

Sermon: Become a Witness

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; John 17:6-19**

Does anyone remember a comic strip called B.C.? You'd have to be of a certain age, I think. Anyway, a brother-in-law once gave me a framed print of a particular strip that we still have up on a wall. It's about playing golf. In the first panel, a young woman says, 'Let me get this straight, the less I hit the ball, the better I'm doing.' Her partner, a man, says, 'That's right.' In the second panel, she asks, 'Then why do it at all?' In the final panel, it's dark and the moon is out, and the man is still out there, wondering, 'Why ... do it ... at all...'

I think you need to be a golfer for that to be funny, but it might be relevant today.

In the Gospels, Jesus' followers are called *disciples*. In Acts, they become *apostles*. A disciple is a student, while an apostle is literally an ambassador or representative. By Peter's definition, an apostle was one who had traveled with Jesus from the days of John the Baptist through the Resurrection, which would seem to disqualify Paul. Yet in almost all of the letters actually written by Paul, Romans for example, he declares himself a servant of Jesus Christ, through whom he 'received grace and *apostleship*.' Peter's definition needed to gain some flexibility as the years passed and apostles qualified.

Which brings us to Jerusalem, in an upper room, where the remaining eleven disciples – now apostles: Peter, John, and James; Andrew, Philip, and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James, along with 'certain women' including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers – all met to find a way to restore their number to twelve.

This first group of apostles had all been there from the beginning and Peter wanted it to stay that way, for good solid reasons: everyone had heard the same words and teachings from Jesus and they all had the same perspective. But over time this couldn't be sustained as the first generation gave way to the next, and the next, so we suspect there might have been another reason for Peter's apostleship definition.

Of the two candidates proposed by the apostles, we don't know much about either Joseph called Barsabbas, or Matthias, and after this they both drop out of the story, never to be heard from again. Matthias ought to have become an apostle hero – he's identified by name, right? That's usually a sign that the person is important to the story, like an actor needing to speak at least one line in order to qualify for a Screen Actor's Guild card, so they make it a good one.

Perhaps Matthias was just meant to be a placeholder. We'll never know. But what we do know is this: the apostles made maintaining their organizational structure a priority over pursuing the mission of the church. They failed to rely on the Holy Spirit for guidance. They *prayed* for guidance but then they cast lots to make their decision. So, why do it at all?

For Luke, having a New Twelve, so to speak, may have been symbolic in order for the faith community to be ready for Pentecost, that moment when they received the gift of the Holy Spirit at the birth of the church. Twelve was a special number in the history of Israel, going back to the twelve tribes of Israel. Maybe that's all this election was ever about, filling out the roster.

Notice that the twelve apostles make up about ten percent of the total number of believers. That's one apostle for every ten members of the community, and it's a pretty good-sized congregation, especially when viewed against the backdrop of the crucifixion and then the Resurrection. The group didn't scatter when they lost their leader; they regrouped in Jerusalem – not in Galilee where Jesus told them he would see them, but here in the heart of Judaism, the Temple, and the gateway to the world.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus mentions 'the world' twelve times in his prayer, and the world he means is the political world of people, of society, of empire; a world that too often is afflicted by greed and war and oppression.

In his prayer, Jesus is asking God to protect those people chosen by God and given to Jesus Christ to make God's name known to them. So, when Jesus said, 'Follow me,' he must have been taking direction from God – 'Take that guy and that guy; those two guys; not that guy; this guy; him, him, and him' – which explains his high confidence in his choices, even when he called Judas Iscariot.

Everything comes from God.

We hardly ever ask for God's guidance when we make community decisions. We elect people to run things for us, to make the choices that keep things going. They write the by-laws and carve out zoning districts; they figure out where to put the Stop signs and the railroads and

the highways; we merely sign off on their work and hope for the best, and sometimes vote the bums out. At any given time, a town's Planning Board or a City Council or a state Legislature might offer a public prayer before they begin their deliberations, but does anyone ever ask the Holy Spirit to blow through the room to lead the way?

Some faith communities devise tests to make sure that all the new folks are good enough just to come into the building. These traditions would prefer that everyone in the pews had the same point of view, the same perspective. That's reasonable but there's a flip side to that too. If we all think the same way, there's no diversity, which is a very popular thing these days. Diversity makes room for the Holy Spirit. It opens the way to new thoughts, new opinions, new options; it helps guide the church to new ministries and apostleship.

Maybe this is why Joseph called Barsabbas didn't make the cut as an apostle: maybe he had new thoughts on how the faith community ought to behave in the world. Maybe Peter and the others saw Matthias as a better choice to serve as a right-thinking apostle when the real point was to choose the kind of person who could do the church's ministry first and represent the faith as a consequence of that ministry.

Jesus prayed for God's protection for us as we make our way in the world as a faith community looking for something more than the usual mayhem of politics, empire, greed, and oppression – all the things humans gravitate to when their focus is not on God and the divine word. Prayer can and often does influence our thinking; it helps clear the mind. It helps us seek the will of God.

Jesus said of the disciples 'that they do not belong to the world' but they – and us – *are in it* nonetheless. He wants us to stay engaged with the world but not to fall victim to its temptations, which is why he prayed for God's protection for us. God knows the world of people is complicated but through faith, through prayer, and with the Holy Spirit's guidance, we can navigate our way safely through it. Jesus said, 'As you have sent me *into* the world, so I have sent them *into* the world,' not to hide in it but to engage in it by doing the work of ministry.

This kind of work can be exhausting, though, and we need to pay attention to that. By being aware of Christ's presence in our lives, we can live faithfully in the world and be energized by the truth of God's word.

In his prayer, Jesus also said, ‘Sanctify them in thy truth; your word is truth.’ We carved this prayer request into our sanctuary long ago, right up there. To sanctify them is to make them holy or ‘hallowed,’ as we hallow God’s name in the Lord’s Prayer.

God’s truth is God’s word, and God spoke all these words to Moses on Mount Sinai, and Moses delivered them to the people of Israel and called them God’s Law. God’s word, God’s Law, is revealed in the world here and now, every day.

A person who knew God’s Law once asked Jesus which of them all was the greatest commandment. Jesus replied, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:36-40).

It all boils down to that, and everything else follows from it.

Amen.