

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Choosing a Witness”
Easter 7—May 13, 2018
Thomas G. Speers, III

Lessons: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; John 17:6-19

I've been hearing about elections recently. I'm not talking about primaries in West Virginia or Ohio. Over the last several weeks, we have had elections at school for student leaders. A great young man was elected president of the student body at Tower Hill and it reminded me of the school where we used to live and their elections. Young women would give a speech and then students would vote and more often than not there was a difficult choice between two great people and only one person could be elected, so there was always a loser. I liked to remind those who didn't win about those who lost the first time they ran for office, and then learned from that loss, people with names like Lincoln and Obama. Sometimes a loss may be the foundation for a much greater win down the road. Of course, it still is difficult to lose.

Garrison Keillor tells the story of playing baseball as a boy: “Morning and afternoon, school recessed and we took to the playground; everyone burst out the door except me. Mrs. Meiers said, ‘Don't run! Walk!’ I always walked. I was in no hurry, I knew what was out there. The girls played in front. Little girls played tag and stoop-ball, hopscotch, skipped rope; big girls sat under the pine tree and whispered. Some girls went to the swings. Boys went out back and played baseball, except for some odd boys who lay around in the shade and fooled with jackknives and talked dirty. I could go in the shade or stand by the backstop and wait to be chosen. Daryl and David always chose up sides and always chose the same people first, the popular ones. ‘Let somebody else be captain!’ Jim said once. ‘How come you always get to choose?’ They just smiled. They were captains, that was all there was to it. After the popular ones got picked, we stood in a bunch looking down at the dirt, waiting to see if our rating had changed. They took their sweet time choosing us, we had plenty of time to study our shoes. Mine were Keds, black, though white ones were more popular. Mother said black wouldn't show dirt. She didn't know how the wrong shoes could mark a person and raise questions in other people's minds...

“Nine boys to a side, four already chosen, ten positions left, and the captains look us over. They chose the popular ones fast (‘Brian!’ ‘Bill!’ ‘Duke!’ ‘John!’ ‘Bob!’ ‘Paul!’ ‘Jim!’ ‘Lancel!’), and now the choice is hard because we're all so much the same: *not so hot*—and then they are down to their last grudging choices, a slow kid for catcher and someone to stick out in right field where nobody hits it, except maybe two guys, and when they come to bat the captain sends the poor right fielder to left, a long ignominious walk. They choose the last ones two at a time, ‘You and you,’ because it makes no difference, and the remaining kids, the scrubs, the excess, they deal for as handicaps (‘If I take him, then you gotta take *him*'). Sometimes I go as high as sixth, usually lower. Just once I'd like Daryl to pick me first. ‘Him! I want him! The skinny kid with the glasses and the black shoes! You! Come on!’ But I've never been chosen with any enthusiasm.”¹

Today we've read a story about transitions in leadership in the Book of Acts. The early church faced the issue of finding a new leader. Judas was no longer with the community and Jesus had left and most everyone recognized that they needed twelve leaders—the number twelve was a reminder of the twelve tribes of Israel. So Peter—one of the captains if you will—talked about the various qualifications needed to be a leader and two people were chosen: Matthias and Justis, who was also called Joseph Barsabbas. They did not have a vote but instead they prayed—which is something many

¹ Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*. © 1985 Penguin Books.

of us do before we take part in an election: “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen... And then they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.”

So Matthias won this particular election and became a part of the inner circle, but the funny thing is that his name is never mentioned again in Scripture and neither is Justis. We know next to nothing about either person, except that they were followers of Jesus from the time of his baptism to the time of his ascension and then after this election, they are not mentioned again. They seem to disappear. Some people think that is a sign that the church acted too quickly. They should have waited for the gift of Pentecost. They should have waited for the gift of the Holy Spirit and because they didn’t this new apostle is not remembered and maybe he even was the wrong choice. That of course is conjecture although it certainly is a reminder that sometimes we move too quickly to fill an open slot instead of waiting for greater discernment. Maybe that slot doesn’t need to be filled or maybe the person we are about to choose is not the right person. Maybe the right person will appear if we just hold on. Maybe.

Barbara Lundblad, offers a different view of Matthias and Justis and the fact that they never appear again, suggesting that “their lack of renown is a wondrous reality. In the next chapter Peter stands with the eleven to preach his Pentecost sermon. That would mean that Matthias must have been there even though he is not named. Where was Justus? Perhaps he was there too, for the narrator tells us that all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. Some will argue that “all” means only the Twelve, now including Matthias. But Justus must have been with them when they cast lots. He must have been in the house, along with some women including Jesus’ mother Mary. After Matthias was chosen, the text does not say the rest of them left Jerusalem. When the day of Pentecost came, “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages” (Acts 2:4). Rather than being disappointed by having so little information, we can be grateful for the witness of those who are so little known.”²

Which leads me to the idea of celebrating all those little known people in our own lives who have faithfully proclaimed God’s presence, celebrated God’s care, and witnessed to the power of the resurrection. In reading about Justis and Matthias—one chosen, the other not—I wonder about all the other ordinary people who have carried forward the extraordinary message of the gospel, people who may not have been chosen with any enthusiasm by their peers, but who have been entrusted with the greatest of gifts by God. I think of Sunday School teachers whose names we can’t come up with today, but who helped little children discover that they are precious and forever loved and cared for by God. I think of a woman who sat up front in church and woe be unto anyone who tried to sit in her usual spot. Every Sunday she took the offering and counted it all and kept those records straight, and also provided a safe haven for some little children whose parents were up front helping to lead the service. There was always a welcome in her pew next to her and we knew she cared for us. I think of people who sing in the choir and would never be asked to sing a solo, but who offer what they have, blending their voices together to create a beautiful sound. In this church, I think of people who have a discipline of prayer and hold us all in their prayers, especially when we are in special need. I think of others who very quietly arrive at church early in the morning on the 19th of every month to cook a meal for people who otherwise might go hungry down at Emmanuel Dining Room. There are others who gather every so often to make small crafts—pillow cases with patterns that would be welcomed by children at A I duPont Hospital or little trinkets for Mothers’ Day or as gifts for those we visit with Christmas Carols. Every church is full of ordinary people sharing the extraordinary power of the gospel. Who are the people in your life like Justis or even like Matthias?

² Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown (2011-05-31). *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide*. © 2008 Westminster John Knox Press.

This passage today is good news for a church like ours. We know ourselves to be small. The reality is that beyond these walls most of us are not well known--some of us maybe: I think of a couple who are well known in our Presbytery and a couple of others who have been active in the political realm, but most here are ordinary folk who simply try to live faithful lives and have found in this place a home where they are valued and where they in turn value those around them. The word for you today is that you matter and you are remembered too. The church has a place for you. You've been chosen with enthusiasm. If you can't pray like Peter and you can't preach like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and say he died for all.

Barbara Lundblad says: "Justus lost the toss of the dice, but there is no indication that he lost his faith in Jesus. As the book of Acts unfolds, there are hundreds of unnamed people who pass on the story of Jesus. Most of them are even less well known than Justus. Without these ordinary folks, Peter and Paul would have remained quite lonely and ineffective in bearing witness "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8)."³

We are here today because ordinary people, people like Justis and Matthias, told somebody about Jesus. Thanks be to God for them.

Let us pray: O God we give you thanks for all those in whom you have entrusted the message of the Gospel, especially those who have touched our lives and made us stronger, more caring, more loving, more faithful. Help us in our own lives to commit as much of ourselves as we know to as much of God as we understand. We pray in the name of Jesus who gives us all we need. Amen.

³ Ibid