

Sermon (5/13/18, Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26):

In the 2017 Virginia elections to the state House of Delegates, the vote between Democrat Shelly Simonds and Republican David Yancey came down to a single ballot. For about a day, it looked like Simonds would be elected with a 1 vote margin over Yancey. But then, a three-judge panel, decided that an initially dismissed, mismarked ballot should be awarded to Yancey making the vote an even split – 11,608 to 11,608.

To decide the election, a controversial decision was made to pick one of their names from a bowl. Yancey's name was drawn, and he was declared the winner.

Many observers agreed that choosing a House Delegate by such a random method seemed bizarre, to say the least. After all the candidating and all the money spent for candidating, after all the planning and hard-work that goes into an election process, after thousands of voters weighing the pros and cons of the candidates and then coming out to vote, only to have it all end by a random drawing just seemed crazy. Is this any way to democratically choose a person for a state house?

To a similar degree, the process by which the Apostles chose to fill the vacancy left behind by the death of Judas, seems a little bizarre too. They cast lots, the text says. After carefully discerning who was eligible and narrowing the list down to two people, the final decision was made by picking a person's name from a bowl.

Much would rest on this inner circle of Jesus' followers. Their leadership would be crucial in the early days of this fledgling, small movement. The stories and lessons they would share would be the foundation upon which Christ's church would find its footing. One would think that such a critical decision like filling a vacancy among the twelve would involve more than a random game of chance! Crazy. In fact, there is much about this story that seems odd, confusing, and crazy.

Just before this moment was the ascension – that mysterious moment when, after numerous appearances by the resurrected Jesus, Jesus leaves the scene completely, disappearing into the heavens.

After their return home from the trauma of that event, Peter decides they need to fill the vacancy left behind by loss of Judas. Why, we

wonder, did Peter choose this moment to make such a weighty decision? Why didn't he wait until they had the company of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus had promised them? Would the results have been different?

We are told, that there were 120 followers in that room including the 11 Apostles and a number of women, including Jesus' mother, Mary. We're also told that Jesus' brothers were there. If they had waited until after the arrival of the Spirit, might someone else have been chosen? Maybe even one of the women? Maybe even Mary? God has been known to pick some pretty unlikely people to do some amazing things. Might the Spirit have directed them to one of the least likely in that room? Was Peter jumping the gun here? Were the disciples once again dismissing Jesus words too quickly, deciding, instead, to take matters into their own hands?

Ten days after the ascension, the promised Holy Spirit would arrive. Within those ten days, this is pretty much the only significant action the disciples took, at least as far as we know. Why did they do it? Why does Luke want us to know this story?

Perhaps, Peter did it because he wanted to make sure that whoever was picked was set in place before the Spirit arrived. Or maybe Peter felt he needed to do something to prove he was capable of the leadership mantel that had fallen upon his shoulders. Maybe this was his way of saying that all was not lost, things would be okay.

It had to be more than a little scary to see Jesus being lifted-up and taken out of sight on that day of Ascension...maybe almost like a second traumatic loss. First, Jesus died, and they were scared and confused. Then Jesus rose from the dead, as he promised, and they were scared and confused. Then Jesus was gone again, and they were scared and confused. It's almost like being scared and confused was part and parcel of being the church. It makes me wonder if maybe this is just a permanent state of being for the church as it strives to worship and follow the mysterious and confusing ways of God. Might this be hopeful news for us today?

Scared and confusing, it seems to me, is an apt description of the way things currently are. There just seems to be so much mess. So many battles and the drawing up of sides-conservatives verses progressives, this

theology verses that, ultimatums and the demonizing of the other.

When I look at some of the fights our denomination and others seem to be having these days, I often wonder, where has the church of my youth gone? The church that nurtured my faith, helped me to survive some incredibly rough times. The church that loved me and showed me what love is. The church whose story and theology lit a passion in me. I mean there was even a time when I looked forward to being a delegate to our national gathering, the General Synod, but, after attending last year's gathering, I can honestly say I hope I never have to go again. It was not pleasant. Like our national political system, we have become significantly polarized - drawing up sides, lining up the ranks to do battle, refusing to even listen and talk to anyone who does not fit the label we have claimed for ourselves. These are, to say the least, scary and confusing times.

Locally, it is just as scary and confusing - the struggle of keeping our financial heads above water, of declining memberships, of dealing with the staggering costs of aging buildings and equipment. The challenge of shrinking volunteer pools and trying to figure what we're supposed to do in the constantly changing and perplexing dynamics of today's culture we are called to do ministry in.

Scary and confusing seems to be a state not reserved solely for just Peter and the others left in that room after Jesus' ascension. Jesus didn't exactly give them or us much to go on. No blue-print on how to do church like the specifics God gave Noah on how to build an Ark. No operator's manual on how to deal with the many conflicting and challenging issues that faced the church then and faces the church now. All Jesus left them with was a vague promise...the Holy Spirit would come. In fact, so perplexed were they by this that they simple stared heavenward, mouths gaping, as Jesus disappeared from their sight. So frozen in time and fear were they, that an angel had to give them a little shove to get on with it-to get on with being the church.

I guess sometimes that's about the best we can do. Yes, these are confusing times. Yes, it can all seem a bit scary. Yes, it can sometimes feel like the odds are against us. Yes, sometimes our meetings are long, our bodies are weary, our search for volunteers feels futile, and our ideas

on how to fix this or that, run dry. Yes, there's a constant struggle of trying to figure out how to stay faithful to our calling while also navigating the complexities of today's society. But sometimes we just have to put one foot in front of the other. Sometimes we need to just jump in and do the best we can. Sometimes we just need to take a few risks like Peter did. Sometimes we must trust that even when we make mistakes, the Spirit will make something good come from it.

Was Peter's decision the best decision? Could he have timed this a bit better than he did? Maybe. I don't know. We weren't there. Maybe Peter sensed something we didn't. Maybe, as those 120 frightened eyes landed upon him in that little room, Peter sensed he needed to act in some way, shape or form.

We're fortunate to know that Jesus's promised arrival of the Spirit happened only ten days after the ascension, but Peter and the 120 didn't. They heard the promise but there was no time table that came with it. For all they knew, it could have been a day, ten days, or ten years. In that particular moment, maybe Peter just did the best he could just like we're supposed to, scared and confused though we might be.

One of the interesting things about this story is that after Matthias was chosen, we never hear about him again. Paul ends up taking center stage and, to be sure, Paul's successes, faithfulness, determination, incredible eloquence, wisdom, and insight can make us feel like wilting flowers. Trying to measure up to Paul is an impossible task. Even so, while Paul was traveling to far off places, the work of the church continued in Jerusalem. The church grew, the church found it's footing, and the church stood the test of time – saving lives, giving comfort, transforming the people and communities it reached out to. Without the church of Jerusalem, Paul's work would have not have had the support it needed to make it all work.

Matthias had a hand in that. We don't know his story. We don't know what he did. He was not the celebrity that Paul was. Yet, the work that Matthias did, along with all those with him including the 120 in that room, helped to change the world for the better. They were the quiet saints, the behind-the-scene saints – people like those who prepare Sunday

School lessons on Saturday night, who get up early on Sunday mornings to teach our children, who practice songs to sing in our choir during worship. People like the quiet saints who visit people in the hospital, bring meals, serve on Consistory and committees even if it requires bringing their infant children with them. Quiet saints who greet children in the lounge during coffee hour, reminding them how precious they are to our community. Quiet saints who wrestle with persnickety heating systems, trying to keep them running. Quiet saints who lead worship in our children's worship center with little ones who aren't always all that attentive.

Each of them, every one of them, and so many more like them, bear the name of Matthias. Striving, trying, doing the best they can. It's these people whose memory I still cherish because I know it's one of the reasons I am in this pulpit today. They cared, they challenged me, they reminded me who I was, they helped me not only to understand my gifts but to believe that I even had gifts in a world that constantly makes us think that we're junk.

To fill Judas' vacancy, they picked a name from a bowl. Peter tried to lead at a time of high anxiety. They did the best they could. They risked, they tried, they stepped up to the moment, they gave it their all just like so many in this sanctuary whom I have grown to love. With fortitude and determination, they made a deliberate decision to be the church and because of it, the world has never been the same. Thanks be to Matthias. Thanks be to the quiet saints who have played a part in bringing us together today. Thanks be to all of you.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Holy and gracious God, you have given us, provided us, blessed us with the church. You have used even us and even our messes in the building of this holy communion that has sustained your people, generation after generation. You have called us, shown us the gifts we have, challenged us to use them, and moved us from times of complacency to boldness. In ways apparent and not so apparent, you have moved mountains with the voices of those who have declared your glory and demanded your goodness. Nations have come and gone, borders have been drawn and battled over, tyrants have tried to quell your work, but your glory has always prevailed. Your grace has remained steadfast. Your love has dismantled all things that work contrary to your will. Your goodness has blossomed even in the most dissolute of places.

We praise and thank you this day. We thank you for the Matthias type saints who have created this space for us and our children. We thank you for today's Matthias type saints whose quiet and often unknown ways continue to make bold declarations of your capacity to save and renew. We thank you, especially, for those saints whose names might be known only to us but who have played a significant role in the shaping of who we are.

Loving God of determination and power remember us. Remember our fragility and our constant need for your care. Remember us and use us, even our messes, to make your goodness known. Remember us, turning even our defeats into glory beyond our wildest dreams. Remember us, love us, and make us bold in declaring that above all else, we are your people and you are our God.

We ask all of this even as we lift to you those who are

frightened, ill, weak, lost, and sorrowful. Be near to those, we pray, who are being wounded by sin and victimized by cold hearts that have forgotten who they are. We especially pray this day, O Lord, for these things we now name in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.