

Hillcrest Congregational UCC
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Who Shall Serve

Scripture: Acts 1:15-17,21-26, I John 5:9-13, John 17:6-19

In our story today about the early church, we find them in a dilemma. They need to have 12 members to complete their leadership circle. Do you remember why? Remember that the number 12 comes from the 12 original tribes of Israel. Who is it that is missing? They lost Judas so they need to replace him.

Peter stands up among them and recommends that they choose someone from among the people who have been followers of Jesus from the beginning- from the baptism of John to the ascension of Jesus to heaven. Two people are named: Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. They pray, they cast lots, and Matthias is chosen. Several things strike me about this passage. But before I point them out, what stuck out for you?

First, there is acknowledgement that they have lost one of their members. He was with them for a time, he did what he was supposed to do, had a share in the ministry, and then went on his own way. They do not dwell on loss or blaming- all has happened BECAUSE it was supposed to happen. It is past. Peter says that scripture was fulfilled.

Second, there is little discussion, they are simply one less in number and this needs to be rectified. They need to have a certain number of people to ensure there is good leadership for their community.

Third, they chose quickly. They did not agonize over losing a member, or drag out the process of choosing a new person to take on leadership. They focus on the task at hand and carry it out, expeditiously.

Fourth, it appears as though all 120 believers who were present participated in the selection of Matthias. They have an open, transparent process in which everyone participates. The leadership circle of 11 is not a closed circle. By that I mean they do not choose their own members. While they have been chosen to serve in a special capacity, the larger community has given them their authority. They are not above or beyond accountability to the others.

Fifth, they set clear, basic requirements- one who has accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us. They know that the one selected needs to have specific qualifications, but they do not agonize over all of them. They have faith that God will equip the person selected and the chosen person will apply them self to the ministry.

Sixth, they pray. They know where to center themselves. They ask for, and know they will receive, Divine guidance for their actions and choices.

Seventh, there is no refusal to serve. This is an honor, but also an awesome responsibility. These people had lives. They were not professional clergy. They had jobs and families to support. Many of them lived what we would consider a subsistence life. They had no savings, there was no church mission support, welfare, unemployment, vacation, leave of absence, retirement, or vacation time. If they did not work, if they did not glean from the field or catch fish each day, they and their families did not eat. Neither Matthias nor Joseph refused the nomination, yet no body else volunteered. This is a serious undertaking.

Eighth, they vote. They cast lots and the results are clear. There are no hanging chads, no long drawn out recounts, or court battles over election results. Their selection is important but so is their unity of purpose.

Ninth, there is no argument. Not about the need for 12 leaders, the qualifications, the nomination process, the voting, the election results, or the person whose absence set this episode in motion.

All of the acknowledgement, process, procedure, nomination, prayer, selection, and election are carried out smoothly, calmly, cooperatively, in a straightforward manner. They do not dwell on loss or blaming- all has happened because it has happened. It is past. They focus on the task at hand and carry it out, expediently. The people step up and take responsibility for voting and for holding office. They know that the Divine will guide them in their actions. They have faith that God will supply the one selected with the gifts needed, the person selected will step up to the job and all will be well. They have an open, transparent process in which everyone participates. There is no argument. Ah would that the political process worked that well. Ah that the church of today worked that way.

Why did it work so well for them? They had their eye on the prize. They were focused on the big picture. They knew what their mission was. They caught the vision. It was not about who was in or out, who left and who stayed, what their qualifications were or why they did or did not have time to be involved. It was about working together to spread the good news. It was about witnessing to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ to the community around them. It was about building, and living the Beloved Community of God, even while it is still under construction.

It is about Jesus' prayer: That they may be one as we are one. I hope that this is a familiar prayer to you. It is the UCC prayer. That we may all be one as Jesus and God are one.

In the Gospel reading this morning, John tells the disciples that Jesus had confidence and prayed for them to do be able to do just this. John presents to his community the words that Jesus' prayed to God. "They know that everything you have given me is from you; I have given your words to them, and they have received them and know in truth. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. May they be sanctified in truth. They are yours. May they may be one, as we are one.

Yet all was not always well in the early church. They were not always one. We can see this in the first letter of John. Scholars believe that the Gospel according to John, and the letters of John, were written by the same author to a community of Gnostic Christians. The language and imagery in this gospel and the letters are different from that found in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts. The Gnostic Christian community needed to hear the good news presented in language that they could understand, shaped by the ideology and culture they were steeped in. We find the highest Christology in John. Jesus is the way the truth and the life, the word, and clear dichotomies of spirit and flesh, heaven and earth, death and life, love and hate, say and do, falsehood and truth, world and god, fear and love are emphasized.

There is also a knowledge or gnosis here that only those who work toward understanding will see. There are secrets of the faith that are revealed only to those who make the effort to study and learn and go through the special training and rituals to become part of the community. Yet all is not well in this community.

The first letter of John is five short chapters, paragraphs written to the community to confirm what they have been taught and know to be the truth (1:1). He writes to tell them that they know what is right; they know that God is light and has given them eternal life. But he also writes to remind them that if they abide in God/ in the light, they will love their brother and sister. And they will know that they have eternal life if they love their brother and sister.

You see he is writing to them because they lack unity. He warns them against listening to the false teachers (2:26-27), to avoid deceivers, and tells them not to worry about those who have left (2:19). But he also reminds them that we make God a liar if we say we have not sinned 1:10. And that we can only know that God's love abides in us if we love, not in word or speech but in truth and action. Specifically he says if we see a brother or sister in need and share what we have with them. And in this there is light and love and truth.

So here we have two extremes. A community that has lost members, but joins together to focus on the future. And a community that has lost members that needs to be reminded that they have already been guaranteed a future if they would just join together. One community that has called new leadership to serve. Another community that is called out to serve by its leadership.

And we have Jesus' prayer. "Now they know truth...I am asking on their behalf... because they are yours. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one... so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves....As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world... so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

It is a powerful prayer, and Jesus said that all things asked in his name would be ours. May it be so. Amen.