

Reading from the New Testament: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Sermon: Apostle Idol

Sunday, May 24, 2009

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What a week it's been. Over 100,000,000 votes were cast. Who did you vote for? Did you cast your ballot for Kris? Were you one of the disappointed ones who voted for Adam?

Or do you even have any idea what I'm talking about?

Well . . . if you paid any attention this season to American Idol, you know it was an upset when Kris took the crown over the highly favored Adam. It didn't take long for most Idol watchers to crown Adam way back in round number two or three as the one to beat.

But . . . once again . . . the voters decided differently . . . for whatever reason. Sometimes it isn't easy to make a decision. And sometimes you just don't know who or what to pick when presented with a choice. Think about it . . . how do you go about making a decision . . . particularly when, like American Idol, both contestants seem so qualified?

The same can be said about the church. It hasn't happened in a long time in this particular church, but often in Presbyterian churches there are more candidates seeking election to the session than there are positions to fill.

How do you go about choosing who is best qualified to be an elder? What sets someone apart as more qualified to be an elder than someone else? Well . . . that was the dilemma faced by the remaining eleven apostles of Jesus Christ.

Judas had betrayed Jesus . . . and now, after Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven . . . the remaining eleven . . . particularly after Peter makes a speech . . . have decided that it is important that they continue the tradition of 12 apostles . . . not because Jesus said so . . . but, you've got to understand that now that they've been left in charge of the church . . . well . . . you got to start making rules and stuff to follow . . . and since 12 was good enough for following Jesus around . . . we've got to have 12 in charge now.

Unfortunately . . . sometimes how we go about making such choices . . . be it in the ancient church or in the church today . . . can get mired in rules and regulations . . . instead of following where the Holy Spirit might be leading us.

Listen to our reading this morning from the Book of Acts, Chapter 1, verses 15-17 and 21-26. I will continue our reading from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*.

15 During this time, Peter stood up in the company—there were about 120 of them in the room at the time—

16 and said, "Friends, long ago the Holy Spirit spoke through David regarding Judas, who became the guide to those who arrested Jesus. That Scripture had to be fulfilled, and now has been.

21 "Judas must now be replaced. The replacement must come from the company of men who stayed together with us

22 from the time Jesus was baptized by John up to the day of his ascension, designated along with us as a witness to his resurrection."

23 They nominated two: Joseph Barsabbas, nicknamed Justus, and Matthias.

24 Then they prayed, "You, O God, know every one of us inside and out. Make plain which of these two men you choose

25 to take the place in this ministry and leadership that Judas threw away in order to go his own way."

26 They then drew straws. Matthias won and was counted in with the 11 apostles.

This is the word of our Lord. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I would like to think that the remaining 12 apostles of Jesus Christ . . . now fully trained and equipped to take over the mission of building what Christ began . . . the church . . . would have gotten it right this time . . . but I really don't think they did.

Because as soon as Jesus ascends to heaven . . . they get this big urge to put things back together like they used to be . . . after all . . . there used to be 12 apostles . . . so surely we're supposed to be 12 again. Just because Judas didn't work out . . . doesn't mean we can't go back to the way we used to do it.

It's like the apostles have reverted to an old default setting . . . when you don't know for sure what to do . . . do what you used to do. So Peter gives his big speech in which he declares that Judas must now be replaced. Except . . . no where in scripture does Jesus actually tell Peter or any other apostle that Judas needs to be replaced . . . no, this is just something that Peter wants to do and the others go along with him.

Now it's important to remember that Jesus has promised to send an advocate . . . the Holy Spirit . . . who will guide the apostles and the early church. We celebrate that moment as Pentecost . . . the day in which the Holy Spirit breathes life into the gathered apostles and disciples . . . filling the early church with power and life to grow and spread the word of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

They have a mission to do . . . and Christ is going to see that the mission gets started on the right foot. But as usual . . . Peter can't wait that long . . . he wants to get things started now . . . with or without the Spirit.

So in what should have been the most spiritual time in the life of the followers of Jesus Christ . . . a time in which they should have been anticipating the arrival of the Spirit of God to come upon them and lead them into mission . . . it instead becomes a time in which rules and regulations and priorities and organization of the early church take precedence over the things of the Spirit and the importance of following the mission of Jesus Christ.

In other words . . . Peter and the gang start to build the church bureaucracy . . . and to do so, their first priority must be writing the Book of Order so they can choose a new member. When you don't know what to do . . . write a how-to manual. It certainly works for Presbyterians.

So what will be the criteria for selecting this new apostle? Well, first . . . the new member must have hung around with the apostles and have known and walked with Jesus from the time of John the Baptist until Jesus' recent ascension . . . and secondly, he must have been a witness to the actual resurrection. Even though that narrows the field, it appears that there must have been several candidates who meet the qualifications . . . yet it seems that only two are nominated by the judges . . . I mean the apostles.

So who will become the new Apostle Idol . . . Joseph Barsabbas, nicknamed Justus . . . or Matthias. I'm sure that both must have been devout followers for over three years. But, according to the new rules, only one can be chosen to be the next Apostle Idol. Now since they've made up their minds that there can only be one winner . . . remember . . . we need a group of 12 and not 13 . . . the apostles do one thing right.

They at least pray. Not a long prayer . . . but at least they pray: "You, O God, know every one of us inside and out. Make plain which of these two men you choose to take the place in this ministry and leadership that Judas threw away in order to go his own way."

They seek God's wisdom and guidance in the decision they want to make. But . . . they certainly don't give God much time to respond to their request . . . nor do they spend any time listening for God's will . . . because no sooner than they pray than they draw straws and Matthias is declared the winner. Gee . . . that was easy.

When you want to make a choice in the church . . . just say a short prayer and then roll the dice. Works every time. Or does it?

Couple of points worth us considering here. It's interesting to note that you never hear of Justus or Mathias ever again in the scriptures. They have their 15 minutes of fame and then . . . poof . . . they're gone from the story. Not entirely sure what that means, but I wonder what difference it really made for the gang of 11 to choose a new apostle in the overall growth and mission of the church.

In one sense, maybe their disappearance from the story makes a point that the will of God will be done . . . with or without our meddling. And secondly . . . this is the last time anyone in scripture casts lots to seek the will of God. Though it was a common practice throughout the Hebrew scriptures to seek God's will by rolling the die . . . maybe the early church learned a lesson from their experience of choosing a new apostle by leaving it to chance. Maybe Mathias' election really wasn't the will of God.

I believe they should have waited . . . waited to truly discern the Spirit of God. One writer, Noel Erskine, quoting our own Justo Gonzalez from his book, *Acts, The Gospel of the Spirit*, said "that what went wrong with the selection was (the 11 apostles) placed issues of organizational structure before that of the mission of the church. Their failure to wait on the gift of the Holy Spirit made the disciples preempt the authority of the Spirit by focusing on matters of church structure . . . rather than the new mission to the Gentiles, as made clear in the later chapters of Acts. The problem, as Gonzalez argues, is that the apostles sought to choose one like themselves, and this is often not the way the Spirit works." (Feasting on the Word, B/2, 530)

And if we are honest . . . we know that we are like that, too. We like to choose people who are like us . . . who think like us . . . who dress like us . . . who have the same ideology . . . the same values . . . who vote the way we want them to vote. But, as Erskine points out . . . "the challenge facing the church today is to be careful not to place issues of structure above the mission of the church."

Gonzalez makes the point even stronger when he asks. . . "Does that remind us of the many elections that take place in our churches? Rather than asking ourselves who can make a better contribution to the mission in an ever-changing world, we seek someone who can continue what has been done previously The very fact that Matthias is never again mentioned," he says, "should serve as a warning: do not try to force the Spirit to act according to our own purposes." (ibid)

That's a tough one . . . do not try to force the Spirit to act according to our own purposes. If you think about it . . . that's actually a good rule of thumb to follow in our own lives as well as in the life of the church. So what can we learn from those early apostles . . . Well . . . actually quite a bit. Now I wish I could take credit for the following list of suggestions on how to discern the Spirit of God . . . be it in your own life or when making an important choice in the church . . . but I won't.

But something I recently read is important for us to hear . . . particularly as we move down the journey of discerning God's call on the mission of our own church. So I boiled down what I read to its essence . . .

First . . . Begin with prayer . . . and then pray some more . . . and then pray some more. Oh . . . by the way, did I mention that you should pray? That's the one important thing that the apostles did right when they sought God's will . . . and we can never underestimate the power of prayer.

Second . . . look to and follow what Jesus Christ has told us to do. The words of Christ are as alive today as when he first spoke them . . . so use his words to follow him!

Third . . . Wait for the Spirit's leading. Don't get ahead of the Holy Spirit. Peter and his friends didn't wait for the Spirit . . . but they should have. Christ promised us that the Holy Spirit would be our guide . . . our advocate . . . let's take advantage of that most wonderful gift. As Thomas Keating wrote . . . "The Spirit . . . is not given only once. It is an ongoing promise . . . and endless promise . . . a promise that is always fulfilled and always being fulfilled." You don't need to roll the dice.

Fourth . . . this one is very Presbyterian . . . Seek the wisdom of the gathered community. Sometimes Peter got a little pushy when he wanted things to go his way. That doesn't work in any relationship . . . and especially in the community of the church. We are called to discern the will of God together.

Fifth . . . make the building up of the Kingdom of God the priority of the church. As I read, "When the community gathers for discernment, it should be praying about bold witness and God's will . . . NOT self-preservation." I like those words . . . so much so I want to repeat them . . . "When the community gathers for discernment, it should be praying about bold witness and God's will . . . NOT self-preservation." That's the part of discerning God's will that tells us . . . take a risk . . . take a leap of faith . . . trust that the Spirit is leading and will keep on leading us.

Sixth . . . share the load. We got to keep in mind the Apostle Paul's words about the Body of Christ being formed of many members . . . each having particular gifts of the Spirit . . . and each gift is important in doing the will of God. We've got to learn to trust those words . . . if you ever think that no one else can do what you do . . . you've forgotten those words. Yes . . . you have gifts of the Spirit . . . but they are only fruitful when used together with all the other gifts of the Holy Spirit . . . when we all work together.

And finally . . . remember that though you can't please everybody . . . we can still work to create, like the Quakers, consensus decision-making. It's should never a matter of I'm right and you're wrong . . . it's giving and taking . . . compromising . . . gathering in the body to discern what God is calling us to do . . . and then moving ahead together to create "both/and" solutions that work for the good of the whole community. (Hungry Hearts, Office of Spiritual Formation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Volume XI, No. 4)

Now I realize that that's a whole lot to swallow in just one sermon . . . but I firmly believe that following these steps keeps us from stumbling in our discernment of God's will in the way those early apostles did. And like them . . . we, too, learn from our mistakes . . . as we move ahead together to discern and do what God calls us to do here at the corner of Kirk and Columbia.

There are some exciting times ahead in the life of this church . . . I can feel it right down to my bones. The Holy Spirit is alive in Columbia Presbyterian Church and I for one, can't wait to see where we are led and what we will be led to do.

Let us pray:

You call from tomorrow, You break ancient schemes,

From the bondage of sorrow, the captives dream dreams;
Our women see visions, our men clear their eyes.
With bold new decisions, Your people arise.
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.