The Gift of Leadership ~

ACTS 1:15-17, 21-26 (NRSVUE) ***In those days Peter stood up among the brothers and sisters (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said,*** [16]***"Brothers and sisters, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus,*** [17]***for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry."*** ***…*** [21]***"So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,*** [22]***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."*** [23]***So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.*** [24]***Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen*** [25]***to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place."*** [26]***And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was added to the eleven apostles.***

The Word of God for the people of God!

Dian just read the minutes of the first church board meeting: an election. A nominating committee was appointed, and two nominees were presented. But they didn't vote. The Apostles prayed and then Joseph and Matthias played "Rock, Paper, Scissors." Hey! Works for me!

This reading from Acts really hits close to home, because at our next Cabinet meeting on August 21, we'll be choosing our Nominating Committee. The question of the day is how do we discern God's will in choosing leadership for our congregation?

As I look over the faces in this room, virtually everyone who's been a part of this congregation more than a couple of years has served in some capacity of leadership. Even our youth are involved: working with the Tech Team, creating and maintaining a Church page on Instagram… The old 80/20 principle (80% of the work is done by 20% of the people) is not at work here. In fact, I'm more concerned about leader burnout than about a lack of leadership.

And so, when today's reading from Acts says leadership is selected by the roll of the dice, it has my attention. What if we… Never mind.

Still, as I read the text, I sense there's a Word from the Lord.

Jesus had 12 disciples, kind of like a board of directors. Sometimes they're called "disciples," which means, "one who follows;" sometimes they're called "apostles," which means "one who is sent." "Disciple" can refer to anybody who follows, whether out of loyalty or simple curiosity. But "apostle" is almost a title, like "Ambassador," or "Delegate." A specific purpose is implied—a mission to be completed.

And why 12? There were 12 sons of Jacob, the forbears of the 12 tribes of Israel? The number 12 appears 187 times in the Bible and usually indicates divine order or perfection, and can refer to government. Jesus spoke about a "kingdom." Some thought he had come to overthrow Rome and restore the kingdom of David.

In today's reading, it's important to replace Judas and maintain the number

12. It's related to governance and authority: who's in charge? What kind of leadership will be employed? Will authority be vested in one person or in a small group? Will it be democratic?

In Luke's narrative it's determined by the roll of dice. But it's not a game of chance; it's an exercise in dependence upon God. All through the Judeo/Christian Scriptures people have exercised various ways of determining God's will:

Gideon laid out the fleece,

Moses said, "Let me see your face…"

Over and over, persons in the biblical narrative say, "It is written…" or, as in this situation, Peter affirms, "The Scriptures had to be fulfilled…" So, a people of the Book trust that Scripture is a resource in discerning the will of God.

And look at Peter's role. Matthew's gospel says Jesus gave Peter the "keys to the kingdom," and Luke likely had access to that gospel. In Luke's narrative he's undeniably in charge. Look at his approach. He uses scriptural precedent to understand all that has happened, and he sets up standards for leadership based upon the core values and missional purpose of the newborn church: this new apostle must be "…a follower of Jesus from day one, and faithful to the present time. Only such a person can be (and here's the missional purpose:) a witness to his resurrection…"

The resurrection and the declaration that in Jesus all the intentions and purposes of God are fulfilled is the core of the church's mission in that first generation. It's one thing to proclaim that message in a Jewish culture: predominantly monotheistic with rigidly established liturgies and moral principles that had prevailed for generations. In that environment, the mission never really got off the ground, and the Jerusalem church struggled with hostile opposition from the oligarchy that had assumed control of Judaism. Leadership couldn't be by popular vote; it had to coincide with God's will. Curiously, we never hear of Matthias or Barsabbas again.

But move out from that environment into the Greco-Roman world of Paul: a pagan culture with a chaotic collection of human-like gods and goddesses and spirits and demons, all of that set over against a totally different paradigm of thought and logic based on the philosophies of Aristotle and Socrates and Plato.

As important as the office of Apostle seems to have been during those first months and years of the Jerusalem church, as Luke develops the story in Acts, beginning with chapter 16, Paul's ministry to the Gentile church takes center stage, where the ministries of Gentile women and men guide this new venture of faith.

The mission of the Jerusalem church was to bear witness to the resurrection. But in Paul's world, how do you explain resurrection; in fact, how do you approach the meaning of Jesus' life and teachings when first you have to deal with the oxymoron of a dead savior in a polytheistic Greco-Roman culture steeped in Greek philosophy?

Now, fast forward to a world of science and quantum physics and artificial intelligence—a world that is the great, great grandchild of Greco-Roman philosophy. In that environment, you don't discern the will of God by rolling the dice. The very existence of a transcendent reality that relates and communicates with humanity is not automatically assumed.

You see why the study of Scripture cannot be—*cannot be*—a simplistic process of drawing our chairs in a circle and each one read a verse and say what it means to me?

But throughout all this chaotic history, one thing remains constant in the witness of the church. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples… At Caesaria the Holy Spirit fell on the Italian soldier, Cornelius and his friends and family gathered in his living room, all Gentiles, uncircumcised, unbaptized…

Much of Paul's epistles is devoted the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit came, and the people were changed and empowered and as one observer in that first generation put it, "These people have turned the world upside down." (Acts 17:6)

Ask artificial intelligence to explain that.

Last week on Facebook, somebody posted this: "I have a master's degree, 16 years of experience, work two extra jobs and donate blood plasma to pay the bills. I'm a teacher in America." How do we explain the dedication of an underpaid school teacher saddled with unrelenting administrative pressure to put in extra hours without extra pay and toiling at the mercy of a political system that seeks to override education with partisan, sectarian indoctrination?

How do we explain the public servant who endures constant attacks on her personal integrity, always someone looking over his shoulder waiting for a slip of the tongue or a brief moment of political incorrectness?

How do we explain the nurse who works a double shift without sleep or a lunch break or a bathroom break, and yet keeps showing up for work?

I remember Erma Fox in my student church in Waynoka, Oklahoma. She had been the pre-school Sunday School teacher for over 30 years, and never missed a Sunday; and we didn't take summers off. Every Monday she studied her lesson for the next Sunday and made notes on how she would set up her classroom. On Tuesday she showed up at church with an armful of materials and spent half the day preparing the room. She reviewed the lesson every other day of the week, and when the children showed up on Sunday morning she was there with a smile and a hug.

We can explain the Aurora Borealis, but how do we explain 30 plus years without burning out?

I don't believe in magic. I enjoy sleight of hand; but that's not magic. And yet,

is there not a level, a dimension of reality that defies explanation? Are we not surrounded by phenomena yet unexplained? Do we not—all of us—experience things that cannot be explained, and yet cannot be denied?

I believe there is something that transcends explanation about a teacher who exhausts energy and resources in the performance of his or her teaching; something that defies explanation about public servants and nurses and medical researchers and life-long Sunday School teachers who never seem to burn out.

In the comments about that Facebook meme, someone said, "It is a calling to teach; and I don't have that calling." When I first made known my intentions to enter ministry, my pastor took me aside and said, "Jim, if you can do anything else, do it; but if God is really calling you to ministry, you can't do anything else."

And here I am.

Somehow, in all the unexplainable elements of life, the church is empowered by the many gifts of the Holy Spirit, including the gift of leadership. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are given as needed, and the good news is that in every age God has provided leadership—some leaders were "unofficial," like the women and men in Paul's world, but all were called by God's Holy Spirit, and those whom God calls God enables. And in my own experience, once you experience the call, it is irresistible.

Invitation to the Table

In today's reading from I John, are these words: "Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts." Sometimes we Mainline Christians, get nervous with that term: testimony. I grew up with revival meetings and Wednesday night prayer meetings and two services on Sunday, with lots of testimonies.

I was always uncomfortable with that. It felt like show-off Christianity.

But John places testimony in our hearts; the very core of our being. When we come to this table, we testify from every pore of our being. It happens when we take, eat, remember, and are connected; with God and with each other. In that moment, there is testimony from our hearts. As we gather around Christ's table, may your heart testify to you the truth of the living God.

THE PASTOR'S PRAYER ON MOTHERS DAY: God, we sometimes struggle to find meaningful new ways to fill the traditions and sacraments of life. Traditionally we share today as Mothers' Day and as the Festival of the Christian Home. We affirm that a family can be any group of persons united by their love and care for one another. Help each of us to be growing, contributing individuals in your worldwide family of persons:

- To those who gave birth this year to their first child—lead us in celebration with them.
- To those who lost a child this year—give us loving expressions of comfort and hope.
- To those who are in the trenches with little ones every day; whose badges are white blouses smelling of burped milk—give us words of support and appreciation.
- To those who suffered loss through miscarriage, failed adoptions or running way—guide us in our sharing of their grief.
- To those who walk the hard path of infertility, fraught with pokes, prods, tears, and disappointment —help us to walk with them. Help them to forgive us when we say foolish things, and to know that we don't mean to make things harder than they are.
- To those who are foster moms, step moms, mentor moms and spiritual moms—help us to say what will help them to feel needed and appreciated.
- To those who have close and warm relationships with their children—give us words of appreciation; and to those who have disappointment, heart ache and distance from their children—lead us to sit with them.
- To those "same gender" partners who serve as both mother and father—grant us grace to be their extended families.
- To those who lost their mothers in the past year—give us words of encouragement and a touch of comfort.
- To those who experienced abuse at the hands of their own mothers—help us to acknowledge their experience and to affirm their value and worth as your sons and daughters.
- To those who have lived through driving tests, medical tests and the overall testing of motherhood —give us words to acknowledge that we are better for having them in our lives.
- To those who have aborted the unborn—give us hearts of understanding and mercy.
- To those who are single and long to be mothering their own children—grant that our presence will be affirming and nurturing.
- To those who envision lavishing love on grandchildren—yet that dream is not to be, grant us compassionate empathy.
- To those who will have emptier nests in the coming year—make us a sanctuary of peace for the wide fluctuation of their emotions.
- To those who are pregnant with new life, both planned and surprising—help us to share their anticipation.
- And to all women—who, in the church become mother figures to so many—help them to know that we walk with them. Mothering is not for the faint of heart, and we thank you for the strength of all the mother figures in our lives, in the Spirit of Christ your Son, our Brother and Savior; Amen.