

Christ Church + Washington Parish
The Seventh Sunday after Easter, Acts 1
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This is one of my all-time favorite readings from Acts. I find in it some good advice on how to make decisions in my life. And no casting lots isn't the answer. The story of election of Matthias is both a warning and an encouragement. This is the first and only time we hear about the 13th apostle – Matthias – but this isn't a story about Matthias, this is really a story about Peter. Peter who is just stepping into the shoes of leading this remnant of Jesus-followers, and the first decision he makes, with all the good intentions in the world, ends up being a flop.

So let's set the story up. Jesus has died. Jesus has risen. Jesus has spent the last 40 days appearing/disappearing to and teaching the remnant of followers. This remnant included the 11 remaining apostles and the women and additional followers of him. The text today says about 120 people total. Now never in those 40 days does Jesus say, we have a slot open for the 12th apostle, since you know, Judas isn't in the game anymore, so I choose you, Joe, or Barsabbas, or Matthias. He shows up to them, convincing them of the resurrection and his continued presence with him, and teaching them about the kingdom of God. Then, he ascends into heaven, assuring the remnant of followers that the Spirit is coming to them not many days from now. We are going to celebrate that Spirit coming next week with Pentecost. But back to the Ascension, Jesus goes up to heaven, and the disciples head to Jerusalem like Jesus told them.

And wow, the smoke cloud has barely faded from Jesus' jet-packing into heaven when Peter gathers the crew and says, friends, we have a problem, we need to replace Judas because Psalm

109 vs. 8 tells us so (that's the psalm he quotes). No one asks, how do you know the psalm, written 600 years ago, is talking about Judas? No one says, umm, Jesus never said that it was important to replace Judas, and if he thought it was important, he would have told us the last 40 days for his pop-up teachings. No, they all agree, got to replace Judas. And the text talks a lot about Judas; the three verses that are cut out from today's reading are all about Judas killing himself after betraying Jesus. There is an aspect of this selection that may have more to do with dealing with the pain of Judas' betrayal and death than needing a 12th apostle. They feel betrayed by Judas, and they miss him, a friend and follower who they had spent three years in ministry with, and maybe, maybe if they found someone else to fill his slot – that feeling of betrayal and loss would dissipate. But I think we all know that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to heal simply with the warm body of another.

Peter states the requirements: (1) someone that has been with Jesus since his baptism and throughout his ministry and (2) a man. That shrinks the list of possibilities to two people the guy with 3 names and Matthias. They say a prayer asking God to show them the way and cast lots – by what method we don't know, but casting lots is not voting, whatever they did, it would produce a random result, which under this circumstance would be considered the way to leave room for the divine to get their two cents in. It's like praying before pulling a name out of a hat. Matthias' name is chosen, he is the 12th, but really 13th, apostle. And that my friends is the last we hear of lucky Matthias. While the church later makes him a saint, he doesn't even become the saint of lotteries, which he really should be.

My primary reason for thinking that this is a failed leadership decision is because we don't hear about Matthias again. He doesn't do anything of note. Later on, when apostles start being martyred, the group doesn't add new ones, trying to get themselves back up to twelve. They just let the twelve dwindle in number. To me, this is an indication that the selection of Matthias was not something the leadership looked back on and said – yeah, we nailed that one.

Yet this story does offer us something to reflection on for how we as people of faith can approach making decisions seeking God's guidance.

First thing: Be honest with yourself. What is the decision I'm making really about? Do I really need to make it? What is behind my desire to answer this question? For Peter, there is an anxiety in this waiting time as they wait for whatever this Holy Spirit is to come whenever it comes. Peter as the unofficial leader, takes it on, that he must do something, and so this. But must he? Must he do something? Waiting, especially when you don't know when the waiting is going to end, is a breeding ground for anxiety-driven questioning and answering. If Peter had been honest with himself, he would have realized he was trying to answer a problem they didn't have. Or maybe he would have realized that what was behind the desire to fill the 12th apostle spot was that he and his fellow apostles really needed to grieve the loss of their friend Judas.

Life lesson #2 from Peter here. A failure of imagination. Peter is convinced that the new apostle needs to be just like the other 11 – a man who has been with Jesus since his baptism and throughout his ministry. This prevents Peter from seeing that Mary Magdalene was an excellent option for the new apostle, as the only person who was at the cross and the tomb in all four

gospels. In fact, with our gender bias more in check, many Christians see Mary Magdalene as on par with the apostles in the gospels. Once you go looking for it, it is as clear as day. Or why not choose someone who had more experience with non-Jews? Jesus had told them repeatedly that their mission would include Jews and Gentiles. They could really use some Gentile experience on their team. Instead of thinking outside the box, the apostles sought to choose one like themselves. We now have studies to back this up, but diverse teams have better results. Yet we still often choose to be with people like ourselves – whether in the work world in our personal life – yet we need to get a bigger imagination beyond our personal experience to see what we are missing and intentionally step toward what we don't yet know. God is always stretching our imagination.

Well, the early church still makes it. They stumble through even despite Peter's poor decision. Matthias didn't do anything notable, and God's work continued to bear fruit with thousands of people finding truth and life in following Christ. Which is life lesson #3 from Peter here – Keep praying. The best thing Peter and his crew do in this story is pray for God's guidance. Prayer fosters humility, opens us to seek God's wisdom rather than convince ourselves of our own. Matthias might have been the wrong choice, but it didn't stop the disciples in their mission. They kept serving and they kept praying. In looking at the rest of Acts, God did answer their prayer in filling the seat of the twelfth disciple. God chose Paul – a Jew, well-steeped in faith but also with a Greek education that made him a particularly good witness to the faith among Gentiles. Paul didn't fit the prerequisite. Paul never even met Jesus during his three years of ministry. Yet he spread the good news as far or even farther than any of the other disciples. And Peter and the apostles struggled in accepting Paul, but they did, and I have no doubt that prayer for God's

guidance is what kept them open to seeing God work in Paul in a new way that they couldn't see right away.

How do we discern God's will in making decisions? #1 Be honest with ourselves. Ask ourselves why we feel like we need to make a decision – what's really behind the question and the decision before us and so what is the real answer. #2 Imagine beyond the parameters you think are required. What are the options before you that you need to look outside the familiar to see? #3, Pray before, during, and after. It's not as important that we know God's will before a decision as it is that we be willing to be shaped by God's will along the way. We pray, we make a decision, and we pray some more, always recognizing that God calls us to new things and works in ways that we don't expect. And if God wants us to change directions, God will let us know – the question is whether we'll shift directions when the Spirit blows.