

Sermon for Sunday, May 20, 2012 Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 "Replacement Apostles"

Matthias, whom we hear about in the reading from Acts of the Apostles today, is one of my favorite saints, for a whole bunch of reasons. First, Matthias is the name of my eldest boy – I think he's just great. Second, Matthias is an apostle, but he is the "replacement" apostle who was chosen to fill the spot of Judas Iscariot. He was a follower of Jesus from the beginning of the Lord's ministry – that seems to have been a requirement for the job, according to Peter – so he was eligible, and they threw some dice to choose between him and Joseph Barsabbas, and Matthias got the nod.

There are all sorts of interesting questions that may come to mind when we hear this story. We have a limited amount of time, though, so we are just going to focus on a couple of them.

The biggest one is this: why did they need to replace Judas? After all, later in the story of the early Christian community, the apostles died, and they weren't replaced in this very deliberate way. But think of when this story occurred. Jesus had just ascended into Heaven. The apostles returned to the upper room for prayer and for consideration of what to do next. Shortly after this moment the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost. Somehow, it was important that there be twelve apostles for this event. And the key to understanding that might be the number twelve.

The Lord himself had chosen twelve apostles to symbolize the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel. This restoration was already something the apostles themselves had been talking about back in the sixth verse of this chapter, when they asked the resurrected Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

That wholeness of the kingdom seemed to require recognition of the twelve tribes, and thus twelve disciples.

So if they needed someone to replace the betrayer, how would they determine who it would be?

There were lots of candidates. At the top of anyone's list might be Jesus' brothers, such as James the Just. There were other people who were part of the circle of followers of the Lord. There were women of prominence, such as Mary Magdalene, often called the apostle to the apostles, but that was culturally too big a leap for these folks. But instead, Peter said there were certain criteria: the replacement apostle must be "one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken from us – one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." It is important that Peter felt that it needed to be someone who was part of the whole journey, and who could speak out clearly that Jesus was raised from the dead. Second-hand reports would not be sufficient.

By those standards, if the apostle Paul had been there, he wouldn't have qualified! So it was a pretty small group, perhaps only the two men whom Peter set before the assembled disciples for election: Barsabbas and Matthias. We know nothing of these two men except that they met the qualifications that Peter outlined.

In our secular world we would wonder if Peter was stacking the deck, if you will, if he was setting up the prequalifications in such a way that he would get the person he wanted as one of the twelve. But this was a different world and a different time. Peter was simply hoping that God would reveal who could share what they had all experienced faithfully, not as a second-hand retelling, but as a lived experience. And so there were two. And Peter did not want to simply name one, even though he could as the named leader of the disciples. He wanted God to reveal the right one. So the disciples prayed and asked God to show them whom they should choose. And then they used an ancient method of choosing – not an election, what we would expect – they cast lots. If there had been an election, it would have been a human choice, votes by the human beings in that room. But casting lots? That was an Old Testament way of giving God a way to convey his desire...throwing dice would put the solution into God's hands, not their own.

And Sarah J, this has nothing to do with Tunica...

And the dice told of God's will, and so Matthias was chosen. Not because of any particular skill, just because he had been a part of the journey all along, and God was asking him. Not because of his relationship with the others – as far as we know, he was not a member of the families of any of the other disciples, no dynasty here. Not because he was renowned for his gifts of proclamation, or the money he could bring into the church, or any other earthly reason. God chose him. God simply chose him.

And that's the thing that really appeals to me about Matthias. Once again, God asked a seemingly ordinary person to step up and serve. That's both a comfort and a challenge to us ordinary people. We can't get away with saying, "No, Lord, I don't have anything to bring to this task you called me to."

I had a conversation with someone preparing for ordination the other day, and when queried about his call, he said, "The Big Guy said 'do this' and I said 'aye aye sir.'" Suffice to say, he was retired Navy.

God taps us to do things. Sometimes it is a whisper in our hearts, sometimes it's a request from someone here at the church, sometimes it's a situation that demands our response. It rarely has to do with what we think we do well. It rarely will yield results that will be documented in the news or in the Bible. Just God asking us to do something, and us saying "aye, aye, sir."

And the last thing that makes Matthias dear to my heart is that this is the last we hear of him in the Bible. He fulfills his role as the twelfth apostle, so that there will be twelve at the miracle of Pentecost, and then he does whatever he does in service to the Lord in anonymity. Just like the rest of us whom God calls.

I guess the take-away from all this for me is that none of us is one of the original twelve. We are all replacements for the originals, several hundred generations removed. We usually discount our gifts and abilities, and yet God still finds a way to use us, and our gifts are sufficient for the task he asks of us.

On this Sunday when we wrap up our Sunday School year, it is clear to me that we are very, very blessed with people with great gifts leading our Sunday School (Gail and Kathy and Anne, April and Karen) , and it is tempting for us to say, "Well, I'm not sufficiently gifted to do that kind of work, or to replace any of these saintly apostles of Sunday School teaching." And so we ignore God's nudge or a request from me or someone here in the parish when we are asked to help out. But God expects us all to be replacement apostles, and gives us what we need to do the task he offers us.

So I would urge you to consider how you might be one of God's replacement apostles in this place and at this time. Are you meant to be someone who helps teach our children about God's love? Maybe. Are you meant to be someone who writes an article for the newsletter? Maybe. Are you meant to be someone who offers a warm welcome to a newcomer to this parish family? Maybe.

Only God knows when he will ask you to step up and be a replacement apostle. Only God knows the hidden strengths and gifts that you didn't even know that you had.

But only you can say, "Yes, sir. Aye, aye." Say it, with fear and joy, and be the replacement apostle that God knows you to be!

Amen.