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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; John 17:6-19
The Disciple Not Chosen

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²³So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. (Acts 1:23, NRSV)

JOSEPH THE JUST

The lot fell to Matthias. And so it was that the apostolic seat went to this man, not to Joseph. Did Joseph walk away with a heavy heart? Well, if so, it would be natural and human. He was a good man, else he would not have been nominated to fill the apostolic seat. He bears a good name – a name that reveals something of the measure of the man: “Joseph the Just, son of the ‘sabbath’.” *Joseph the Just*. I would be proud of such a name. He seems to have lived up to his name. But now, it is Matthias who enters the elite leadership group called The Twelve, while Joseph the Just fades from the pages of scripture.

Some people within the Church are more famous than others. Carol and I just came back from visiting the remains of one of them: St. James. He was part of the inner three disciples: Peter, James, and John. These were the three who witnessed the Transfiguration of our Lord. These were the three Jesus desired to tarry with him, to watch and pray with him when his soul was so very sorrowful in the garden of Gethsemane. The remains of St. James are in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain. During our recent vacation, Carol and I hiked a little bit of an ancient pilgrimage route leading there. We walked the Camino – the pilgrimage route – in the mountains of Asturias in northern Spain, and we walked the last few miles into Santiago Compostela, joining other pilgrims converging there from all over Europe. As we approached the Cathedral, we walked by the Galician bagpipe player who is so often there greeting the pilgrims. We entered the Cathedral, worshiped in the Pilgrim’s Mass, saw the silver casket where the remains are stored, and hugged the statue of St. James as so many others were doing. Some people within the Communion of Saints, I say, are more famous than the rest of us. St. James is one of them. St. Matthias is one of them. But Joseph Justus: not so much.

SETTING THE STAGE

Let me set the stage a bit for this story of Joseph and Matthias: You might have noticed that the appointed First Lesson for today skips a few verses. The whole reading is from the First Chapter of Acts, but the reading pauses at verse 17, skips over verses 18-20, and then picks up again with verse 21. What was happening in those omitted verses? Something very sad: these verses speak of the despair of Judas, the Betrayer of our Lord. Judas was not one to betray his Master and then go merrily on his way. Judas, it seems, was subject to *self-examination* and to *self-condemnation*. These are quite different things. It is good for us to examine ourselves from time to time. It is of both spiritual and practical advantage to measure ourselves against the Ten Commandments and against the image of Christ we learn from the Bible. Such self-examination gives us a chance to repent, to change things, and to improve. But self-examination is quite a different thing from self-condemnation. If there is any condemning to be done, leave that to the Lord. And leave it to him in hope, that as Jesus did not condemn the woman caught in adultery neither will he condemn us. But alas for Judas, the man not only examined himself, but also condemned himself. The omitted verses tell the story of his end. In St. Matthew we read that Judas hanged himself (Matthew 27:5). Our Acts reading adds the gruesome detail that, “falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out.” I guess the writers of the lectionary did not want to trouble delicate consciences and so left out those verses, but the Bible itself does not seem troubled to tell the story.

In any event, the death of Judas meant that one of the apostolic seats was left empty. Jesus had called twelve disciples. Twelve was a number expressing completeness. Just as there were twelve tribes in Israel, so there were to be twelve disciples. It was as if to say, “No part of the people of God must be left forlorn. None must be neglected.” If you or I should be part of a lowly, out-of-the-way church, let us not worry that we are so small that our Lord cannot see us. No, there are twelve disciples, not eleven. No corner of the church need worry that it is forgotten. No Christian anywhere on this old globe should fear wandering so far as to have wandered out of sight of the Lord.

But Judas is gone. There are only eleven disciples. The blessed company is one short. Who will take his place? St. Peter organizes the election. The one to take Judas’s place must have walked with Jesus from the beginning, from the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River all the way to our Lord’s Ascension. The goal is that this person must be qualified to join the other eleven in witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus, for that is the heart of the faith.

²¹So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²²beginning 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.” (Acts 1:21-22, NRSV)

“Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!” That is what this twelfth man must be able to say. He must be able to witness from the heart and from personal experience. His testimony is not to be based on hearsay, but on personal experience of these holy matters. And he must have the right *attitude* toward the resurrection of Jesus, so that he is happy about the resurrection, thrilled by the resurrection. How else is he going to be able to comfort and shepherd the world? He has got to be the kind of person who can walk up to a stranger, grab him by the shirt collar and shout the good news: “Have you heard? Jesus is risen! I know the man. I’ve walked with him. He is a good man! His resurrection means all things are now different. All things are now better!” After all, the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus is not meant to frighten the world, but to bring joy to the world, a sense of direction, and hope. These things the twelfth man must be able to say by personal experience.

So, Peter explains these matters to the assembly of believers, who number about one hundred twenty persons. The assembly nominated two people who fulfilled the qualifications: Matthias and Joseph. The lot fell to Matthias.

What I want to do in this sermon is to say that both Matthias and Joseph are important. The one – Matthias – has a higher office than the other. But my theme is that they are equal in spiritual dignity -- both precious to the Lord and both crucial to the church. The seat of honor went to Matthias, while it was the fate of Joseph to quickly fade from the pages of history. But that is only how history sees things. From heaven’s point of view, the life of Joseph was precious and endlessly important. And this is good news for you and me, for we are more akin to Joseph than to Matthias. There are in fact distinctions of office within the church. But there are no differences of spiritual dignity and no differences in how beloved we are to the Lord. In his eyes, each of us is worth everything! Each of us is worth the very Body and Blood of Our Lord.

THE HIGH OFFICE OF APOSTLE

So some people occupy higher positions of authority than others. And I should think that when it comes to high positions of authority, it doesn’t get any higher than this: the Twelve. When Matthias was admitted to this blessed company, he was thereby admitted into the most fundamental level of authority in the Church. The Lord of the Church is Jesus Christ and him alone. But for now, Jesus chooses to exercise his authority by way of undershepherds. And among all his ministers, clergy, and undershepherds, none rank higher than the Twelve. So Matthias is now one of them, one of the Twelve. And Joseph Justus

is not one of them. He is the disciple not chosen. But he is equally important to our Lord. This is my theme. Each of us, no matter how famous or how lowly we might be, is of measureless importance to the Lord.

To develop this point, let me lift up another distinction in the church: the distinction between the “apostle” versus the “follower of Jesus.” We are all followers of Jesus, from St. Peter himself to you and me here in the pews of Immanuel Lutheran Church. We are all sheep of our Lord’s fold. That is our great comfort and dignity. But not all of us are “apostles.” In fact, very few people within the whole Communion of Saints are apostles. Just a handful. You and I, for example, are *not* apostles. We are too late-born for that. An apostle comes from the first generation of believers. An apostle is someone who actually knew Jesus. The apostle is someone who could personally witness to the resurrection of Jesus because the apostle had met the resurrected Jesus – spoken with him, ate with him, saw the wounds in his hands and his side. An apostle is an original witness. Not only are apostles witnesses, but they are authorized and call to witness to the resurrection. So, there are only a few apostles. They come from a generation that lived and died. They are the unrepeatable first preachers of the Gospel. And any church worth its salt, including any national church like the ELCA, must somehow preach what the apostles preached, else it is a false shepherd and a house unworthy of Christian habitation. That’s not because the apostles are smarter than we are. It is simply because they are the ones who actually were in the presence of Jesus. They were inspired by the very Word of God himself. Their preaching, then, is trustworthy, and we in our generation, must be “apostolic.” We can’t go around preaching or believing what the good, old apostles did not preach or believe.

So, the apostles are first in authority – the first witnesses of the resurrection. But they are not somehow the first in our Lord’s love. For you and I are also beloved of the Lord, with a love that is infinite.

WHAT OF MATTHIAS?

Matthias joined this high order of preachers. Tradition cherishes him, along with the rest of the Twelve. According to tradition, Matthias preached the Gospel in Judea, then in the Black Sea region, and was crucified.¹

He seems to have been a preacher of austere discipleship. He emphasized self-renunciation and discipline of the body. A sentence of his preaching has been attributed to him and passed down to us:

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Matthias

...we must combat our flesh, set no value upon it, and concede to it nothing that can flatter it, but rather increase the growth of our soul by faith and knowledge.²

WHAT OF JOSEPH?

So that is Matthias. God wants him to enter the college of apostles, wants him to receive the Holy Spirit at that first Pentecost, wants him to preach and teach and suffer for him, and means to be with Matthias during all these things.

And what of Joseph – the disciple not chosen? Again, it would be natural and entirely human to imagine him walking away with his shoulders slumped and his head drooping a bit. But judging by the peacefulness of the rest of the story, Joseph took his rejection in good stride. We hear no word that he turned away from Jesus. Indeed, tradition cherishes him too. According to tradition, Joseph became one of the early bishops of the church and is honored as a saint and martyr for Christ:

In Christian tradition, this Justus went on to become Bishop of Eleutheropolis, where he died a martyr and is venerated as Saint Justus of Eleutheropolis.³

So it is that we arrive at a crucial distinction concerning Joseph. I have been calling him “the disciple *not* chosen.” But now we see that Joseph was *not chosen* to be one of the Twelve, but he was indeed chosen to serve his Lord. And he seems to have served Jesus with integrity for the rest of his life.

AND WHAT OF US?

And what of us: modern folk, sometimes heavy-laden, stressed, and of little fame or authority in this world? We bear the name of Christ, but are not apostles. Indeed, we are not popes, or bishops, or any high-ranking leaders in the church. We are more akin to Joseph than Matthias. What of us?

Well, for the moment, let us magnify our insignificance. Let it grow. Let us imagine ourselves to be the littlest lamb in our Lord’s flock. We are harassed and threatened by wolves. (Picture them in your own lives, whatever they might be: sickness, or poverty, or weariness, or hard bosses, etc.) We have little strength, little authority. Altogether, let us imagine ourselves to be the little ones of Christ’s Church.

² <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10066a.htm>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Barsabbas

Then, again for just a moment, imagine that Jesus who speaks in this morning's Gospel Lesson is speaking simply to you, to me. Let the world fade away for the moment – not for long, but simply for a moment for a conversation with Jesus, so that we can return to the world stronger and more helpful to it. In our Gospel Lesson Jesus speaks of a consecrated life. He is speaking to his Twelve Disciples, but he means it for you and me too. Let us take it to heart. Picture Jesus speaking to you now. He acknowledges that you are lowly and harassed. He acknowledges that he has not called you to be part of the Twelve, not an apostle, not a pope, not a bishop, nothing high and mighty. Nonetheless, he calls you. He calls you to a consecrated life. He calls you to truth. He calls you to himself. And finally he calls you to return to the world as a consecrated person. Hard to imagine, but Jesus needs Joseph as well as Matthias. He needs Pope Benedict, but also he needs you and me. He needs us to be true to him for the sake of the whole wide world – a world he loves and was willing to die for.

And so I end with that simple liturgical conclusion I so dearly love: Go in peace, little sheep that you might be. Go in peace. Serve the Lord. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.