

Sermon May 16, 2021 by Pastor Andi Fox

Acts 1:15-17; 21-26

This is an interesting piece of scripture that needs a bit more context. Jesus was resurrected and stayed for a while. You can imagine the disciples' relief to have Jesus around. Jesus was their leader. Jesus was their teacher. Jesus was their model. Jesus was their savior. They had been devastated when Jesus died. So Jesus being back was amazing. We have several stories about Jesus appearing and continuing to teach. Jesus had told the apostles to wait in Jerusalem. The apostles then asked "are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?" (Remember that question, it'll be important later.) Jesus' answer was that the Holy Spirit will come upon them and they will be witnesses in Jerusalem and nearby places and across the earth. Then, suddenly, Jesus ascends into heaven while the disciples watch. This scripture passage with the disciples choosing someone to take Judas' place happens directly after Jesus' ascension in the Book of Acts. Once again, the disciples find themselves without their leader. So the question is-- what do we do now?

There really isn't a church as we would call it at this time. The disciples had no organization, no official mission statement, no written records of their time with Jesus. They just had a group of people that included a selected twelve-but now eleven-apostles. Those eleven had been hand picked by Jesus, empowered to heal and help, and witnesses to Jesus' more private moments. They knew when Jesus had withdrawn to pray. They knew when Jesus was being provoked by the Pharisees. They knew pretty much when Jesus did everything. That's hard to replicate without Jesus physically there. But Jesus wasn't physically there. What do we do now?

We know what happens after this because we have written records and centuries of theology and church thinking about what we do without a physically present Jesus. But let's try

to imagine that we don't know. There's a group of people. The scripture says one hundred and twenty. So, picture a decent-sized group of people. Before this passage Acts names all the living apostles "along with some women, including Mary the mother of Jesus" are in this group and probably many more. We don't know the rest of the folks' who are there names. But this group would've known each other. Maybe not all of them traveled with Jesus at the same time, but generally they would've known each other. They would be looking to each other with their questions. What do we do now?

The question the apostles had asked Jesus before his ascension--are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?--points to what they thought was going to happen after Jesus' resurrection. These earliest followers were almost all Jewish. They saw in Jesus the hope of the Messiah who they thought would establish a physical kingdom on earth--a new Israel. That hope, that belief, is what brings them to their first priority after Jesus' ascension: replacing Judas. For that group gathered there, Jesus choosing 12 apostles wasn't just a random number. There were 12 tribes of Israel. This connection to their history and scripture was important. At the very least replacing Judas so there were 12 apostles again was important symbolically even if it doesn't matter much in terms of how they governed themselves or what they did afterward. After all, Matthias, the person who is named Judas' replacement, isn't mentioned again in scripture. So I think the process is more important than the person. 12 tribes. 12 apostles. Makes sense.

We don't know how many people fit the description offered by Peter: someone who was there when Jesus was baptized by John, all through the ministry, and was a witness to the resurrection. Maybe the two who were nominated were the only two who fit the bill. Maybe everyone gathered fit that description. We don't know. But two finalists emerge. Joseph Barsabbas Justus and poor one-name Matthias. We can assume these are the two most fitting

candidates for apostle-hood. Then, they pray. Not a bad thing to do when trying to make a decision. They pray: “Lord, you know everyone’s deepest thoughts and desires. Show us clearly which one you have chosen from among these two to take the place of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas turned away to go to his own place.” Basically they’re looking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They’re directly asking: God, what do we do now?

They cast lots to figure this out. We don’t know exactly how, but this wasn’t a vote. This was some kind of gambling. Maybe they flipped a coin or pulled straws or something. Now, the commentaries I read kept saying not to focus on this casting of lots. The thing they’re doing is important, not necessarily the way they’re doing it. It could be easy to get off-track and think this passage is giving us a sure-fire way to know God’s will for our lives. Unfortunately, things aren’t that easy. Otherwise, everyone would be flipping coins or pulling straws for every decision. Maybe they cast lots because both of their candidates were equally qualified and they couldn’t make a decision themselves. Maybe they were overwhelmed with Jesus’ absence and chose an easy way to answer the one question right in front of them. Maybe it was quicker than debating and voting. Whatever happened, the spotlight fell on Matthias. Who then is never mentioned again but we can assume was present and working within the community. The problem is, the community is still left with the question--what do we do now? (8 min)

A lot of people including pastors and church leaders have been asking ourselves that very same question as the world is opening back up. What do we do now? It’s the same question we’ve been asking since March 2020. Only this time instead of shutting down we’re opening up. There is no straightforward answer individually or as a community. Everyone has had to weigh the risks and benefits of different decisions. Do you send your kid back to in person school? Do

you start planning travel? Do you go back into the office? And there's no easy answers here. But I don't want it to feel like we're gambling with our answers.

Like this early community in scripture we don't have a physical Jesus to lead us. We have to rely on the stories of faith and prayer and the Holy Spirit to lead the way. So what do you do when you're stuck with a question? You ask a different question. The 'what' questions are often the first to come to us, but they're not always the most important. There's also the 'how' questions and the 'why' questions. I've heard about these three different types of questions in business seminars and seminary. In budgeting blog posts and most recently in a youth ministry small group. Asking guiding questions isn't just for churches after all. Many groups of people and businesses come together for shared purposes and need to discern their why-how-and what. These early believers gathered together were waiting for Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit to come upon them. Jesus had told them to wait. Isn't waiting sometimes the hardest thing? Some of us know that very deeply right now.

The disciples' why at that point in time was because told Jesus them to. It's a pretty specific why. Our current whys may be a little more nuisance. Yes, we do a lot of things because Jesus told his disciples to but also because there's now a history of Jesus followers doing those things. We place ourselves in that lineage. We have individual whys that encompass our life journeys. What the disciples are not quite getting yet is that without a physical Jesus, they are the how. We as their spiritual descendents are the how, too. When Jesus tells his disciples that they will be witnesses in the city, the surrounding area, and the world that's him saying 'you are the how.' Jesus is the why. And we have to discern the what. Without a physical Jesus on earth, we become his hands and feet. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are the ones who continue the

disciples' work. Feeding the hungry. Standing up to injustice. Worshiping and praying together. Supporting each other. Serving our neighbors. Bringing hope. Leading change. (12 min 20 sec)

So we pray and rely on the Holy Spirit as these early disciples did after Jesus' ascension for our own discernment. But no matter what our lot lands on, we are the ones responsible for doing the thing. Or at least doing something because we know not everyone can do everything and certainly no one can do anything truly alone. Sometimes we attend to matters internal to our own faith community. Sometimes we attend to matters that have farther reaching implications. But honestly whatever we do, we can learn from these early disciples. Together we can do more than we can individually, prayer is a good thing, and sometimes the Holy Spirit is going to show up and surprise us as we will see at Pentecost next week. Whats may change. But the how doesn't. We are the how. We are the hands and feet of Christ serving this world.

This reminds me of the famous poem by Teresa of Avila:

*"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."*

May we remember this always. Amen.