. They are anxious to get the job done, but their priorities are their own and not God's.

(In fact I agree with many commentators that the real 12th apostle was selected later on. Paul, an enemy of the faith became by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit the great leader in the early church. And it was Paul who transformed Christianity from a sect of Judaism to a worldwide religion.)

God's choice is always better. But, often waiting upon God is not easy to do.

We are the same way. In our anxiety to get things done we hurry up and make a plan and elect someone to be responsible for getting things done without allowing time for the Spirit to work.

Show a Presbyterian a problem and he or she will immediately form a committee and maybe even restructure the entire church!

But, is that always the best way to proceed?

I think we have to build in time to listen for the leading of God's Spirit. We have to build in time to consider that God's ways may not be our ways.

RESTORING THE KINGDOM

When we read the history of God's people we learn that sometimes God's plan took generations to accomplish. And even when they arrived in the Promised Land the journey wasn't over. There was still more to learn.

God still had places for them to go. God was forever doing a new thing among his people. Indeed, the story of Jesus was one of those new things. It was a story that fulfilled prophecy, and yet it was also a story that broke the mold.

The biggest problem faced by these early disciples is that they were stuck in the old way of thinking. They couldn't get beyond the idea that they were God's chosen people who would live forever in the Promised Land.

Maybe that's why they thought it was so important to select a 12th disciple to parallel the 12 tribes of Israel. Maybe they thought that they were the New Israel, a new kind of chosen people, but God's chosen nonetheless.

My clue for this interpretation comes from what happened earlier in this same chapter. The disciples ask Jesus a question that they have asked him many times before. Just before his ascension they ask, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6)

Don't be too critical of their persistent question. The disciples had been raised on a dream of past glory. They fondly remembered when David was a powerful king. They reveled in stories of the splendor of Solomon's temple. In those days people respected and even feared Israel.

They longed for a return to the good old days. And they thought that this was the primary mission of the Messiah, to restore Israel to what it used to be.

From their perspective since they were God's chosen, how could God not give them the victory? They had waited so long. Wouldn't now be a good time to restore the kingdom?

These first disciples spent time with Jesus before and after the resurrection. They saw with their own eyes the power and hope of God's salvation. But, they still did not interpret that message correctly.

Over and over again Jesus told the disciples that this was not the point of his kingdom. His kingdom was not of this world. Jesus talked about spiritual transformation instead of political transformation.

But, here they are asking the same old question. Will the kingdom come now? Is now the time when we can throw the Romans out and gain control of our political future?

A GREATER KINGDOM

Jesus answered them by saying, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority."

This not knowing has always been a difficult thing for us to accept. Our basic need for security tempts us to rebel against this foundational concept. We want control. We think that we know what needs to be done to bring in the kingdom here and now, if only Jesus would listen to us!

In order to be an effective witness, we must break that cycle. We must trust the seasons of our life to the sovereign Lord. Our ideas about the kingdom must always be provisional and open to correction because the kingdom we proclaim is not our own. We ask that his kingdom come and his will be done.

Our elections and our actions are but temporary measures until God by the coming of His Spirit allows us to see the truth more clearly. Our dreams for the kingdom are always too small. Only when we are open to being filled with the power of God's Spirit can we begin to bear witness to a kingdom that goes beyond our little world.

The kingdom of God says Jesus would be more than just Israel. The disciples would proclaim the message of the kingdom in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

An authentic witness must be expansive. The good news is not just for me and my family and my friends. The good news is not just for people like me. The gospel is not just for my country. The gospel is for the world.

But, in order to obtain a greater vision of God's kingdom we have to learn how to wait on God. Our dreams ... no matter how bold ... are always too small and limited. The only cure for a small dream is the eye opening, vision-expanding power of God's Spirit.

Like those first disciples, we need to learn how to wait where God tells us to wait. Instead of relying upon our own understanding, we need to learn to rely upon God's will and God's empowering Spirit.

We need to learn that it is dangerous and disobedient to think that we have the answers and the power. We do not. The Kingdom is almost always different from what you and I think it is.

Whether we elect our leaders by vote or flipping a coin is not important. What is important is to remember the provisional nature of any decision we make in the church. Church Councils can and do make mistakes. The church is in constant need of reformation.

But, we can take comfort in the fact that God will not allow our mistakes to stand. In the final analysis it is Jesus who is the head of the church and anything we do or say is subject to the correction of His Word and Spirit.

THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

So I can affirm what we say every week. I do believe in the holy, catholic church. But, holy does not mean perfect. Holy means we are called by God to be a witness. We are a witness to the grace of God in our own life. We simply tell what happened to us when Jesus came into our lives.

And the church is catholic with a little "C." Catholic with a little "c" means universal. There is one true church and that church is universal. The one true church is for the world. Our message is not limited to one group. It is a witness to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the whole world.

God's will is still done through very flawed frightened people ... people like you and me. We call these frightened and misguided people the church.

The Spirit still comes to us. And lives are still changed by the power of that Spirit. People bound by their own small dream are given a greater vision and obstacles that once seemed insurmountable are swept away.

Back in the 1950's theologian, Emil Brunner wrote a book entitled "The Misunderstanding of the Church." In that book, he said that the church we have today is really a mistake. The true church was supposed to be a "pure" fellowship without law, sacraments, and institutional apparatus.

After some long church meeting or in the middle of some messy church squabble, I would be sorely tempted to agree with Brunner. Yes, I believe in the church, but surely this particular church is not the church that I believe in!

This church is just a little too human for my tastes. Surely the real church is somewhere else. Surely there is a real church somewhere, which has no need for officer elections or business meetings or financial planning or conflict management! Surely there is a church where the doctrine is pure and the saints have their halos shined every day!

We wish. But, what church would we put in the place of the very human church that we have today. Would we replace this church with the church of Sunday morning TV where God is a good investment? Would we replace this church with the church of vague thoughts as we take a walk in the woods?

Such a view of the church is certainly less demanding than the God who meets us in the weak and foolish brothers and sisters who actually reside in the flesh and blood church. But, those all too human characters are the very ones God has chosen.

Jesus told us to love one another as he first loved us. But, he failed to mention that some of our brothers and sisters that we are to love wear hard hob nailed boots. They have this unfortunate tendency to step on our toes from time to time. And I'm afraid we return the favor.

When I attended General Assembly one of the candidates for the office of Moderator paraphrased the cartoon character, Pogo. You may remember that Pogo said something like, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Well this candidate said, "We have met the General Assembly, and it is us."

He was right. That odd mix of people from all over the country did represent us. They represented what was best and what was worst about us. They represented a church that is often more a struggle than a blessing. And they represented a church that was witnessing to God's grace in many different ways all over the world.

Sometimes I like to dream about a church that is more "spiritual" than the church I found at the Assembly. Sometimes I like to dream about a church that is less like a business and more like that "pure fellowship" which theologian Brunner envisioned.

But, God didn't choose to work in this way. God chose the church as a witness to his grace. God has chose that all too human and flawed group of people to carry the gospel to the world.

Whatever problems you have in the world, you will have those same problems in the church.

From the very beginning, the Christian community was an ambiguous community. Followers of Jesus were not always faithful. In fact our story for today starts with a crisis in leadership because one of the first disciples betrayed the Lord.

But, the church, this frail and flawed community is not the object of our faith. It is the arena in which faith is found.

It is the place in which we find that God's grace stretches down to embrace apostates and apostles alike. That's really good news because I believe that within each of us there is both apostasy and apostleship.

And so like Simon Peter, we boldly call for the business of the church to continue.

Let us hold our imperfect elections. Let us hold our imperfect assemblies. Let us begin to do God's will as best we can here and now ... because God meets us here.

He meets us here and now in the imperfect faces of our Christian brothers and sisters.

NOT OUR CADILLAC

Garrison Keillor told a story about an experience he had when he was a teen.

He was walking down the sidewalk one day when he saw this unbelievably beautiful woman coming toward him. Her beauty was overwhelming. And he wanted ever so much to impress this beautiful creature. What could he do?

He spied a large white Cadillac parked next to the sidewalk. Strolling over to the Cadillac, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a dime, put it in the parking meter, and leaned confidently against the Cadillac, smiling at the approaching woman.

To his delight, she returned his smile. She moved toward him, spoke to him, saying "Thank you," as she got into the Cadillac and drove off.

Take that as a parable. The church is not our Cadillac. The church we believe in is God's church, and God will preserve her despite our apostasy and foolish pride.

Our job is to wait upon the Spirit. Our job is to align our will with God's will.

Surprisingly, God has decided to work through us. God has decided to bestow his Spirit on us. And this humble fellowship is a sign of his coming kingdom.

Like Matthias, we too have been elected to lead. The lot has fallen on us. God has chosen us to be witnesses to His grace and glory.

Only God knows where it will lead. But, this one thing we do know. His Spirit will be with us every step of the way.

Amen.