

Our Friend Matthias' Call

Sunday, May 16, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Acts 1:15-26

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred 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."

(Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) "For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it'; and 'Let another take his position of overseer.'

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 one 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.

To say that the Apostle Matthias is little known would be an understatement. His name has been relegated to the pages of Bible trivia quiz books, and the story of his calling may strike the reader as a small matter of business which needed to be tended to before the great day of Pentecost. The first mention we find of Matthias in the Bible is here in Acts 1, and this is also the Bible's last mention of this obscure apostle. His was truly a different kind of call. He received no seaside invitation to follow as Peter, Andrew, James and John had been given, in fact, Jesus had left the earth by the time that Matthias was called to apostleship. For this late coming apostle, it appeared that a team from the apostles' human resources department had put together a job description and then checked the market to see what was available. Matthias' call may not have been the most exciting invitation to service, but it is the kind of calling which

we can understand. One might say that his calling is a picture of ours. Whether we can see it or not, Matthias was our friend who taught us all a great deal about our callings to holy service. Let us consider our friend Matthias and his call.

Matthias' call to the high office of apostle began the same as most callings. First there was a need. There was a service which needed to be performed. There was a vacancy among the apostles left by Judas Iscariot who had betrayed Jesus and then killed himself. This search for an apostle to replace Judas begins at a very late time. The apostles had witnessed Jesus' ascension into heaven and were now waiting for the promise of Jesus to be fulfilled, that they would receive power from on high. During this ten-day waiting period the followers of Jesus gathered for ongoing prayer. We are told that there were one hundred and twenty of Jesus followers.

When we think of Jesus' inner circle during his days of ministry, we usually think only of the twelve, but we forget that many of these disciples had families which travelled with them. We must also remember how the Gospel's mention of women who followed Jesus and contributed to the financial needs. And there were apparently other believers who were not of the twelve but were still real followers of our Lord. In Paul's Corinthian Letter he tells of Jesus appearing to five hundred believers not long after His Resurrection. The believers were a small group in these days before Pentecost, but there were more than a mere twelve of them.

In one of these days just before Pentecost, Peter rose and called for the space of Judas to be filled. The search was now on. This is a dynamic which we understand as job offerings are usually the result of a job suddenly lacking a worker. "The assistant accountant retired, so now we need a new accountant to take her place." Such a vacancy can occur in business or in the Church. "The Sunday School teacher moves away, and we are now calling for a new one to fill that position." But there are many vacancies which do not involve a formal job position but come from a need in a congregation or a community. This could be a need for someone to work with youth, to guide the unemployed or to feed the hungry. This world is full of such vacancies for us all to be considering.

I find it noteworthy that this search for another apostle originated in a most unpleasant circumstance—the desertion and suicide of Judas. If I were one of the apostles, I would not want to even think about Judas. The desertion of Judas certainly brought up all sorts of unpleasant emotions, from anger to anguish, and there seemed to be little positive benefit from pondering his terrible betrayal. I would have been tempted to ignore the whole event, but Peter boldly faced the matter head-on. Peter and the apostles wanted to rise above the shame and grief which surrounded Judas' memory, and we can all learn a lesson in not being dragged down by the failures and misdeeds of our lives and ministries. The Book of Acts dealt very honestly and directly with the tragic life of Judas. It was a sad event which needed to be faced squarely, but

even in such a sad circumstance they were rightly convinced that God was going to do something good.

This was a profoundly uncertain time for Peter and the apostles. What was about to happen, and what did it mean that the Spirit would come in power? They had little idea of what was ahead, but they were confident that God's plan was a good one and that God would not let them down! Even in uncertain times Peter could sense God's hand was present. We find two quotations from the Psalms, one of them calling for a replacement for the deserter. As these verses came to Peter's attention, he could do nothing else. Not only was God directing this job search, but with God having commanded this search Peter knew that this endeavor would not fail.

In these days we have seen too many disappointments and losses. We don't feel like the same dynamic and serving congregation that we were before the virus. Shall we let this become a matter of shame and shall we feel like failures, or like Peter, shall we step up and confidently affirm our future? Shall we dare to be confident in the future of our music program, our Vacation Bible School, the return of *Lunch with Luke*, and other new ministries? Peter quoted Bible verses which affirmed the course of action that he was taking. Shall we join him by affirming Great Commission given to us by Jesus which reminds that we have been given full, divine authority to serve in Jesus' Name? Matthias' calling began with the recognition of a need. Let us see and name the many needs before us and seek leaders and workers who can address those needs.

Peter pointed out the need and the divine calling to find a leader to take Judas' place, and at this point the job search begins to look much like something from the modern business world. First a job description was written, with this one having one main requirement. *"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."* The call was out for one who had followed Jesus' ministry from the very beginning, up to the day of the Ascension. After a brief search the field was narrowed down to two candidates. *"So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias."*

We feel safe reading this story of divine calling, for we know that we would *not* be a viable candidate in this job search. We may safely say that we were not called to be apostles as were the Twelve, but this all raises an important question. What are our qualifications, and where are these qualifications directing us? We are more gifted and skilled than we know, and these talents should be leading us to ever greater service. Of course, we instinctively deny having any real skills. I love to tell the story of "the Dumb Housewife" that I met back when I was in college. The church with which I was involved was preparing for a major event, and to get much of the work done they put together work teams of four or five and gave them a specific task. My team's task was to assemble some large mailings. One of the members on our team was

a woman whose children had recently grown up and left home. She spoke of looking forward to doing more outside of the home and was very glad to be involved in this little work project. What proved most interesting about this woman was that she kept referring to herself as “just a dumb housewife” with little to offer. She was quick to point out that she had never been to college, nor did she ever hold down an important sounding job. She may have introduced herself to us as “just a dumb housewife,” but by the time our tasks were completed she had demonstrated all sorts of skills, insights and leadership which made our work much easier. Without this “dumb housewife’s” guidance the job would have taken us twice as long. And it all ended with her still being convinced that she was just a “dumb housewife.”

There are a lot of “dumb housewives” out there and among us, for we are far more skilled and capable than we dare admit, and there is always more that we can be doing in the Kingdom. And there are more than just skills which call us to serve. Many a calling has begun with a heart which aches to see the hurting helped and a crying need met. What needs do you see that are breaking your heart? You are being called! Some calls are a matter of circumstance. I often ponder my call to be a volunteer firefighter. It began when we moved into a house which was next door to the firehouse. And how could I, a healthy and able-bodied young man not respond? What firehouse might you be living next to? Another major qualification for work is our availability, or should I say our willingness to make ourselves available to God. We are an abundantly qualified people, so let us follow the leading of those qualifications, just as Matthias was about to do.

The apostles prayed and were led to cast lots to find the right person. The lot fell to Matthias, but before we get to Matthias, let us consider for a moment the loser in this transaction, Joseph. I wonder if it hurt when Joseph received that news that he was *not* chosen? Losing is never easy, and I would imagine that for a moment he may have felt some real sadness. Perhaps we should make Joseph the Patron Saint of the Unemployed, as he knew the pain of rejection? But if Joseph felt any disappointment, we can be sure that as a long-time follower of Jesus he had the maturity and wisdom to soon recognize this as a part of God’s good plan. Certainly, there would be much for him to do in the Church that was about to be born.

The apostle’s job and title went to Matthias, but this quickly raises the great question: Whatever happened to Matthias? Not a word is said about him after Acts 1, but Matthias can find comfort in the knowledge that this was true of about half of the apostles. One could also ask why the calling of Matthias is so carefully explained when nothing is ever said of his life achievements and ministry? Many have pointed out how the apostles in general seem to quickly fade from the spotlight as the Church grows. We only need to go six chapters into the Book of Acts before we find seven deacons appointed, and soon after there appears the latecomer, Paul. Were the apostles not so really necessary after all?

First, we must note that though the apostles seem to fade from prominence as the Church grows, they were crucially important in getting the enterprise started. On the day of Pentecost three thousand would become believers, and these were people from all around the ancient world. Already the apostles were outnumbered by 250 to 1 as they had a lot of people to train in the faith and to organize into a functioning Church! Soon the leadership of the Church would expand with the appointing of the deacons, but who was it that appointed these deacons? It was the apostles. And years down the road there would be important disputes over doctrine and faith which needed a definitive word of judgment. The apostles had plenty to do!

The Church was rapidly expanding. Paul would become God's primary instrument to open up the Church to the Gentiles, and soon there were all kinds of new leaders serving with Paul that had never even seen Jesus in His earthly days: Luke, Apollis, Priscilla and Aquila, Barnabas, Timothy, Titus, and the names go on. Were the apostles a team of sidelined has-beens? Not at all! The apostles served boldly in a crucial work of God. The overwhelming number of others whose work continued and multiplied the apostles' efforts is only a testimony to the importance and effectiveness of their lives and ministries. I cannot tell you precisely what Matthias did for the remainder of his earthly life, but I do know that he was involved at the ground level of the greatest work of God, the Church.

There is so much that we do not know about Matthias, and it is tempting to write him off as unimportant, but it is Matthias who reminds us of the very nature of our call to Christ's service. Matthias let his qualifications be known and willingly followed where that training led him. It is Matthias who calls us to look within ourselves and to consider where and to what ministry we are being called. What job, what task, what need within our congregation, community or world is calling you now? Be a Matthias. Follow that leading.

You may call Matthias an unknown or forgotten historical figure but do know that he was a real player and there was nothing trivial about his life and service. What greater achievement could we ever aspire to than to be like Matthias—a believer who stepped up and served as God called.