

“In Praise of Commonness”

Acts 1:15-26

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November 15, 2020

My sermon actually begins, not here in the first chapter of Acts but in an earlier event recounted by the gospels- the death of Judas. MATTHEW tells us how after betraying his Lord for a mere thirty pieces of silver, he was SO overcome with remorse that he threw down the money he had received from the Temple priests, went out, and hung himself. Unwilling to put “blood money” into the treasury, the priests bought a potter’s field with it for use as a cemetery for foreigners. LUKE, on the other hand, says that Judas purchased the field himself where he fell to his death, bursting open and his insides spilling out. When Jesus chose his original disciples, he intentionally chose twelve to mirror the twelve tribes of Israel to indicate how this new organism he was now creating--the church--had in fact become the NEW Israel. Thus, with Judas gone, they found themselves short one disciple.

From among the group, it is Peter who stands up and announces that they need to find a replacement for him. He stipulates that the only two qualifications are that it must be someone who had accompanied Jesus from his baptism to his ascension into heaven, but also someone who had been a witness to his resurrection. Two obscure figures, whose only mention in the Bible occurs here in our text, are chosen- Joseph, called Barsabbas and surnamed Justus (which is Latin for “a just or righteous one”), and Matthias. After some prayer, they cast lots to determine who would take Judas’s place. This entailed shaking two stones together in a container with the names of candidates written on each one. The stone that came out was then interpreted to be the Lord’s choice. It was no different than putting both names into a hat and then drawing out the winner. The lot fell upon Matthias who was then enrolled with the other eleven. However, once the Holy Spirit was bestowed on the day of Pentecost, it was never used again.

There are several points here I find interesting. The first is who WASN’T chosen. You would have thought they would have looked to a person of considerable means and influence- someone like a Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea. After all, these were two of the most important and well-connected persons of their day- men of considerable power and wealth who were also members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Court. It was Joseph who had asked for and received Jesus’ body from Pontius Pilate, and both he and Nicodemus had taken it upon themselves to wrap him in burial spices. It was also in Joseph’s tomb that his body was placed. They were certainly willing to risk their lives and reputations by associating with Jesus, and by this time, both had become convinced of his messiahship and were firmly committed to his ministry. If those early disciples had wanted to establish some instant credibility, that would have been the way to go.

A more RADICAL alternative would have been to elevate a WOMAN to leadership in the church- perhaps someone like Mary Magdalene. Few persons had a deeper love for Jesus than SHE had. Mary had been an early follower of his and it was to her that our Lord made his first resurrection appearance. And yet, despite all her devotion and faithful service, Mary Magdalene’s name never even came up as a possible replacement for Judas. In fact, it would be almost two thousand years before a woman was ordained to fulfill the same role that men had been performing during that same period.

We really don't know much else of Matthias's life and ministry other than what has been passed down through a handful of assorted traditions. According to Hippolytus of Rome, an Early Church Father, he died of old age in Jerusalem. St. Nicephorus, a Greek historian from the early 9th century, claimed that after preaching all through Judea, he went to Ethiopia to establish churches. He was supposedly crucified in Colchis which is on the coast of the Black Sea in the Republic of Georgia. Another tradition says that after preaching for years in Ethiopia, he died in Sebastopol and was buried near the Temple of the Sun, most likely in the modern day Sudan. One apocryphal story about Matthias' ministry in Ethiopia is that he went among the cannibals and was thrown into prison and eventually freed by the Apostle Andrew. Then there is a tradition that the Israelites stoned Matthias in Jerusalem and then beheaded him. There was a *Gospel of Matthias* that circulated among the Early Church but it was never accorded the same authority as the other four gospels. All in all, what CAN be said of him was that Matthias was a quiet follower who was committed to Jesus from the very beginning- first as one of the seventy disciples and, then after his election as the twelfth Apostle immediately after our Lord's ascension. To honor him, the Church eventually made him the patron saint of reformed alcoholics, carpenters, smallpox, and tailors.

Because he seemed such an unremarkable figure who spent much of his life laboring in obscurity, there are some preachers and theologians who argue that Matthias was an "accidental apostle," that is, that he may have been the selection of those early disciples but GOD'S choice was yet to come- with the conversion and commissioning of Saul of Tarsus as the Apostle Paul a few years later. It is argued that Mathias was too anonymous, too pedestrian, too common a choice for such an important role to play. I, however, beg to differ for one principal reason: I believe that rather than a limitation, the fact that Matthias' life seemed so minor and inconsequential is really a strength. You see, God has always had a special love for the "common" things of this world. As Abraham Lincoln once observed, "God must love the common man, he made so many of them."

Christ HIMSELF became common in order to prove that very point. He entered this world in the humblest of circumstances- the back of a one-car garage, and grew up in less than a middle-class household. He inaugurated his ministry by appealing to common folk of every stripe all throughout Judea and Galilee, to women as well as men; to fishermen, simple laborers, and various trades people. In fact, what made Christianity so distinctive from every other religion in the ancient world is that it consciously sought to eliminate all class distinctions, that as we were all equally sinners before God so were we all equally recipients of the very same grace as everyone else. Therefore, no person or group of persons should receive favors on the basis of one's economic or social status. Paul says as much himself to the church in Corinth when he wrote:

For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 1:26-29)

To support my point, I'd like to reference ANOTHER figure whom many thought was too common and too inconsequential to fill such an historic role. Harry Truman was a failed haberdasher from Independence, Missouri- a short, near-sighted man without any college education. In fact, when he married Bess, it was HER family that was distressed, convinced that her new husband would never amount to much. He was picked by Roosevelt from the Senate to

become his Vice-President because he was regarded as politically harmless and unknown to many. The historian David McCullough relates in his Pulitzer Prize winning biography on Truman what happened upon his assumption to the presidency in the wake of Franklin Roosevelt's death:

...To the country, the Congress, the Washington bureaucracy, to hundreds of veteran New Dealers besides those who had gathered in the Cabinet Room, to much of the military high command, to millions of American men and women overseas, the news of Franklin Roosevelt's death, followed by the realization that Harry Truman was President, struck like massive earth tremors in quick succession, the thought of Truman in the White House coming with the force of a shock wave. To many it was not just that the greatest of men had fallen, but that the least of men--or at any rate the least likely of men--had assumed his place. "Good God, Truman will be President," it was being said everywhere. If Harry Truman can be President, so could my next-door neighbor...For thousands of men in the ranks, as for many at home, the question was not so much was Truman qualified, as who WAS he.

This man who was responsible for the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, NATO, the Berlin Airlift; the President who first recognized Israel, established the Defense Department, started the CIA, who decided to proceed with the hydrogen bomb; this one who sent the first civil rights message ever to Congress and desegregated the armed forces--Harry S Truman--is now hailed as one the greatest Presidents America has ever had. This "plain-spoken man from Independence" as he was often called appeared on the world stage in such an unlikely figure- a humble, unpretentious man who on the face of it seemed to offer so little promise and YET went on to change history.

Perhaps you've asked YOURSELF this question, the one that goes, "Can anything good come from a life so ordinary and inconsequential as MINE might be? Why I'm only a common human being leading a common ordinary life. I put my hours in at work, pay the bills, see that everyone is clothed and fed, watch some TV in the evenings, and then go to bed. My life is filled with routine, and aside from my family, my church, my friends, and maybe the persons I work with, my life doesn't amount to much. I'm just an insignificant little person from a rural insignificant community on an insignificant little planet- a life without much promise, much hope, much future. Can anything good come out of MY life?"

OF COURSE IT CAN! FIRST, nobody is ever just "common" to God. Each one of us is so very special in his sight, having been uniquely formed by his hands and where our every need and care is lifted up into his own heart. Though society may brand us as common and insignificant, to GOD, we remain his cherished children. You will hear me repeat again and again how God could never love Jesus--his only-begotten Son--ANY MORE than he personally loves you and me. And were you or I the ONLY sinner in the ENTIRE world, God would have sent Jesus to die EXPRESSLY FOR US, such is his love! And SECOND, our commonness means that we meet all the criteria to be of GREAT use to God. God doesn't look to our theology or our denominational affiliation or our social standing and worldly successes- rather, he only looks to our heart. WE MIGHT NOT BE WEALTHY but each of us is certainly rich in love and joy and patience and goodness. WE MIGHT NOT BE INTELLECTUALS but all of us are blessed with a knowledge and wisdom from above more valuable than any sheepskin hanging on our wall. NONE OF US MIGHT WIELD GREAT POWER but at work within us is the power of faith and hope and moral courage through the Holy Spirit. This force is far more

effectual in shaping the character of nations and individuals than even the mightiest army.

One of my favorite preachers, Fred Craddock, tells a story about his own ministry and sense of call. He says that he always imagined that someday he'd do something really great, that he'd be a martyr for Jesus. There'd be a monument built for him to recognize his deeds and people would come by and read "Here's where Fred gave it all for Jesus." He always thought his call would play out as a spectacular \$100 bill kind of experience. But then he came to realize that his ministry was actually about giving lectures, reading books, grading papers, going to meetings. He knew he'd finally accepted that call when he took the \$100 bill to the bank and said, "Give it to me in quarters." Now, Craddock says, he lives out his call one ordinary quarter at a time.

Isn't Craddock describing for us what essentially the Christian life is all about- that it is living out our call "one ordinary quarter at a time," performing routines which sometimes feel dull and dreary, and yet in spite of it, continuing to lead quiet lives of steady and dependable service and love. As that great philosopher Woody Allen once said, "Eighty percent of success is just showing up." Yes, we ARE common and inconsequential but, you see, that's to our advantage for it is the habit of God to use nothing BUT the most common, the most ordinary, the most mundane things to accomplish the most EXTRAORDINARY acts of charity and love- the things that REALLY count to God. Take our CHURCH, for example. In the eyes of the world, people might ask, "Can anything good come from such a small, rural congregation as THIS?" Yes, and it DOES! The Word gets preached, Christ is worshiped, the sick get prayed for, children are taught, and mission is undertaken- accomplishments God considers GREAT in his sight.

And so the answer to the question, "Can anything good come from you or me?" is a resounding YES! You take a shut-in shopping, you do volunteer work for the local hospital, you offer a meal to a hungry stranger, you visit a sick neighbor, you comfort a grieving friend- on the scale of GOD'S values, THIS is what he regards as TRULY important. If anything good could come from a group of ordinary fishermen, then most assuredly something good can come from a small rural congregation in south-western Pennsylvania, and from lives as common and as seemingly insignificant as yours and mine. True, we don't know anything more about Mathias other than what tradition has ascribed to him. But where silence about the man may seem to lessen his significance in the minds of many scholars and historians, in GOD'S eyes, such unobtrusiveness, such humility and quiet faithfulness just may be the very qualities that place him among the GREATEST of the apostles who have ever lived. Let us pray...

Lord, we thank you for a love that is not based on what we've accomplished in this world, what we earn or accrued or how high a status we've attained. Rather, you love us just for the sake of loving us and we can add nothing to gain your favor or to increase that love. You love us every bit as much as your Only-Begotten Son Jesus and could never love us ANY LESS or your Son ANY MORE. May we seek only that which is good and walk in the only way you require of us, and that is "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God." In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.