

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 05/12/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, May 12th

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Getting in front of the Spirit

The Seventh Sunday of Easter falls between the Ascension and Pentecost and the events recorded by Luke in this week's selected lectionary text also occurs during this same period. Having lost Judas, Peter reasons from Scripture that Judas needed to be replaced with another suitable candidate to maintain the number of apostles at twelve. Matthias is chosen to replace Judas. There seems to be a problem here. Before His ascension, Jesus told His disciples not to depart from Jerusalem and to wait for the Holy Spirit (v.1:4-5) – but such an important decision as this is made just days before the Holy Spirit comes. Why not wait? Luke's record also reveals what was on the minds of the disciples immediately before Jesus ascends. The disciples ask Him about restoring the Kingdom to Israel (vv.6-8). Perhaps Peter is thinking here of what Jesus said in Luke 22:28-30 about each of the apostles sitting on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel – thus twelve would be needed. Through the vantage point of history, the Holy Spirit appears to have chosen another – Paul – whose ministry took the Gospel to the Gentiles and made a good start in the command to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. How could Peter and the others appear to miss the obvious? Is it possible that we are at risk of similar errors in our own time?

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 Commentary

¹⁵ *In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said,*

"In those days" signifies how Peter was the spokesperson of the apostles and default leader of the community gathered in the upper room (1:12). The fact there were around 120 people is significant. In Jewish law, a minimum of 120 Jewish men were required to form a separate community with its own council. The band of disciples was thus large enough to be considered a separate community.

¹⁶ *"Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to 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 men must become with us a witness to his resurrection."*

In v.16, Peter clearly illustrates how the apostles believe Scripture is the inspired word of God. Peter equates the words of David (written down in the referenced Psalm) were inspired by the Holy Spirit over a thousand years

earlier. Missing from the lectionary text (vv. 18-20) are the two references to the Psalms (Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8). From the latter Scripture, Peter determines they must elect another apostle to take Judas' place.

²³ And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴ And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show 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 numbered with the eleven apostles.

Two men were put forward. Immediately the apostles pray for discernment. The method used involved drawing lots. While there is precedence in Scripture for such action (1 Chronicles 26:13-16), after the coming of the Holy Spirit such decisions in the rest of the New Testament were taken by human beings through prayer and through discernment of the Holy Spirit's guidance. The text is clear that the "lot fell on Matthias," but interestingly Luke never states that God chose Matthias.

Reflection and Application

This passage reflects the state of the Church before the coming of the Holy Spirit. In what must have been a crisis of considerably more magnitude than Luke suggests in his commissioned history of the early Church, Peter and the others felt they must take matters into their own hands. To their credit, they looked to Scripture and turned to God in prayer – but Jesus warned them to wait for the Holy Spirit. Their focus remained on Israel and the Jews – hence the need for twelve apostles. They appear to have missed the universal implications of Jesus' command in Acts 1:8: "... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Through the vantage point of history, Matthias' appointment as an apostle appears unnecessary – he is never mentioned in Acts again. Ultimately the Holy Spirit selected Paul and the rest is history. To break the homogeneity and Israel-centric focus of Jesus' apostles, a diasporic Jew was needed. This was only possible because of the vacancy left by Judas' betrayal. Perhaps this was why Jesus chose Judas as one of the twelve in the first place.

If the early Church was plagued by insular thinking, what of the institutional church today? It is perhaps no exaggeration to claim the institutional church is the very definition of insular thinking. Such thinking played out across two millennia has resulted in the 120 people in the upper room being represented by thirty thousand Christian denominations today! Yet like Judas' betrayal, such diversity in expression of Christianity is what is needed to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth rather than attempting to impose one culture's view of the Gospel on everyone else. We may have sheep of many folds yet there is still one flock and one Shepherd. I am left with the distinct impression that Christ, the Head of the Church, actually knows what He is doing, even if we don't.

