

Casting Lots
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
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¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said, ¹⁶‘Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— ¹⁷for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.’

²¹So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²²beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.’ ²³So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴Then they prayed and said, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.’ ²⁶And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Whenever a pastor comes into a new presbytery (whether to be ordained and installed or simply installed), he or she typically has to go before an examinations committee. The exact process differs from presbytery to presbytery, but in the presbytery that ordained me in North Carolina, the process was fairly standard and similar to how things are done in here in Foothills Presbytery. First, you submit documents – a sermon, a statement of faith, a brief bio. Then, you attend a meeting of the examinations committee. Back in the summer of 2011 when I was preparing to begin my first call as a pastor, I traveled to White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh for my examination. As soon as I arrived, I was welcomed by the chair of the examinations committee and then ushered into a room with 4 members from that committee where, for the next hour and a half, they asked me questions about theology, the Bible, polity, and worship. When we got to the theology section, a pastor on the committee picked up my statement of faith and asked me the following question, **“Where is Jesus?”** I’m sure I had a blank look on my face because he elaborated a bit – “in your statement of faith you reference Jesus multiple times,” he said, “but you do not specify where he is.” Right about this

time, I started to sweat bullets. What does he mean by this question, I wondered to myself? What answer is he looking for? I decided to go with the truest answer I had – “Jesus is in my heart,” I replied confidently. “Yeah,” “you could say that,” he replied. “But where is he?” Where is he....I wondered again silently to myself. Okay, I thought, maybe he wants an answer that has to do with the church. “Jesus abides in gathered community of the church. We are the body of Christ in the world.” Definitely nailed it this time, I thought. “Well, yes, he said,” “but also no,” “that wasn’t exactly what I was looking for.” Hmm...I started sweating even more as I found myself thinking that maybe this has something to do with the Trinity. “Christ is alive in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit,” I replied. “Yeah,” I guess that’s right, too,” he said, “but that’s still not exactly what I am looking for.” I started to panic at this point. My examination had been going really well. But now it had stalled and I couldn’t figure out why. I started to think through the Apostles Creed in my head – “At the right hand of the Father,” I asked tentatively? “You’re getting closer,” he replied, “but you still haven’t quite hit the nail on the head. “Okay,” I said, “I don’t think I’m going to have the answer you want today. Would you share with me what exactly you were looking for?” “He is ascended is what I am looking for,” the man responded. “Jesus ascended into heaven before Pentecost and that is why he now sits at the right hand of the Father.” “So...” I asked, “were you looking for ascended, heaven, or at the right hand of the Father?” “Ascended,” he said, “I think the church doesn’t emphasize the ascension nearly enough. We recently celebrated the Day of Ascension,” he said, “and you don’t seem to know that.”

This story that still sometimes shows up in my dreams (dreams of anxiety that is) orients us to the context of our New Testament passage today. The disciples have just witnessed the ascension of Jesus into heaven 40 days after he was resurrected on Easter Sunday. They are now back in that upper room – the same one where they shared the last supper and encountered the risen Jesus – wondering what to do next. Jesus isn’t dead, but he’s no longer present with them. Life is different and they must move on. So, Peter stands up and gives them a seemingly simple task to do – fill the vacancy left by Judas when he betrayed Jesus. The narrative that follows is short and to the point. Candidates were proposed and one was chosen. And that’s the last we hear of it. Seriously. For the rest of Acts, the rest of the Bible, Matthias, the chosen candidate is never heard from again.

No shipwrecks, no angelic jailbreaks, no mass baptisms or missionary journeys, no letters or sermons or healings.

The only relatively extraordinary aspect of Matthias' apostleship is, perhaps, the fact that he was chosen by lot. That practice probably sounds strange to our 21st century ears, but not so strange in Biblical times. Remember, the soldiers who attended the crucifixion decided who would get Jesus' tunic by casting lots? And in the Old Testament, lots were cast to determine which land each of the 12 tribes of Israel would get. They were also cast to discern who had done wrong (Achan, Jonah, Jonathan), who would perform certain holy duties in the temple, and even who would become the first king of Israel. One pastor describes casting lots in the Bible as "respectable," another talks about how it is a way of discernment that seeks to listen to God and to see who God is calling. Even as we learn all of this about lot-casting, it is still pretty awe-inspiring that the 12th apostle was chosen by lot. That God worked through the drawing of straws, the roll of a di, or some other manner of chance. Some of you may know the work or jokes of comedian Sarah Silverman, well, her sister is a progressive Jewish Rabbi who lives in Israel and recently published a memoir on faith. Its title? Casting Lots. In her book, Susan Silverman talks about her journey of faith – specifically the decisions to become a rabbi and to start a family through adoption, and even reflects upon a family tragedy that occurred during her childhood. For Susan Silverman, casting lots is a powerful metaphor for God's call upon and presence in her life.

I want each one of us in this sanctuary today to take a moment and do something that Mr. Rogers asked the audience to do back in 1997 when he accepted his Lifetime Achievement Emmy award. Take 10 seconds to think of the special ones who have loved you into being, those who have cared about you and wanted what was best for you in life. As Mr. Rogers said, "I'll watch the time."

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Like Mr. Rogers, some of those people in our lives are here, some are far away, some are even in heaven. I would venture a guess that most of them are like Matthias. Not famous. Their stories are ordinary and untold. They are "unsung disciples". Today we are celebrating Confirmation Sunday in the life of our church. Twenty-three 9th graders and their mentors have spent the Lenten and Easter seasons learning more about their faith and preparing to claim the Christian faith as their own today.

I'm sure that they all have "unsung disciples" like Matthias in their lives. The unsung disciples of my teenage years included a man named Mr. Gurley who would slip candy into the hands of me and my brother as we made our way into worship on Sunday mornings, and a woman name Mae Fretwell who became my prayer partner in the 9th grade and faithfully prayed for me daily until her death. She also invited me to the Christmas brunch she organized each year for her granddaughters, telling me to call her "Mae-Mae" just like they did. There was also my high school cross-country coach, Coach Parker, who taught me as much about Christian faith and character as he did about running.

Here's the thing, for our confirmands, and for all of us – just like we have all have unsung disciples in our lives for whom we give thanks, God might very well be calling us to be the unsung disciple in the life of another. We're more likely to be the Matthiases and the Justuses of the world than we are the Peters and the Pauls. And our task is all that simple and it is all that hard – to witness to the resurrection of Christ. That's all the 12th apostle had to do. To become a witness to Christ's resurrection. To tell people about Jesus and to share the love of Christ with others. Well, that's almost all. They and we are called to *"become witnesses **WITH US** to his resurrection."* This means something important. It means that we cannot be Christians alone. We need other people. We need the church. That's why we celebrate Confirmation Sunday during worship. That's why we're baptizing two of those confirmands today – because we are the church together. We are witnesses to the resurrection together. We are disciples together.

Casting lots. That's not something someone would do on his or her own. It's only something that would be done with others around, in the context of the community. Every time lots were cast in the Bible, it was a community seeking something. People seeking to discern God's will together. Much of Susan Silverman's memoir entitled "Casting Lots" is devoted to stories related to her children and the community that surrounds them. She and her husband purposefully created a family made up of biological and adopted children and raised them in a faith community. When describing the adoption of her son, a child from a Jewish community in Ethiopia, Silverman talks about how nervous she was. She had traveled to an orphanage in Addis Ababa with her sister while her husband stayed home with their other children. She was anxious, but in an excited way. She trusted that God had put this call upon her heart, but she still caught herself wondering, "Is this the right choice?" Would she love this child as much as she should? Would her family and community accept him? Would he

accept them? As she closes the first chapter of the book, describing the moment she approached the room her son was in to meet him for the first time, she writes, “the door opened before I even had the chance to knock.”

I wonder if Matthias felt that way? That the door to apostleship in the name of Jesus opened before he even had the chance to knock. When he was part of the early band of followers that accompanied Jesus and witnessed, first-hand, all of the things that happened, I bet he never imagined that he would one day be promoted to one of the 12. But he was. God had a plan for him and opened that door before he could even knock. That’s what casting lots is sometimes, trusting God and following through whatever door is opened. The time that the 120 followers of Jesus were living in after Jesus’ ascension is, although 2,000 years apart, the same time that we’re living in. Jesus is no longer walking earth. We’re his hands and feet and voice. We’re the ones called to witness to the resurrection together. And the challenge and task from back then is the same as ours today. To take care of the body that’s in the church and to get outside the upper room and witness to those in the world. To our confirmands – much of your time in the church has been spent here, within these walls. Walking the halls of our building during Its Elementary. Learning more about God in our classrooms. Worshipping in this sanctuary. Playing games in the Youth Suite. Basketball practice in the gym. Standing on the chancel steps and singing with the choir. Church suppers in the fellowship hall. Continue to do that. Nurture your faith here. Step up as an example for those younger than you. Become the man who gives out candy to little children on the way into worship. Become the woman who adopts teenagers into her brood of grandchildren. But also get out there. Into the wide world, wherever God’s call takes you and become a witness WITH US to Christ’s resurrection.

Casting Lots and unsung disciples. For a short little passage that seems ordinary and to the point, there’s a lot to unpack here. There’s a lot to learn. There’s a lot to do. *Become witnesses with us to his resurrection.* It is all that easy and its all that hard. Let’s get to work. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.