

Decently and In Order

Acts 1 (various)

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

Rev. Pen Peery

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Our second scripture takes place in an in-between time. As you heard Jane/Taylor read, Jesus has ascended into heaven. Before he did that, he gave his disciples explicit instructions to return to Jerusalem and **wait** for the promise of the Father and for a baptism by the Holy Spirit.

Our second scripture picks up after the eleven disciples (remember that they were down one because of Judas) have returned to Jerusalem. However, instead of waiting for the Holy Spirit, Peter decides he needs to act. I am reading from the first chapter, beginning with the 15th verse. Listen with me for the word of God.

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In those days, Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and 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 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.

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Peter is the kind of leader that I respect.

He is a take-charge kind of guy.

He knows that people crave direction and he doesn't mind giving it to them.

In this morning's scripture, Jesus has ascended into heaven. He left the disciples to be about the work of the kingdom – to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. He told them to wait for the Holy Spirit to come and give them direction – but what Peter realized is that everyone was standing around wondering what to do next, and so Peter decided he would fill that vacuum with leadership.

Peter seems like a man who knew that what people needed was for someone to take control. I can respect that.

I love control.

I hate feeling out of control.

This Thursday, your staff will meet off-site to plan the church calendar for the next 13 months. I don't know if there is anything more satisfying than putting things on a December calendar in May. It just makes you feel better about life, right?

Ask me what my life will look like in five years – and I will gladly tell you. I've got it figured out. Ask me when I will retire and what my monthly income will need to be for me to live the lifestyle to which I will be accustomed – I can tell you that, too.

All meetings should have an agenda.
And a proscribed time by which the meeting should adjourn.
Every year should begin with goals.
Never start something without the end in mind.

You see, I think Peter would get that.

I think he had the kind of personality that a culture like ours would value.
He was willing to take charge and take control.
So while Jesus told him to “wait” for the Holy Spirit...

To return to Jerusalem with the rest of the disciples and watch for watch for what God would reveal about their next steps...

I think Peter interpreted Jesus’ words as a suggestion rather than a command. Because he knew there was work to do and, by golly, he was the man to do it.

As a Presbyterian pastor who loves feeling in control, I find a lot of comfort (and humor) in the fact that the very first thing the very first church did after Jesus ascended heaven was to form a nominating committee to replace an apostle with an unexpired term.

The nominee’s name was Matthias.

Now, if you don’t know who Matthias is, you are to be forgiven. Even the staunchest of Southern Baptists might not be able to recall the name of this apostle who replaced Judas.

And the fact is that Matthias exits the biblical stage as quickly as he enters it. If you look for Matthias to be mentioned anywhere else in the Bible you are going to be a while. After he is chosen by the apostles he is never mentioned again in the Scriptures. It’s not even 15 minutes of fame. It is only a vote.

All in favor of Matthias, say “aye.”

All opposed, “nay.”

So ordered.

And that’s it – poof! Matthias is history.

Matthias was chosen because he made number twelve. Jesus called twelve disciples. After Judas’ act of betrayal, only eleven made it to apostle-status – so the search was on for a twelfth.

It makes sense.

Twelve is a good, round, biblical number.

It symbolizes completion; wholeness.

There were twelve tribes of Israel.

There were twelve judges, then twelve kings.

Revelation tells us that the city wall in the New Jerusalem will measure 12 cubits by 12.

You could even say that “God had always done it that way.”

That seemed to be the basis of Peter’s argument.

Still, it makes you wonder why – if finding this twelfth apostle was so important – the rest of the story in Acts – which is about the birth of the church – doesn’t mention Matthias at all.

I can understand why Peter and the other apostles decided to hold that meeting. They did it because they were anxious. What in the world does it look like to do what Jesus told them and “wait for the Holy Spirit?” How do you quantify that? What are the metrics?

So I get that in the face of not knowing what to do or how to wait, they would go back to a place that felt familiar; I get that they would busy themselves with committee work that helped them feel in control of their future –

and I am convicted when I realize that through their inability to wait, they exposed their lack of faith and willingness to allow the Spirit to lead the church.

In his commentary on this passage, Bible scholar Justo Gonzalez notices that after this anxiety induced committee work in the first chapter, the rest of Acts tells the story of the church's birth by the power of the book's primary character: not Peter, or the other apostles, but the Holy Spirit.¹

As Acts tells the story, the witness of the Church grows – not because the apostles are able to impose structure and do things decently and in order, but because God is out ahead of the Church, increasing the Church's bounds.

Read the rest of the book. From tongues of fire, to the costly witness of disciples; from a Damascus road, to repetitive dreams about profane animals made clean; from Jerusalem councils, to shipwrecks – Acts is a book that wanders, not on a straight and orderly line – but by a path forged by the Spirit. It is a picture of the Church – then, now, and in the future. It is a path we are called to walk, not to control. And, boy, that can be difficult for me.

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My grandfather was a good Presbyterian – an elder in the church. He was a judge in a small, county seat in the southwest corner of Virginia. After he retired, he kept his office on Main Street. Each weekday morning, he would make the short walk from his house to the office – newspaper in one hand and briefcase in the other. When asked why – at age 83, 16 years after his last case he continued to go to his office five days a week, his answer was simple, and quintessentially Presbyterian: “Well...a man needs a place to go.”

It seems “the place we need to go” as a church is to generate structure that makes sense of our work. The “place we go” is to schedule a meeting to wonder about what God is doing in the world, instead of going out to experience it. The “place we go” as a church is to find people who have passion for ministry...maybe they are new members, maybe they are old members, maybe they are visitors...and try to find a way to get them to sit on a committee. We go to this place because it is familiar, and because it is feels comfortable. Perhaps we have forgotten there is any other place to go.

Lest you think I fail to see my own hypocrisy, I'll admit that I am preaching to myself. I've been a pastor of a church for 13 years. I can't begin to tell you how many meetings I have attended. Worse, I can't tell you how many times I have invited (or, more directly, required!) that many of you attend meetings. I'll never forget the time that I came come late at night to find Wells – then, my four year old son – “playing meeting” in his room. Talk about holding up a mirror!

It's not that structure and meetings and doing things “decently and in order” are not important...sometimes they are. But what I suspect – and what I even confess – is that many times our love of committee work and meetings is a symptom of our misplaced belief that we are in control of the church.

We are not in control of the church. The Holy Spirit is in control of the church – and if the story of Matthias in the book of Acts tells us anything, it is that any attempts we make to force our structure on the Holy Spirit's action are and will be futile.

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¹ Gonzalez, Justo (*Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*, Orbis, New York, 2001) Justo's commentary informs much of this sermon.

If you were in church last Sunday, you heard Kay Valaoras announce that the Session has recently voted to implement an innovative model of church leadership.

The Session will be smaller – and focused on prayerfully considering how our ministry might best align with God’s will; guiding us to make faithful and strategic decisions about our life together.

The Deacons will assume the responsibility of the active, or day-to-day ministry of our church – we are streamlining our various committees and asking the Deacons to be in charge of them.

Later this morning we will elect a nominating committee to consider whom God is calling to serve as Elders and Deacons in our church. Unlike Peter and the apostles, I do not think casting lots will be their practice. The committee will rely on your suggestions and wisdom, and I encourage you to recommend people you think have the leadership and vision that we need.

But here is the big change – and the big innovation – in how we are approaching church leadership: we have tried to organize ourselves in such a way that we can trust each other to listen for where the Holy Spirit leads.

Rather than asking you to come to meetings and serve on the sub-committee of the committee of a larger committee, we will pay attention to where the interest and passion of our members is and form Ministry Teams – designed to group people together with similar ministry interests to unleash your potential instead of listing it as an item on an agenda.

The point of Ministry Teams is that if you see an opportunity to better connect or minister to people in the church – children, youth, older adults, whomever...you can do it! You don’t have to complain about it – you don’t make a motion at a session meeting. You just follow your passion. Passion is how the Holy Spirit gets your attention.

If you catch wind of the Spirit that leads us to be the church somewhere outside these walls – through a mission project, a relationship with another ministry, or with someone who needs a neighbor or an advocate...go for it! Don’t come ask for permission. Don’t schedule a meeting. Engage. Then let your family of faith know where you think God is calling us to follow.

If there is someone you know who hungers for a connection to the body of Christ found in this church – reach out to them! Don’t write the evangelism committee or Mary Scott Peterson a memo. Be an evangelist...God calls all of us do it.

The church that God is calling us to be next will exist and be effective – not because we have the right structure, but because we have the courage to follow where the Holy Spirit leads.

But, then again, don’t take my word for it...go ask Matthias.