

*In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said, 'Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus—for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.' So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout 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.' So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.' And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.*

Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26

Our Scripture today is the story of the first recorded congregational meeting of the Christian Church, and Peter's first sermon. The risen Christ had been had been with them in a resurrected, spiritual body for 40 days: teaching them, reassuring them, convincing them that he had risen. By the Biblical account, this wasn't just a psychological phenomenon for them: they experienced the presence of the risen Christ for 40 days, and only for 40 days. Jesus was there, unexpectedly, astonishingly: in the garden, in the upper room, on the road, at the beach, turning their lives upside down. Frightened, grieving, utterly disheartened former followers of a failed Messiah; became joyful, exuberant, disciples who lived with purpose and spoke with power, changed by the Risen Christ.

And in the room are not just the 11 apostles, but 120 believers, including women who had followed Jesus, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers! The last we have heard of Jesus' brothers in Luke, they were trying to bring Jesus home because they thought he was crazy! But here they are, inexplicably, with the faithful, just weeks after their worst fears were realized and Jesus was executed as a criminal.

Could it be because of the appearance of the Risen Christ to James, the brother of Jesus that Paul records in I Corinthians? Something dramatic, something life-changing happened: something that came to an end on Ascension Day. Jesus had been with them, miraculously, and suddenly he was gone, just as mysteriously.

Just before his ascension, Jesus told them to remain in Jerusalem and to wait there. So they're waiting; waiting and praying. This is the season of the church year that we are in now: Ascension Day was last Thursday, Pentecost in next Sunday. They are in an interim time. And Peter calls a congregational meeting.

I've preached on this sermon before. But looking back, really, I'm a little ashamed of myself. I was so critical of Peter and the others, so judgmental, so arrogant. I concluded that Jesus had told them to wait. Jesus could have appointed a replacement for Judas before he left them, but he didn't. Now, they decide they need another apostle. And they decided that this new apostle should be someone just like them! Big surprise! and they picked two people and prayed saying, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you choose." And they drew lots, and Matthias was chosen-- and he is never heard of in scripture again. I argued that they had chosen Matthias, but God had chosen Paul, who didn't fit any of their criteria.

As if I knew. Nowhere in the Acts of the Apostles, nor anywhere else in scripture, nor in the gathered room at the time; is this choosing of Matthias condemned, nor the timing nor the method used questioned. And while Matthias isn't mentioned again in the New Testament, neither is Andrew or Thomas of Bartholomew, or Simon the Zealot, or James, son of Alphaeus, or for that matter, Mary. Now I feel I was too quick to judge, too shallow, too clever, not paying enough attention; because there is so much here, so much to learn, so much that gets us thinking and praying. In the New Testament, we have only part of one chapter that bridges the time between the ascension of Jesus and Pentecost, just 15 verses. So I feel chastened not to have paid more attention to reading it with prayer and humility.

First of all, don't you find it interesting that there were others besides the Twelve who were with Jesus for his whole ministry: from the baptism of John until the ascension? This is the first we're told that.

There were 12 apostles, but evidently, more disciples than that: followers from first to last who were found faithful enough for one to be numbered now among the twelve. Before this they were nameless, their story untold, but now, when needed, there Matthias is: known and named and ready and called.

That's an amazing word to each of us. We don't know our significance, until need makes our role clear. Faithfulness, day in and day out, prepares us for a future we don't yet know, but in which we may have a crucial role to play.

Second, of those who have been followers from baptism to ascension, there is one other criterion: the one chosen, Peter says, "must become a witness with us to the resurrection." Not merely a witness of the resurrection, but a witness to the resurrection. Peter is looking for someone who will share that experience with others. Many of us have followed Jesus all our lives: but have we been a witness not just of, but to, the life-changing presence of God in our lives? Peter was looking for a witness: a *martyr* in the original Greek, it only came to have specialized meaning of one killed for their faith because so many early Christians were martyred. Are we willing to take any risks for our faith? To be a witness? How prepared are we for service if the need arises?

I have been riveted and disturbed by the next verses. *The scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas He was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.* Those seem to me words full of sorrow and loss. Judas had been chosen by Jesus, had shared in their ministry from the baptism of John. What if Judas, like Peter and the others had been able to encounter the risen Christ? Might he not also have found himself to be both forgivable and forgiven? What a witness it would have been if Judas could have been among them, reconciled and witnessing to the resurrection.

It is no small thing, I think, when any of us is lost to Christ's church. Each member has been named and called, each allotted a share in our ministry. While others can be included, there is not one of us who can really be replaced. We each have our own perspective, our own story, our own experience, and no one else can offer that. When someone is gone from a church, for what ever reason: death, or moving, anger or hurt, it is always a real loss and the congregation is full of their absence. In a church as in a family, someone can be added, but no one can be replaced.

How do we reach out, and reach back as a reconciling, welcoming community? God has gifted us with one another, and when one is lost, all are diminished. This is important because we are meant to discern the will of God together. Especially where it is hard, we are meant to seek truth together.

What does our story have to tell us about how the church discerns the will of God? First, Peter identifies a problem or necessity. Then he brings it to the whole church, and helps the community look at the decision in the light of scripture. This is where the process in the story is problematic for me: because Peter is the only one talking. But he wasn't the only one there.

We are a gathered church for a reason. When we have a difficult decision to make, I have my perspective to offer, and you have yours. And we need to be very attentive to one another, because none of us has the whole truth; and together, we can see more of God's truth than any of us can alone. And we short ourselves and perhaps misunderstand God, if we are not each offering the truth God has given us, and listening carefully to one another.

It's a dilemma here for the people trying to help us consider the questions around being Open and Affirming. There's a sense that there are people whose perspective isn't being heard, people who aren't comfortable speaking out. And yet, while we can come to a decision even if some are silent, we can't come to consensus; because we don't know what the sense of the community is if all voices aren't heard.

So how do we make this a place where it is safe enough that we are able to discuss difficult things honestly, openly, faithfully, patiently, attentively? We need to be able to do this. The Open and Affirming question is like a pilot project in how to be the church confronting difficult issues together. This is not the only question in which we could help each other to a broader, truer perspective. We live in polarized times. We so much need the church to be a place where we can speak and hear conflicting truths. I need it. I think we all need it.

I am afraid to struggle with the great moral questions that confront our nation, unless I am taking with people who already agree with me. I fear we are so cautious not to give offense, that we are really handicapped in discerning the truth. And so we fail each other, and are more limited than we need to be.

While my opinion can be confirmed by talking to people with whom I already agree, I can only be transformed by the renewing of my mind. And that requires exposure to truths I don't yet know and won't find within myself. In our search for truth, for right decisions, for faithful actions, we need all the light we can get, and if we pool our light, my partial truth and yours, we have a much better chance of discerning how to be faithful in challenging times.

We face great questions of war and justice. People are dying right now, every day, and we need to be able to talk about this. We have huge responsibilities to the future. As a nation we are a colossus in the world; we have unprecedented power, for good and ill. Our political decisions have enormous consequence. It is hard to sort out truth from falsehood, right from wrong. I can't be the only one searching the news for clarity and fearing that I am unequal to the challenges we face and the decisions that must be made. We are too polarized as a nation to even reach for consensus. We all know it, but we don't know what to do. Somehow, somewhere, people who disagree, who see truth and moral necessity from different perspectives, need to be able to talk to one another about the great issues of our day.

And so I find myself asking the questions Russ Brenneman put to us three years ago: If our hopes can't be realized here, at Saugatuck, then where? We hold in our church the possibility of being more and more an honest, wrestling, seeking, listening, loving, reconciling community of people who are not like-minded; but are open-minded, and open to one another. If not here, where will we find a community receiving each other as gifts, learning from one another, trusting one another, praying for the spirit that will guide us into new truths: knowing that God gave us to each other for a reason, and that as we speak, and listen, we may discern together a truth God cannot reveal in any other way.

Not just we, but the nation needs this model, of people of faith who can disagree with each other faithfully, who can look at hard truths together from different perspectives, who invite others in to speak their truths. We need churches where people are safe enough to seek together a truth they don't yet know; studying scripture, praying, speaking passionately of things that matter, and listening compassionately. If not here, at Saugatuck, where can it happen? God has given us each other, companions in hard times. And I need the truth you know. We all do. We are diminished without it. Amen.