

NEW BEGINNINGS LUTHERAN CHURCH

Seventh Sunday of Easter – May 12th, 2024 (11:11 am)

CRISIS AND RESPONSE

Psalm 1
Acts 1:12-26
1 John 5:9-15
John 17:11-19

Our Great High Priest Preserves Us in the Name of His Father

On the eve of His Passion, Christ Jesus intercedes for the disciples as their merciful and great High Priest. He prays that His Father would protect them “*from the evil one*” and preserve them in His name (John 17:11–12, 15). Along with His prayer, Christ Himself comes to the Father by His self-sacrifice upon the cross, thereby consecrating Himself for the sake of His disciples, “*that they also may be sanctified in truth*” (John 17:19). To that same end, He speaks to them in the world and gives them His Father’s Word, that is, Himself. His apostles, in turn, have written these things “*to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life*” (1 John 5:13). For “*this life is in his Son,*” whom He has given by His Word, and “*whoever has the Son has life*” (1 John 5:11–12). By this apostolic testimony, disciples are gathered together “*with one accord,*” as one Body in Christ, “*devoting themselves to prayer*” and waiting upon the Lord in “*the upper room*” of His Church on earth (Acts 1:13–14).

The book of acts is the only History book in the New Testament that provides us with valuable information about the early Church. The challenge that the Church faces in every generation is to take the unchanging Word of God and communicate it to a changing world. This is true today; and it was true back then. We will see this morning that lessons learned in the earliest days of the church are still applicable in our day.

This is certainly the case with the story set before us on this final Sunday of the Easter Season. This story fits the pattern of crisis and response as I understand it.

What’s the crisis? The death of Judas and the vacancy this leaves in the number of the twelve.

A full complement of twelve disciples is considered of vital importance, not only as a practical matter, but as a reminder of Israel’s twelve tribes and the twelve patriarchs for whom they are named. The Christian community claims that it is a new and reformed Israel. At that time, having its dozen patriarchs is an essential part of its vision and belief.

What’s the response? Matthias is elected to fill the empty place, thereby restoring the apostolic group to their full strength of twelve.

We have here a foundation text for the idea of Apostolic Continuity in other words, the Church in every age as a community connected with the earliest disciples.

But something more is happening here. We have a ***crisis and response pattern*** that can be applied to numerous circumstances in the life of a Christian community. The key is that it needs to be done according to the will of God.

You remember what precipitated this crisis of succession in the early church. The betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot was the greatest challenge the early church had to deal with. Judas Iscariot died at his own hand. It was a gruesome death. It's hard to figure out what was going on in the mind of this man. *Why, exactly, did he betray his master? Were his expectations not met? Was he frustrated with Jesus? Had he given up on the idea that Jesus was Israel's Messiah?* Lots of questions. Not that many answers.

The early Christian community, a group of some 120 people, could respond differently than they do. They could spend their time preoccupied with the failures of Judas. They could fragment into parties that would eventually oppose one another. They could become stuck, waiting passively for the next one of the twelve to go the way of all flesh. Any of these responses is possible given human nature and how groups function.

What they decide on is to take a different option. Peter seems to have a significant role in this. He stands up and makes a speech summarizing the situation and proposing a course of action. That speech occupies most of today's reading from Acts. But the most brilliant speech is worth little unless people choose to act upon it.

Peter manages to strike the right chord. He urges that someone be found to replace Judas. That person must fit specific criteria. What is needed is somebody who has followed Jesus since the earliest days and who can testify to the reality of his resurrection. The community responds by putting forth not one candidate but two. Through prayer and the casting of lots, one of them is chosen, Matthias. And, of course, this is where things get interesting for us modern people. The people of God prayed for God's guidance. That's not unusual. It is expected. But then they cast lots – the ancient equivalent of throwing dice, – in other words, gambling. The difference here is that they were using an ancient method that was grounded on God's will, and not on chance, destiny, or luck. Then, Matthias was chosen. Crisis faced. Crisis resolved.

Again, it could happen otherwise. Peter's proposal could be shouted down or condemned by silence. There could be no candidates to put forward, or those suggested could decline the honour. These things are known to happen in human groups.

But instead, Peter exercises leadership by proposing a solution to the community's **dilemma**. The congregation responds, not simply with verbal assent but with two qualified candidates willing to serve. A process of choosing is employed, which has been blessed by community prayer. The result is a crisis resolved.

Whatever else is happening in this episode, I dare to say that a principle is at work here to benefit the Church in every generation. Here is how we could express that principle: **Faithful response to a crisis involves calling forth additional expressions of ministry.**

We think that it's significant that this whole process is undertaken and completed without conflict or hard feelings. We see how the early church sought God's will. And once God's will was discerned, we see how they faithfully executed it. There is certainly a lesson here for us.

I think it's significant that these gathered Christians focused on doing God's will not their own will. They were concerned most of all with what was best for the church and not for themselves. They got together. They assessed the situation. With the apostle Peter's assistance and faithful leadership, they found a solution and implemented it.

In this situation, there was unity in the church. A common challenge and a common solution. When you think about it, getting 120 people to agree on anything is quite a challenge. But by the enabling of the Holy Spirit, they were able to get the job done. They worked together. They found common ground. Their primary concern was with the church and with the success of its outreach. Again, a good example for us today.

As we hear the story in Acts, it seems as though both Matthias and Justus step forward at this moment, urged on by those around them.

Matthias was the one chosen to replace Judas Iscariot. And you would think that you would hear a lot more about him in the rest of the New Testament, but this account is the only place where he is mentioned. After this event, he is not mentioned again. There was a need and God provided individuals to step in. There were prayers offered and answered. The church was able to carry on with its outreach and its growth continued unabated. At times of crisis, the Families, the Church, and the World find additional forms of ministry or solutions, with God's help.

We might well recall the Old Testament story about the prophet Elisha, whose city was surrounded by the great army of a hostile king. Elisha's attendant was distraught about this, fearing the worst, but the prophet told him, **"Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."** Then Elisha prayed and said, **"O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see."** So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, **the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."** (2 Kings 6:16-17)

For whatever the crisis, far more numerous than the forces of destruction are the forces aligned with God. His horses and chariots of fire are always there ready to intervene. The disciples and others seek the Lord's will concerning the candidate of His choice to replace Judas as a Church leader, the new Israel. Today, entrust your future to the

Lord in prayer. He will prepare your way before you. Since our Lord is present with us till the end of the age, He will knit together with love His faithful people with Himself and with one another.

As individuals, or as a congregation, we can entrust our future to the Lord. He promises to be with us. He promises to intervene on our behalf. He says that he will never leave us or forsake us. Consider these words from the first Psalm – the first three verses: ***"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers."*** In Jesus' name. Amen.