

“The Twelfth Apostle”

Acts 1:15-26

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Thomas Marshall, was Vice-President of the United States under Woodrow Wilson a century ago and is credited for the famous quotation, “What this country needs is a good five cent cigar.” He also made a remark about his own vice presidency which is ALMOST as famous. Speaking of what he felt was the irrelevancy of the office he held for eight years, he said, “Once there were two brothers: one ran away to sea, the other was elected Vice-President- and nothing was ever heard from either of them again.” Marshall’s saying came to my mind this week as I reflected on this morning’s text. After all, we are looking at the selection of Matthias as the twelfth apostle following the suicide of Judas, and once he was chosen, unquestionably to one of the most significant offices in the Early Church, we never see or hear about him again. In fact, this is the one and only reference to him in all the New Testament.

The FIRST part of our scripture lesson involves the death of Judas. Matthew tells us that he was SO overcome with remorse after betraying his Lord for a mere thirty pieces of silver that he subsequently threw down the money he had received from the priests in the Temple, went out, and hanged 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. In this way, he was indicating how the church had now 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 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 name of each candidate 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.

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.

However, Mary Magdalene wasn't the ONLY woman ignored by the church. For the next two thousand years, women were forced to adopt a much LESSER role within her. For too long, they were told to remain quiet, to keep their head covered, to play a secondary role to that of men- solely because of their sex. Up until the mid-1950's, the question of the ordination of women clergy was routinely rejected by the mainline Christian denominations of our country, INCLUDING the Presbyterian Church. It was voted down again and again by the various presbyteries due to deep-seated fears and prejudices which had no basis in reality, much like the fight over the ordination of gays and lesbians in the church has been today. It was said that the Bible placed women in a subordinate role to men. It was assumed that the female was a less true or complete image of God than the male and therefore less capable of representing God to people and people before God in the priesthood. It was believed that women were emotionally unstable and not mentally or psychologically fit to handle the rigors of ministry that a man was.

It wasn't until 1956--almost two thousand years after the birth of the Church and some four hundred years after the founding of Presbyterianism--that the first woman was ordained to Christian ministry in our denomination with the ordination of Margaret Towner. It was an event I can proudly say took place in the sanctuary of my former church in Syracuse, NY where she had grown up. Over seventy journalists from around the world and representing such respectable tabloids as Time, Newsweek, Life, and Look magazines were on hand to record the ordination of the first female minister of a major Christian denomination. Today, almost sixty years later, I am happy to say that there are now more women elders in our churches and more women in our seminaries being ordained to pastoral ministry than there are MEN.

Of course, you can't help but wonder how such an important decision as the selection of the twelfth apostle could have been decided in such an off-hand manner as the tossing of some dice. We currently find our nation in the midst of a seemingly-interminable process to pick the next President of the United States. Already within days of President Obama's inauguration three and a half years ago, Washington power brokers and potential candidates were maneuvering and making plans to oust him in the next election. Over the past year, his Republican opponents have already logged hundreds of thousands of miles and spent many millions of dollars while holding twenty debates between them in an effort to win their party's nomination and the privilege of facing in him November. With the election still six months away, many Americans have ALREADY grown weary of the incessant politicking and have tuned out.

Sometime over the next few weeks, the next *American Idol* winner will be chosen after having competed for the past three and a half months against twelve other finalists in a series of highly competitive singing contests. Hundreds of millions of persons over that time will have dialed in their favorite *American Idol* to determine the winner. The same goes for the next winner on *Dancing With The Stars*. Even our Presbyterian call system involves far more than that. Most ministers are only installed after a process that can take anywhere from one to three years- one that involves the creation of a pastoral nominating committee, the completion of a mission study, an extensive candidate search, and then the extending of the call itself which must have the concurrence of both presbytery and the congregation. The Pastoral Nominating Committee of this

church labored for two and a half years and considered over 300 dossiers before extending a call for me to come to this church. When I considered all the time and energy and resources their search committee expended that I might stand in that pulpit Sunday after Sunday leading worship, I felt humbled beyond belief! Yet one of the most important positions in the Early Church was decided by a simple roll of the dice. Once the Holy Spirit was bestowed on the day of Pentecost, however, it was never used again.

Regarding Matthias's life and ministry, we're really left with nothing more than 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 fourteenth century, claimed that after preaching all through Judea, he went to Ethiopia to establish churches. He placed his death by crucifixion 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 70 disciples and, then after his election as the 12th Apostle immediately after his 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. I for one have rejected such a theory- that Mathias was too pedestrian, too common a choice for such an important role to play. To begin with, 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- 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)

Perhaps you've asked yourself this question, the one that goes, ACan anything good come from a life so common, so ordinary, so 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 an insignificant city 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. As you will hear me repeat again and again, God could never love Jesus--his only-begotten Son—ANY MORE than he personally loves you or me. 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 deed 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 said, 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, "Ninety 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 my own two churches, for example- Deer Creek and Pleasant Unity. In the eyes of the world, people might ask, "Can anything good come from two congregations so small, so rural, so inconsequential?" YES, and it DOES! The Word gets preached, Christ is worshiped, the sick get prayed for, children are baptized, and the spiritually hungry are fed from his own table at various times of the year- things 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 DEFINITELY come from small rural churches like Deer Creek and Pleasant Unity, and from lives as common and as seemingly dull and 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...

Gracious God, we thank you for a love that is not based on what we've accomplished in this world, on what we earn or what we've 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." Amen and amen.