

# “The Ministry of Accompaniment”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – May 16, 2021*

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Psalm 4

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

In sporting events, teams are rarely as vulnerable as when they are down a player: four trying to guard five in basketball, five defending six on a power play in hockey, or ten against eleven in football and soccer. Teams anxiously scramble and valiantly rally to hold on until the numbers on each side become equal again.

In this first chapter of Acts, the level of anxiety for the disciples is high: after three years of being Jesus’s followers, they now face the challenge of navigating a world without him. After witnessing the dramatic events of Holy Week – when their teacher went from being lauded as a new king to being crucified like a criminal – they face the reality of losing not only their leader and friend, but their own security. The risen Jesus told them they would be witnesses all peoples of the earth, but also that they must wait – for how long, they do not know – for the Holy Spirit to descend and call them to action.

And so, we discover the disciples – described as a group of 120 apostles, women, and others – together in an upper room in Jerusalem. As they wait, they are praying; and Peter – the outspoken one who steps into this leadership void – decides that while they are waiting and praying, there is some administrative business to consider. Because of the betrayal and subsequent demise of Judas, the number of apostles – those identified by Jesus as part of his designated inside circle – now stands at eleven. Symbolically, this may have called into question the early church’s claim to follow in the tradition of Israel. In order to maintain the parallel between the apostles and the tribes of Israel, it was necessary that a new, twelfth apostle be selected.

Thus, we read today an account of the first congregational meeting in church history. As Judas is now gone, there is an opening on the church board which Peter proceeds to address. It appears that two viable candidates emerge: Joseph called Barsabbas, also known as Justus; and Matthias. In today’s elections, we might worry about name recognition for a man who had three; and, in the end, it is the latter man – with only one name – who is chosen. The method for election that is

employed – the casting of lots – seems not to have been an issue. It could have just as easily have been done by voice vote, secret ballot, or committee recommendation. As the group of 120 were unified in their prayers, there seems to be no dissent to the selection.

What stands out to us, today, is the criteria for candidacy that is applied. They chose from those “who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us.” In other words, the need was for someone who had been among them from the beginning, from the baptism to the ascension of Jesus. Faithfulness required continuity; the moment was calling for someone with experience and integrity.<sup>1</sup>

What this first administrative act of the early church describes is a process of *discerning*. The community – in the midst of their anxiety and loss – considered which of their members had the leadership traits that were most important to them at that time and presented them for service; and then put the decision in God’s hands. There were no campaigns or nomination speeches, it was a process that allowed for their sense of identity as God’s chosen people – the twelve tribes of Israel reconstituted as followers of Jesus’ way – to continue forward.

Churches today, across our nation and beyond, likewise find themselves in a state of high anxiety. There is much uncertainty about the present: when and how much to open back up for on-site worship services and activities; and how to protect members, staff, and children. But there are also questions about the longer-term future of congregations: how soon and to what extent will people return; what percentage of people will continue their participation virtually or, instead, may have fallen away from their faith practices and habits?

Still, in some respects, these are the surface questions; underneath them are uncertainties about whether the format and message of our churches continue to connect with folks in today’s world. Is the church recognized from the outside for its community and service; or, instead, for division, scandal, and corruption? For those of us on the inside, are we guided by hope and faith or fear and anxiety? Do we see ourselves as abundantly blessed or playing shorthanded?

In telling the story of the birth and formation of the early church, the Book of Acts might serve as a guide when we try to answer such questions. In their moment of high anxiety and an uncertain future – and sensing the incompleteness of moving forward without a twelfth apostle – the followers of Jesus tackled the

---

<sup>1</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts from Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*

issue of identifying and discerning God's will for them. They established the criteria for who would be selected as one of their leaders: which qualities would be considered most important for moving forward into an uncertain future.

And the quality they identified as being most vital was accompaniment. Matthias was nominated and elected to fill the role of the twelfth apostle because he had been a part of the community all along. He was not chosen after conducting a nation-wide search; nor because he was considered the best or brightest; not even because he had extra time on his hands and was looking for something to fill up his day. No, all we know is that this man, Matthias, had been accompanying the nascent church along its journey; he was a part of the community.

After this story, here in the first chapter, the name Matthias never appears again in the Book of Acts; nor anywhere else in scripture. We can assume that since he had been a faithful member of the community up to this point, this man continued to serve well after his selection. Some even say that Paul, who will show up several chapters into Acts – first as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus and later, after his conversion, as the great evangelist – fills the role of the true twelfth apostle.<sup>2</sup>

But let's not allow the low profile of Matthias detract from what he – and the other early church members – can teach us about what it means to be a part of the church today. For, despite the uncertainty before them, despite the high anxiety of living through a world-shaking transition and left to move forward with Jesus no longer leading them, they continued in faithful practice of the ministry of accompaniment: walking side-by-side through all the joys and trials, the hopes and challenges, of being God's gathered and sent people.

As today's church, we have been called to this same ministry of accompaniment. We are the ones who have stood side-by-side with one another as we sang and prayed, as we worked and served. We have watched our children be baptized and have mourned the death of each other's parents. We have witnessed amazing examples of transformation and waited patiently for dawn after long nights to come. We have passed the peace, held hands to receive the benediction, and shared donuts and cups of coffee.

Sometimes, we feel as if we fall short as companions to one another; we fail to notice, too often, when others are hurting. We get distracted and forget to call or be patient listeners. In this strange, unsettling pandemic year, we might feel

---

<sup>2</sup> Jerusha Matsen Neal from *WorkingPreacher.com*

disconnected or alone; it has been difficult to show up for each other with our patterns and practices so disrupted.

And yet, like Matthias – as well as Joseph / Barsabbas / Justus – we are known and called by God by name. No one can fill our particular role in the community in the same way. No one has the same exact experiences and perspectives that we do. We might, or might not, be asked to serve in a leadership position, but each of us has ways to impact this community – within these walls and beyond – by standing and walking alongside one another.

This ministry is not an easy one; but, of course, Jesus never promised us that it would be. The challenges and anxieties for every church community – including this one – are significant. But what the disciples who gathered in that upper room soon discovered, when the Holy Spirit descended upon them like a rushing wind and a blazing fire, is that nothing – no circumstance, no obstacle, no personal or national crisis – nothing can separate us from the love of God made known in Jesus Christ. Therefore, despite all the anxiety and uncertainty, the disruption and the loss; all our thanks belong to God: our Creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.