

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 7th Sunday of Easter, May 17, 2015

Filling a Vacancy

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Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Whenever there is a vacancy in a political office, there tends to be a flood of people tossing their hats into the ring asking to be appointed to fill the vacancy. Sometimes they see the vacancy as an opportunity for public service but more often it is a bid for prestige, power or political influence.

When there is a vacancy in a youth group leadership position, a church committee chair's position or on a church session and volunteers are sought to fill the vacancy, few people are willing to step forward and volunteer. Arms have to be twisted to get anyone, anyone at all, to agree to serve.

As a Scout leader I know how difficult it is to recruit people to take on important roles such as being a Scoutmaster or a Cub Scout Den leader. People are apprehensive about volunteering not knowing exactly what the job entails, how much time it will take, and the sacrifices they will need to make to do the job as it should be done.

The same is true of church positions with many added concerns --- "I am not devout enough!" --- "What if I am asked to lead a prayer? I can't do that." --- "I simply don't have the time to take on anything more." --- "I don't have the skills needed." --- and on and on and on.

All of that, for the most part, amounts to feeble excuses. We all can do what is needed for the sake of our children or for the sake of our faith if we really want to.

Now, what if you were approached by Peter and told, "We have a vacancy. One of our twelve apostles is gone. He betrayed the Lord. We need someone to replace him. It's a tough job. Many people will oppose whoever we choose and our choice stands the chance of being jailed. being beaten, being stoned or possible even being crucified. There is no pay for doing the job. To the contrary, the person we choose will have to give up his family and everything he owns."

"We think that you are an ideal candidate for the position. There will be an election

to fill the vacancy. May we put your name in nomination?”

Wow! How would you react? Would you agree?

Well, two people did agree, one of whom you are probably vaguely aware of and the other who you probably never heard of except perhaps in reading today's text from Acts.

These two men were Matthias or Mattatheas and a man named Joseph or Barsabbas. He is also referred to in scripture as Justus.

What do we know about either of these two men?

Frankly, little or nothing. In a way it was like picking from a list of potential politicians --- or potential Scout leaders --- or a new church member who is being considered as a potential elder. We often have to take it on faith that this person or that person is the best choice. Sometimes, as we well know, an individual doesn't work out. We make the wrong choice.

In the case of the eleven apostles choosing a replacement for Judas Iscariot they could not afford to make the wrong choice but they had Jesus to guide their decision, just as we pray that we have when choosing our youth leaders and the leaders of our congregations.

What do we know about the two candidates to replace Judas and what did the eleven know? Presumably the eleven knew a lot more than we do. All we know about Joseph or Justus Barsabbas is that he was considered as a replacement for Judas and that his name means “Son of Sabbas” or “Born on the Sabbath.” That's it! Often with politicians we don't know much more than that.

For Matthias, all we know is that he was the one who was selected. Nowhere in scripture is Matthias or Barsabbas ever mentioned again.

We do know that Peter spoke to a group of about 120 disciples about Judas Iscariot and calling for a replacement from among those who had been associated with the first disciples, that is from those who knew Jesus. Peter described the qualifications that the new apostle had to meet. That person had to have been a follower of Christ from the beginning, that is from the day of Jesus baptism up to an including his ascension. A personal and immediate relationship with Jesus was paramount.

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* paraphrased Peter's words this way: “*Judas*

must now be replaced. The replacement must come from the company of men who stayed together with us from the time Jesus was baptized by John up to the day of his ascension, designated along with us as a witness to his resurrection.”

The list of candidates who met these criteria was short and from that short list, Matthias and Barsabbas were chosen. Tradition has it that both men were among the seventy disciples sent out two by two during Jesus' early ministry but scripture doesn't say nor do we know anything more about their subsequent ministries.

Origen and Clement of Alexandria in the third century mention Gnostic gospels about Matthias but whatever these gospels were, they are long lost. Papias reported that Barsabbas drank poison but came to no harm. Again we have no way of knowing if that is true or not.

However Matthias and Barsabbas were chosen as candidates for the position, they were clearly held in great esteem by the eleven who, trusting in God's guiding hand, selected Matthias by casting lots.

Was Matthias elated and was Barsabbas disappointed? Probably yes in both cases but we really don't know. All we can do is speculate.

But in the words of Walter Bruggeman, et al¹, *“The fact is that the text is silent on the subsequent careers of both candidates for the apostolic circle, leading to the conclusion that, like so many thousands of unnamed early, they spent the rest of their lives witnessing to the power of the Resurrected One. Their adventures in faithfulness did not draw the attention of the early church as did those of Paul. But it was they, not just Paul, who won much of the Roman world to Christ, and without them there would have been no Christian community to receive and treasure Paul's letters*

“The apostolic office was important --- at least to some in the young church. Vastly more important were the dedication and faithfulness of Christ's women and men”

That is not changed today. The church grows and thrives not because of elders and pastors but because of the dedication and faithfulness of all Christians everywhere.

Amen.

1. Walter Bruggeman, et al, Texts for Preaching --- Year B, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1993