

Pastor's Message – 5/12/24
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

I've already seen sweet corn for sale, higher priced than I'm willing to pay, but already available. It's too early for locally grown corn, but it's coming. Some of you may remember buying sweet corn at \$1/dozen, but that was a long time ago. And I can remember that the farmer might throw in an extra ear to make "a baker's dozen." But twelve was the magic number.

What's so great about the number twelve that the apostles cast lots to find a replacement for Judas? Is there some problem with being only eleven? Jesus' contemporaries were superstitious. Thirteen was a generous sweet corn purchase, but thirteen is often considered a superstitious number. The apostles lived in a world without science, a world they could not explain away with a quick glance in a textbook or an internet search. Life was short; the future always uncertain. Superstitions evolved around everything, even numbers. Twelve apostles. What did that number mean to them?

In Hebrew tradition, there were twelve fruits on the tree of life; twelve tribes of Israel; twelve sons of Jacob; twelve months of the year, represented by twelve loaves of bread in the temple; twelve gates to the heavenly city. Later, there would be twelve fruits of the spirit, and Revelation would make good use of the number twelve. Of course, there would be twelve apostles. Although we profess to be much less superstitious than our ancestors, we still like the number twelve today. Twelve makes a dozen. There are twelve days of Christmas and twelve signs of the zodiac. Maybe the apostles were on to something, after all.

This may, however, be the first recorded evidence of a familiar church trap. There were twelve apostles, one is gone; therefore, someone has to take his place. Why? *Because we've always done it that way!* That's the trap. The words that have been used as the rationale for stagnation and resistance to change for so many years may have been spoken in this meeting and set the stage for church policy for 2,000 years.

A little background. We've been reading from the Book of Acts for 6 weeks now and the readings have not been chronological. This week's passage from Acts picks up the story just after Jesus' Ascension and His leaving the earth, forty days after His resurrection. The followers of Jesus (about 120 according to the narrative) are gathered and Peter, taking leadership of the group (we've heard several of his sermons so far), proposes that they elect a new apostle to replace Judas (Judas was said to have died after betraying Jesus). Our missing verses today give one version of how he died.

Peter lays out the criterion: that the person has been present with the group from the beginning of the time Jesus was among them through to this point. The group offers the names of two men. When it comes time to choose

between these two, they have a process worked out. They will pray for guidance and cast lots, an accepted way of making decisions at the time that was believed to place the results in God's hands (see Joshua 18:65). But how did they narrow the choices to these two in the first place?

Two men of faith were suggested, Matthias and Justus. Lots were cast, and Matthias was elected. But how do you think Justus felt? He apparently was qualified, experienced, and deserving, yet someone else was chosen for the top spot. So how do those of us who place second, third, and fourth in life maintain a sense of our value and worth?

Perhaps, not to be chosen is not a rejection. It may simply mean that God has decided that we are better suited or have more to offer in a different role. I can play several musical instruments and sing, but I've never been very good at shooting a basketball. I can write sermons, but I don't know how to do a brake job on a car. I can bake a cake or cookies, but I can't tap dance. God gave me some gifts to do certain things and then called me to a career that utilized those abilities. However, God did not choose for me to be a basketball player, a car mechanic, or a tap dancer.

Perhaps, Justus, because of his faith was able to remember two very important things about his relationship to Christ. The first is the fact that everyone who has received God's grace in Jesus Christ is worthwhile. Our worth in life is not measured by popular opinion, or Gallup polls, or even our credit rating! Our worth lies in the fact that God counts us valuable enough to let his beloved Son die in our place at Calvary. You and I, no matter what others may think of us, are worth the life of God's own Son! In that he was one of the finalists, Justus was obviously gifted by God. But there were others.

Among the 120 who were gathered was a potential pool of candidates, members of Jesus' family and some of his female followers. We are left to wonder whether the women were actually considered for selection. Many of the women had been there from the beginning and would continue to play significant roles in bearing witness to Jesus and offering leadership in this emerging Christian community. Unfortunately, excluding women from the story at this pivotal moment of leadership selection may have contributed to the continuing exclusion of women in leadership through the centuries.

There is so much missing from this story that it is inadequate as a model of leadership selection in today's faith community. However, a lesson or two can be drawn from the story. The believers were open to God's guidance and incorporated prayer into their decision process. Certainly, this is something we would do well to imitate. But if women were excluded from the process as it appears in this account, how was the group's decision making limited by cultural norms. Wondering even for just a moment how things might have been different

had women been included invites us to challenge our own culture. When have we allowed our culture to shape our decisions as a faith community in potentially limiting ways, cutting off possibilities? Is there a greater openness to which God calls us?

This passage invites us to reflect on the roles of men and women in the church. Remember that in this gathering of 120 people, both men and women were present, including Mary, the mother of Jesus. Some have seen this story as evidence that only men should be leaders in the church, because only males were nominated to take the place of Judas. However, others point to the presence of women in the story and the fact that they appear to be equals in the company, as evidence that indeed the role of women in the early church was equal to that of men. While Matthias is chosen for this particular position, many recognize Mary Magdalene as the first apostle, being the first to see the risen Christ and proclaim his resurrection.

On this 2nd Sunday of May in the United States, we have an official day to celebrate mothers, but I think we show short shrift to other women who have acted like mothers to others, who possess and use motherly gifts, and have been gifted the skills, talents, and insights of leaders in society and in the church. We do well to lift up those women who have made a difference in our lives and in the life of the church.

What criteria do we use to determine who is gifted and who is best suited for leadership within the Christian community? The disciples chose someone who has been there from the beginning. New people have come into the church since then who have spiritual gifts for leadership and ministry. What if we took seriously Jesus' words about looking to children – people without great experience but full of wonder who call us to look outside the box, the way we've always done things; or outcasts – people without tradition but who call us to think outside the lines; or tax-collectors, fisher-folk, and all the other disciples, as potential leaders? What gifts do we look for and expect in people called to lead? What gifts did Jesus look for?

Matthias was called out of the crowd who had gathered; we hadn't heard of him before today. Matthias is unremarkable. All we know about him is what we hear in this passage from Acts 1. From church history we know next to nothing of where he preached or what he did later. Matthias was just a guy who was with Jesus, saw him, loved him, and gave his life for the cause of Christ. But he left a legacy of a church for us.

Maybe those are the people that God calls: people who know Jesus, love him, and give their lives for the cause of Christ. Jesus and those early disciples left a legacy for us. Loving others as God loves us is the call for all followers of Jesus. Listening for the voice and direction of God and then following God's

directions is the call on everyone who claims to be Christian.

Often people think of God's spirit like the wind. In Hebrew and Greek, the languages the Bible was written in, the same word is used for both *Spirit* and *wind*. In olden times, ships and boats relied on wind to make them go. They didn't have engines, and sails would move them along.

People sometimes think of the church as being like a ship. In fact, the part of the church building where the people sit is called the nave (as in *navy*) and in some churches the ceiling looks like an upside-down ship. There's room in the boat for all people, and we are guided by the wind of God's spirit. When we are truly being the church- truly being disciples of Jesus- we are letting God's spirit direct our course.

Last year, this Waupun United Methodist Church opened its mind, heart, and soul to the direction of the Holy Spirit and chose a new Mission Statement. That Mission Statement, given by the Holy Spirit helps the church reclaim and articulate a sense of its identity. It gives a direction to where the church is going, what its purpose is, why it exists, and how its members can embrace the mission of the Church and utilize the gifts given to each individual to make that vision a reality.

God places that mission on the heart of each individual. God knows your heart! Verse 24 says, "Then they prayed, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us who of these two you have chosen.'" God knows everyone's heart. That can be good or bad depending on what is in your heart. You can't hide your real motive and you can't fool God. So, we can just be honest. And that's good, especially when we really are stumped and must step out with what we think is the best decision. You can't go wrong if your heart is right. God sees it and he will turn even a less-than-perfect decision into good because he knows you were seeking him. "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Our reading from Acts today may be a strange text for a sermon and for us to focus on. It gives us an interesting group of facts about the early church, but at first glance, it seems to have little or no relevance for today. A good sermon must not only be true, but must answer the question, "What difference does it make?" What difference does it make that Matthias was chosen to replace Judas so that the apostles would still number twelve?

You may not know why you are here or exactly what God has called you to do or how your gifts shared today will affect the future, but your presence here, your work in the church and beyond, and the sharing of your gifts – whatever you can do - will continue the journey and ministry of the church into the future. Blest and gifted, you can make a difference in the lives of others and the life and future of this Church.