

## The Problem with Finding a Twelfth

Acts 1 (various)

March 6, 2011

Earlier this week I attended, and preached for, a conference in Indianapolis. The conference was called “Next” – as in what is “Next” for the Presbyterian Church (USA). There were about 400 people there – Presbyterians of all sizes and stripes; seminary students; elders and deacons, too. We gathered, we worshipped, we shared what we saw God doing in the world – where we had experienced the living Christ. It was a rich experience that is being shared across the country by those who attended.

I want you to know something: The most pervasive feeling coming out of the conference was hope. That’s right – I said hope.

What is next for the Presbyterian Church (and for that matter, all churches) is going to be different than the church we know now. It is going to be different than the church we remember from our past. The way we “do” church is going to change...it is going to change in ways we can’t even yet imagine. And you know what? That’s okay – because if belonging to a church means anything, it means that – together as a community of faith, as the body of Christ – we believe that God is in control of the future and we believe that God is working God’s purposes out. Whatever is “next” – we know that God is in charge of it. It is with that conviction that we approach today’s scripture.

Today’s scripture is from the book of Acts and takes place in an upper room, in between Jesus’ ascension and the chaos of Pentecost. A time during which the apostles and disciples are instructed to wait for the coming of the Spirit. Listen with me for God’s word to the church...

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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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Matthias is the kind of biblical character who makes people like puzzle-master Will Shortz happy. He is the kind of person who shows up on the Bible Content Exam that all ordained Presbyterian ministers must pass on their journey toward becoming a pastor.

There are plenty of people in this sanctuary who know their Bibles, but you are to be forgiven if you don’t know him. Matthias exits the biblical stage as quickly and quietly as he enters it. After he is chosen as a replacement for Judas in this passage, his name is never mentioned again in the witness of scripture.

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 about the birth of the church doesn't mention Matthias at all.

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For years, people who love the church and want the church to be faithful have been scratching their heads about how we do that in a world that is changing. How do we communicate the message of the gospel in a world that is more connected, more diverse, and more educated than ever before? Scholars call the world we are in post-denominational/post-modern/and even post-Christian.

The reality is that we can no longer count on the things we used to count on. The way we have “done church” is looking a little bit ragged; a little bit out of date; a little bit out of touch. Our categories and committees – the things we depended on to keep us connected and to give shape to the church's witness seem both fragile and cumbersome. And all of that makes us nervous and anxious as we are the ones who make up the church that God is calling into the future.

So take heart! Take heart in this pre-denominational/pre-modern/pre-Christian story we just heard from Acts!

The decision to pluck Matthias up from obscurity to then leave him in obscurity was made by a group of followers of Jesus who were worried about their future.

This re-structuring decision was made during an uncertain time. The small band of apostles and disciples who watched Jesus being taken into heaven had just been given the awesome responsibility to be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth – they had been entrusted to spread the good news of the gospel – and then they were told to wait for the coming of the Spirit.

What, then, did those followers do? They returned to the upper room and they formed a nominating committee! They rushed back to a place that felt familiar; they busied themselves with committee work that helped them feel in control of their future – and in their inability to wait, they exposed their lack of faith and willingness to allow the Spirit to lead the church.

One of my seminary professors 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: the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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 and snakes – Acts is a book that wanders, not on a straight and orderly line – but by a path forged by the Spirit. It is a path we are called to walk, not to control.

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Probably like many of you, my feet are firmly planted on a path well-worn by committed Presbyterians. For me, it is a family thing.

My grandfather was a good layman – 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.

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

Lest you think I fail to see my own hypocrisy, I'll admit that I am preaching to myself. I can't begin to tell you how many meetings I have attended as the pastor of this church. 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 one time that I came late at night to find Wells – 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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So here is a proposal. It's a little radical – but I am in a radical mood.

Let's trust each other to listen for where the Holy Spirit leads.

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 you see an opportunity to better connect or minister to people in the church – children, youth, older adults, whomever...do it! Don't complain about it – don't make a motion at a session meeting. Follow your passion. Passion is how the Holy Spirit gets your attention.

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 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 don't take my word for it...go ask Matthias.

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