

The Selection of Matthias

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) ¹⁶ and said, “Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ He was one of our number and shared in our ministry.”

²¹ Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, ²² beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.” ²³ So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. ²⁴ Then they prayed, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.” ²⁶ Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

1 Peter 5:1-11

5 Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you ² to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. ³ Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. ⁵ In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for: “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” ⁶ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

Sermon: Choosing Leaders

Sport is a religion in our culture. People have allegiances to teams and go to secular “megachurches” where they can worship their idols with modern chants and anthems. And we learn this from a young age, often through our parents, but also through our own personal inclination for our favourite sport, whether that is hockey, football, baseball, soccer, or whatever. Moreover, we quickly pick up the necessary skills at school – or *don't*, depending on how athletic we are! I have vivid memories of school playgrounds and compulsory physical education classes where two teams were picked from a line of kids. Two team captains are chosen, based on their competence at the sport, and then they call out names successively and people from the line go and stand behind their respective captains. This is both a test of popularity and skill, and those - like me - who were not that athletic, would all look uncomfortably at each other wondering who would be the *last* to be picked, and would it be me?!¹ And we were invariably given team positions where they thought we could do least damage.

But this kind of thing doesn't stop at the playground. The political systems of the adult world often echo that “survival of the fittest” principle. Yes, there are elections, but the candidate selection process can be tainted by such things as money, influence, and, behind the scenes maneuverings. And while in a democracy there is always a sense of hope that positive things will come out of our choices, there is also widespread cynicism that good intentions will still amount to nothing at the end of the day; that “swamps” won't be drained, just become murkier! Perhaps all this goes to show that *all* our electoral processes are imperfect, because we are flawed too.

Churches also have elaborate systems for selecting leaders and each denomination has a different method. There is the mystique surrounding the selection of a new pope; and the choosing of a Presbyterian minister is a cross between a blind-date and an arranged marriage! Whether it's a schoolyard soccer team, national elections, or calling of leaders in the church, we are used to some degree of choice and having our voices heard in the process. We use our best judgment in forming the strongest team, picking the best candidate, and discerning the best leaders.

Our lectionary reading for today is the story of the selection of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot in Acts 1. This is coincidental, or is it providential (!), in the timely context of choosing of new elders here in St. Andrew's. Acts chapter 1 is widely accepted as a transition, in that after Jesus ascends into heaven the Church has to take hold of the responsibility and leadership for undertaking Christ's ongoing mission. Part of the preparation for leadership included waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had already set the parameters for their mission, they were to go from Jerusalem steadily outwards to the ends of the earth and preach and live out the good news of the kingdom of God. This must have been both intimidating and scary for those first disciples.

¹ Just to add insult to injury, nearing the end one captain would sometimes say, “You can have those last two,” which provided permanent scarring for the kids involved!

Luke tells us that after the ascension, the followers of Jesus return to the upper room in Jerusalem and prayed.² There is mention that there were about 120 of them at the time.³ It is helpful to know that, according to Jewish law, 120 males were required to form a synagogue with its own council. So already the disciples had enough people to form a legitimate community, one that is in faithfulness to Judaism, says Luke. And right away Peter emerges as the unquestioned leader.

It was recognized that with the death of Judas Iscariot, there were now only 11 apostles.⁴ Yet in the Last Supper, Luke tells us that Jesus prophesied that the 12 would - at the end of time - rule over the 12 tribes of Israel.⁵ Consequently, if they were going to establish a new Israel, they would need *twelve* apostles as witnesses to the messianic kingdom that was inaugurated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Many critics have suggested that Peter jumped the gun; he should have waited until the Holy Spirit had come upon them at Pentecost, as then they might have done things differently. Luke doesn't make this contrast, however, but he does emphasize that they made their decisions with reference to the Old Testament Scriptures and in the context of prayer. Even so, the two verses Luke references from the Psalms seem somewhat dubious and very much like what we would call proof-texting today, where we hunt and find any verse that suits us!⁶ More charitably, it is probably better to understand Luke's theological outlook as emphasizing "promise and fulfillment" in that everything that happens does so as a necessary fulfillment of Scripture and the purposes of God.⁷

Regardless, this election gives Luke an opportunity to *define* what an apostle is. Note that Peter did *not* seek to use his prerogative as leader to unilaterally choose Matthias as a replacement for Judas. All he did was outline the essential qualifications and then allowed the community of 120 who gathered in the upper room to nominate candidates. The criterion was simply this: "choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a *witness* with us of his *resurrection*."⁸ Consequently, the real mark of an apostle was that the person *knew* Jesus and not just knew *about* Jesus. Moreover, being an eyewitness from beginning will guarantee the authenticity of the new apostle's ministry. Incidentally, this criterion would exclude St Paul! It also

² Acts 1:12-14.

³ Acts 1:15.

⁴ Incidentally, Matt 27:1-10 says Judas commits suicide; Luke suggests a different kind of death! We probably shouldn't try to resolve the discrepancy. Matthew is, perhaps, the kindest to Judas, since he confesses his sin, returns the money, and hangs himself, which is a quintessential expression of remorse (27:4-5). For Luke, Judas' actions were a divine necessity and thus he was an unwitting instrument to bring God's purpose is to fulfillment. But both make the connection with the potter's field: Acts 1:19, Matt 27:9-10.

⁵ See Luke 22:28-30.

⁶ See Acts 1:20, which cites (a) Ps 69:25 - a psalm of lament that was well-known in the early church, since various NT writers compare it with Jesus, and (b) Ps 109:8 - a verse from a string of prayers *against* a person, almost like curses! This psalm is a victim's appeal for justice . . . but in a tone that seems most *unchristian*!

⁷ In other words, predestination; moreover, for Luke, God is truly omniscient (see Acts 15:8, Luke 16:15).

⁸ Acts 1:21-22. See also Acts 6:3-6 for similar selection process for the 'deacons.'

shows how the early church understood itself as being a continuation of the kingdom of God work that Jesus had begun with John's baptism. Note the added emphasis on witness to the resurrection; if you take that away from the book of Acts, you're really left with nothing and you're just another irrelevant religious sect.

Two names emerged as satisfying the criterion: Joseph and Matthias, and we don't know much about either of them. Then they prayed: "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen."⁹ What this models for us today is that prayer is the appropriate context of decision-making as the church deals with all its issues, but especially that of leadership. Praying signals that the church looks beyond itself for the guidance and direction and seeks divine wisdom and insight, because it needs to partner with God rather than go-it-alone.

By today's standards, what happened next seems crazy; they cast lots to select the replacement apostle! This process is unthinkable to our enlightened minds. Imagine how would change the dynamics in creating school sport's teams! Or in provincial and federal elections! Yet casting lots was common among the Jews at that time. The names of the candidates were written on stones which were then put into a jar, the jar was shaken until one of the stones fell out, and the person whose name was on the stone was thereby elected to office. While we would say that the winner was picked by chance, they thought the outcome was from the hand of God!¹⁰ I said earlier, that none of our election systems were perfect, but I bet we dare not replace them by prayer and rolling the dice!

Given the way Luke describes the way Matthias was chosen, one would think that we would hear about him again, but he is never again mentioned in the New Testament. That's odd. What is also strange is that in Acts 12, the apostle James [the brother of John] is killed by King Herod Agrippa, yet there is no mention of new elections to replace him!

Even so, this story of the selection of Matthias raises questions about how we discern the will of God and the confidence we place in the systems that we employ. How does prayerful reflection on the things God values influence *our* decision making: in considering our choice of jobs, how we spend our money and time? How does prayerful reflection influence our decision making as a church? To what extent do the methods we employ get tangled up with our own need to control circumstances and outcome? The Session, rightly or wrongly, used the process of each member *prayerfully* and *privately* prioritizing between 5-8 people to create the shortlist from the 10 people you carefully nominated. What emerged was a self-evident *uniformity* of support across all Session members for the names I mentioned earlier. I'd like to think through this collective discernment process, we were partnering with God. I am thrilled with the outcome and I trust you are too, and I thank God for that.

⁹ Acts 1:24.

¹⁰ Prov 16:33.

Nevertheless, and returning to our reading from Acts; what about Joseph, the person who was equally qualified and well-respected amongst community, but lost out on the toss of the dice? There is no indication that he lost his faith in Jesus. And as the book of Acts unfolds, there are hundreds of unnamed people – many of them women - who pass on the story of Jesus. Most of them are even less well-known than Joseph. But without such ordinary folk, the apostles would have remained quite lonely and ineffective. This gives us each a moment to pause and reflect on the unsung heroes of our respective spiritual journeys. It could be a Sunday school teacher, a person whose advice was wise at a critical time, or someone who prayed regularly for you or encouraged you in the faith. It could be your mother! Such people may not have become famous, but they were faithful. I am certainly grateful for high-school teachers and church leaders who inspired me. So let us also thank God for them, for they helped shape who we have become.

As we read on in the book of Acts we can get a glimpse as to how the early church understood leadership and how it worked in practice, including the choosing of elders to help lead the churches.¹¹ Luke emphasizes how leadership is a *gift* from God to the church, and without *divine* enabling the Church's ministry would flounder. The symbolic "laying on of hands" at ordination confers *authority* being given in a public manner, but the empowering itself comes from God. What we also see in Acts is that leadership is *shared*, and that is something that the Presbyterian Church is not very good at.¹² I have been part of churches where there were multiple ministers each with different gifts and personalities, and that always enriches life of the church. In the Presbyterian context, shared leadership is found amongst the various members of the Session, Board and, more recently here at St Andrew's, with the Pastoral Care Team. Since leadership is shared, leaders need to be *team-players*. Leadership is also *service* to others, not a platform to lord it over others. Leadership is also *diverse* in that the various individuals' talents, gifts, and life experiences can be pooled to meet the wide-ranging needs of the congregation and wider community. Leadership is *learnt* on the job! While today, we receive some training, being an elder or a minister is nevertheless life-long learning, and so we need to be both humble and teachable. All these aspects are evident as you read through the book of Acts.

But there are other qualities in all Christian leadership too; a person's character and integrity is very important for leadership. Do we *walk* with God? After all, being a disciple involves discipline. Can we *inspire* others? Leaders are called to lead, to be visionaries, to go out on a limb and motivate others to follow. Do we *enable* others? In other words, do we equip others through teaching and by being an example, and by encouraging and empowering others? What do leaders *believe*? Do leaders look to the Bible and Christian books for guidance and wisdom; do we seek God in study and prayer – for prayer is how we include God to all that we do. Do we genuinely *care* about people? What is our *attitude* to money and possessions? Are we *willing* to face unpopularity? Can we endure the inevitable hard times and criticism? Are we *wholehearted*, and will we be vulnerable enough to receive

¹¹ See Acts 14:23; 15:6; 1 Pet 5:1-11; Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Tim 3:1-13.

¹² Paul takes companions on his missionary journeys; the apostles appoint deacons.

ministry and grace from others. And, critically in Acts, are we truly *open to the Holy Spirit* working amongst us?

This is a daunting list! So pray regularly for your elders and minister. This is why, of course, above all we need God's help. But this is *Christ's* church we are talking about and it is *his* mission. Jesus knew first-hand how daunting it would be and so he wanted us to live in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our second reading from 1 Peter 5 summarizes the calling and responsibility of eldership in this way:

"Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. . . . And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another . . ."13

Jesus modeled humility for his disciples in the Upper Room at the Last Supper. He washed the disciples' feet, so performing the act of the lowest household servant.¹⁴ This is shockingly counter-cultural and goes against all we expect from a leader, whether that is a boss at work, an elected politician, or a sports team captain. John tells us Jesus then said: "I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."¹⁵ As we follow Christ, may we be blest too; Amen.

¹³ 1 Pet 5:1-3,5b.

¹⁴ John 13:1-17; see also Luke 22:24-27.

¹⁵ John 13:15-17.