



“Luck of the Draw”

a sermon by

Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
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Our reading today comes to us from Acts 1:15-17, 21-26. This book, of course, holds the story of the formation of the early church. And today, we have a rather mechanical description of one of the earlier developments- the deciding of a new apostle. "In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, "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 - for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry. So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning 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." So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles."

Here we get a great glimpse into the early church's process. The problem is quite simple- there used to be 12 disciples, they were now down a man, tragically, and a slot needed to be filled. So two nominees are brought forward.

There is some basic criteria- whoever was to be decided on had to have himself encountered Jesus, and not only that but had to have been with them all from the very beginning- since the day of his baptism until the day of resurrection. And, the man had to be willing to become a witness to that resurrection. So, the first ever church nominating committee brought forth two names - Barsabbas and Matthias. A prayer was given. Lots were cast- literally, the dice were rolled, and they fell on Matthias. And he was added to the eleven. Done deal. But there's no mention of either the other nominee or the new apostle anywhere else in the New Testament so it would seem that our author has a different purpose in mind in reporting this rather mundane piece of early church business than introducing a character that would later figure prominently into the story. There must be a wisdom in the mechanics of the whole exchange somehow.

We've just begun our nominating process for new church officers for next year and I dare say that their work is going to look a little different than the one outlined here. So what is there to be learned?

I read this passage and can't help but have a few different emotions. To be honest, the first is a little bit of fear. I mean, this is the foundation of the church we're talking about. All of Christendom is at this moment in the hands of 11 guys and your telling me that they made their decision by rolling dice? Part of me finds it kind of terrifying to think that they relied on the luck of the draw and God's interest in turning the lots according to his will when it all kind of seems a bit like a big game of chance to me.

It's not unlike praying that God will miraculously reveal the exact word that you need for your life at any given moment in time and then opening your Bible and randomly putting your finger on a verse. Admit it, you've done it. And the reason that we Presbyterians

who are all very decent and in good order don't encourage the practice is because of the randomness of it all and because it can become something of an exercise in seeking revelation 'on demand'.

The second thing I feel is a little bit charmed. So they had to make a decision, they prayed, they rolled the dice, and interpreted the outcome to be the Word of God and just went with it. That's so sweet. You really think God is speaking in dice? But then I also feel admiration. Maybe even a little envy over the simplicity of it all. You have a decision to make. You narrow your choices. You pray, you go through a motion of discernment, and you stick with it. And you move on.

Think about the way that you go about making decisions relative to this story. How does it compare to your process? I can tell you how it compares to mine. My mom used to accuse me of getting 'paralysis from analysis' when I was a kid- I would get so worked up over the smallest decision that had to be made because I was so afraid of getting it wrong that I would get paralyzed- even when there was no consequence. Do you want to watch a movie tonight or play a game? It would do me in- this is the plight of the only child, I suppose, there's no one to bounce these critical things off of. But we're adults here- and the decisions we're called upon to make in our worlds aren't exactly between movies and games.

We live in a time that is laced with complexity and interconnectedness and uncertainty. And we live at a time when there is more information available to us than ever before- streams of variables of a seemingly infinite variety regarding any host of issues surround us. And because we're all enlightened, responsible individuals, there's a great deal of pressure on getting it right whatever 'it' may be. Maybe you have to get a new cell phone. Maybe it's about healthcare. Maybe the church. Maybe it is a choice you make about raising your kids. One of a thousand decisions you make in a day at work.

Decisions that will affect your life. Decisions that will affect your future, your families. Decisions that will affect other people. Decisions about how you will spend your time, your money, your talent or how you will influence others to spend theirs. And the stakes are high. It is enough to give anyone paralysis from analysis.

But there is something so simple about the wisdom of faithful decision-making that we are being invited to discern and also to decide to make our own in this text for today.

First, a prayer. Nothing fancy. 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us who you have chosen.' We can spend a lot of time in prayer over our decisions, which is a good thing. But it is also a single request that places the sovereignty over a situation where it belongs- in the hands of God.

The disciples could have gone to the dry erase board to list attributes and potential pitfalls all day, which has its place. But instead they appeal to the God who sees and knows all, and who alone controls salvation's history. This is not about choosing the perfect man for the job. This is about choosing the man God has chosen.

And the beauty of the prayer is that it is prayed in trust that God will have his way. And we know this by the rest of the story. A means is employed, the outcome noted, and the decision made. End of story. Why is it not always this easy for us?

Of course, there are ways that we shortchange the process. It's plenty easy to roll the dice without praying. And it's plenty easy to act out of our own will rather than God's. As infinite as the number of variables that surround us are also the variety of ways in which we can interject ourselves into any act of discernment. And we can almost be certain that if we're not praying, 'thy will be done,' it's because we're hoping that 'my will be done'. So it's easy not to pray.

But on the flip side of the equation we can also be good at praying for discernment but not always trusting the outcome. We may pray and think we have a decision but then start running the scenarios and second guessing. We try and justify, explain, and manage the unfolding of a situation.

We pray for God to have God's way but then don't actually take that next step of letting go and trusting God to work. And in so doing we forget that we are not God.

Luke gives us a great example of those closest to Jesus trusting God to be God. This is a decision for them to pray over and then let go. There is other work to be done and when you do your part the rest of the story really does belong to the Lord. And it is time then to be free.

My former pastor, Rev. Walter Jones used to say of faithful decision-making that there are really three steps to follow. First, to pray for discernment. Seeking the will of God. Then, to pray for strength to carry out whatever it is that you have discerned. And, finally, to pray for forgiveness for ever trying to figure out the will of God at all.

What Luke invites us into finally is a dose of humility. Not just because God is sovereign and we are not. Not just because God's knowledge is so vast, which it is, or because his ways are so unknowable, which they are. But because God partners with us at all in carrying out that essential story of salvation. That God invites us into his history and commissions us to claim our part in it.

The work of the kingdom is at hand every second of every day. And in those seconds where we find ourselves in critical junctures deciding how we will react to a person or respond in love, deciding what is best for our lives and what will glorify God, at that intersection between certainty and doubt when you have got to take a stand and the chips will fall where they may and lives and situations and systems will be forever changed in big and small ways, there is God. Committing to you. Calling you. Beckoning you. Not to be sure and make the right choice. But to trust that he will be God. The world's salvation is not in your hands. The situations around you are not in your hands. Other people are not in your hands. Your own life even is not in your hands. It is all only in

God's. And this is so that you can be freed up receive the blessing- the blessing of the opportunity to come alongside this great enterprise of his in faith.

We are called as partners in Christ's service the self-appointed apostle Paul would tell us. And we are being-and will forever be faithfully led. Amen.