

Sermon - Easter 7, Year B
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
5/12/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Throughout these past seven weeks following Easter Sunday, we have been reading in church from the Acts of the Apostles. We have been thinking together about how the book of Acts is the origin story of the Church. It describes in great detail the work, the challenges, and the faithfulness of the first disciples, and the way that the small group of people who come to be known as Christians begin to organize their community together after Jesus' Ascension into heaven. It is the story of a group of people who are called to begin a fresh way of living in the world. The old ways of being have been made new.

The Acts of the Apostles is wonderfully interesting in that it is full of miracles – healings, conversions, peacemaking, and all sorts of extraordinary transformation – but it is also a book about ordinary people doing ordinary things and working together to solve ordinary problems: who is in charge here? Where is the money coming from? What do we do about *that* guy? Somehow they are aware that everything – absolutely everything – has been transformed in the grace of Christ's Resurrection, and yet...someone still needs to make dinner.

The Acts of the Apostles is a rich gift to the Church and to us, because this is our story too. We arrive at the great Feast of Easter, we sing "Alleluia" together – some part of us at the very center of our hearts believes (or wants to believe) that everything has been transformed in the grace of Christ's Resurrection. We are *here*, together, in church. We are on the path of discipleship. We yearn for the miracles – the healing and the conversion and the peacemaking. And yet...the gutters outside the front door are too small. We still have *life* to manage. We still get hungry, irritated, and depressed. Where is the Resurrection here.

But the Acts of the Apostles is not a book to show us what we do not have. It's not a text that describes some ancient intimacy with God that is no longer relevant or possible. It is a book that does indeed show us who we are and what we are meant for. It is an excellent, if challenging guide. And it offers us a vision of a world that is not so unlike our own. It is the proclamation of hope to a divided, conflict ridden world.

Today's reading from Acts might first appear to be a rather strange exercise in decision-making. Think of the last substantive decision you made, big or small, and how you went about it. How do we make decisions today? How do we teach our children to make decisions? Well, I suppose one strategy is that we begin by gathering as much information as possible. We ask experts. We read reviews. Perhaps in business, we hire a consultant. We develop a plan. Sadly, another strategy is based in fear. We move forward with a choice because we think we have to or something terrible will result. Behind each of these strategies is the uniquely powerful human insistence upon control. We want *agency* - we want to always be the author of the story, the master of the game, the hero on the journey, and the one with the responsibility for the consequences. It is almost difficult to imagine any other way of being.

So what on *earth* are the apostles thinking when they gather to decide on their next teammate? "In those days Peter stood up among the believers and said, "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled...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." And so they proposed two. And they prayed. And they cast lots, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

The number twelve for the apostles of Jesus was very significant. There were twelve tribes of Israel. And so the number indicated a fullness, a completion of the fulfillment of all of

the Old Testament prophecies. When Judas betrayed Jesus on the night before his crucifixion and later died, the number was down to eleven. And thus another was required to be added among them. You'd think they might have scheduled interviews. Perhaps they should have gathered to author a definitive job description. For some reason, no one in this passage is checking references. They prayed. They cast lots. And they trusted God.

This vignette from the Acts of the Apostles can sound quaint and charmingly absurd to our modern sensibilities, but there is great wisdom here. The unfolding of this unconventional decision making is a wellspring of great promise and great grace.

When the disciples gather to select the next person to minister alongside them, first and foremost, they give this decision completely to God. They relinquish control. They don't abandon any responsibility – remember, they gather to make the choice in the first place, they invite two men to be considered, they come together in prayer. But there is never a doubt in this gathering that the ultimate authority over all that is to unfold is the authority of their loving and almighty God. And they trust him.

In our review-reading, consultant hiring culture, decision-making is often inseparable from anxiety. We worry so much about making the “right” choice. We might even worry about whether we are truly following God's will, and then we worry that if we've somehow missed God's will for us, we've lost any chance at hope or success. But absolutely everything in scripture calls out to us to remind us that God's grace invites us into a fresh way of living in the world. The old ways of being have been made new.

God does not think within human binaries of “right” choice and “wrong” choice. There is no fork in the road after which a wrong turn will send us into oblivion if we somehow misread the map. God is not a divine riddle master, offering difficult, hidden clues that we must somehow

parse in a puzzle in order to read the invisible ink. God is not watching us scurry like little critters in a maze, desperate to find the secret treat.

God loves you. God has known you since before the beginning of time. “Before you knit me in my mother’s womb, you knew me” – the psalmist says. In Psalm 139: “Where can I go then from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I climb up to heaven, you are there; * if I make the grave my bed, you are there also. If I take the wings of the morning * and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there your hand will lead me * and your right hand holds me fast.” Jesus himself says in the Gospel that not one of his little ones will be lost. Even if we are perhaps not so little anymore.

And so we can begin our decision making from this place of peace. We can begin, even in the most terrifying of circumstances, from the solid ground of trust in God. We can know that the One who formed us and knows us even now is with us in all things, and that there is no wrong choice or missed mark that can separate our hearts from him. When we have an important decision to make, *we can begin from here*. And then we can pray. Any prayer will do – even “help me, God!” – but the apostles today help us remember to pray from a place of humility. We are not the authors of the story. We can pray from a place of rest and thanksgiving. It is actually a wild and fresh relief to not have to be the one in charge.

Trust. Pray. And remember that Jesus in his own prayer to the Father in the Gospel asked God to protect you. He says it not once, but twice: Father, protect them. We can make every decision knowing that this protection will guard and sustain us. We can meet every bend in the road with quiet confidence. When things get difficult, we can help each other remember. And together, by God’s grace, we might become “like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; * and everything they do shall prosper.”

Amen.