

**Sermon: Guided in Prayer**

New North Church

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Based on **John 17:6-19; Acts 1:15-17, 20-26**

In the Gospel reading, we find Jesus praying immediately before his betrayal and arrest. And in Acts, with Jesus having just ascended into heaven, the apostles pray as they make selecting a replacement for Judas their first order of business. In both readings, prayer is shown to be the first thing you do when you need help.

In the Gospels, Jesus' followers are called *disciples*. In Acts, they became *apostles*. A disciple is a student, while an apostle is literally an ambassador. By Peter's definition, an apostle was anyone who had traveled with Jesus from the days of John the Baptist through the Resurrection, which makes it a very short list.

So, in Jerusalem, in the same upper room of the house where Jesus shared his last earthly meal, 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.

Why twelve?

For Luke, twelve apostles echo the twelve tribes of Israel and may have been symbolic to get the faith community ready for that moment when they received the gift of the Holy Spirit which, for us, signifies the birth of the church. Maybe that's all this election was ever about, filling out the roster, because they had no idea *when* the Holy Spirit might come upon them, but they knew it would because Jesus told them so (Acts 1:8).

Now, 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 lessons from Jesus, and they all had the same perspective. But it seems only Justus and Matthias qualified.

This requirement was unsustainable as the first generation gave way to the next, and then the next. As it happened, this was the first and last election of this kind as recorded by Luke.

Verse 24 in the Acts reading tells us the apostles prayed to Jesus for guidance, saying, “*Show us* which one of these two you have chosen.” Where the English version reads *show us*, Luke wrote *reveal*: “*Reveal* which one of these two *you* have chosen.”

Then they cast lots. *Lots* are sacred dice used in oracles. Casting lots is the traditional method for God’s will to be revealed, according to a verse in Proverbs 16, which reads:

The lot is cast into the lap,  
but the decision is the LORD’s alone. (Proverbs 16:33)

So, the apostles put their faith in God, who often reveals the divine will by working through people. It’s not always through thunder or an earthquake. And notice the apostles didn’t say, “How about best two out of three?” They accepted God’s will without question.

So, the lot fell on Matthias. In the New Testament writings, this is the only time he and Justus are mentioned. They served their purpose and left the stage.

Notice that the twelve apostles made up about ten percent of the total number of believers. That’s one apostle for every ten members of the faith community, and it’s a pretty good-sized congregation already. The group didn’t scatter when they lost their leader; they regrouped and organized themselves around the Twelve in an orderly process based on prayer but also trusting the group to rebuild and get on with the mission.

In the Gospel reading, we hear Jesus taking the time to ensure the disciples and their people will be guided and protected; he knows they have a particular role and place in the world.

In his prayer, Jesus mentioned ‘the world’ several times, and the world he meant is the political world of people, of society, of empire; a world that too often is afflicted by greed and war and oppression.

And he is praying for all those that God gave him to receive the Word that they may be one. He is praying for God to protect them. He is praying for them because he knows he is sending them into the world as a bunch of outsiders, where they will become the Other; not to use the world’s methods, but God’s, whose presence in the world is not always welcome.

Jesus prayed, therefore, that they follow an alternative model of living in the world without falling victim to its values and pressures, and that under God’s protective care, they can live in a complex world without getting tangled up in its conflicts. That’s the goal.

As the church grew, more and more decisions were left to the leaders at the top. As time went on, the church came to include many different voices and opinions on how and what the

church should be and do. It developed a hierarchy and became part of the world, and not always in a good way.

Some say the worst thing that ever happened to the church was when Emperor Constantine I, also known as Constantine the Great, legalized Christianity.

The Edict of Milan granted Christians throughout the Empire toleration and permission to gather. While native cults and traditions remained, Constantine favored Christians both financially and theologically. As their supreme patron, Constantine endowed Christians with funds to build basilicas and to acquire property, returned confiscated property, named Christians to high-ranking offices, and exempted Christian clergy from paying taxes. Theologically, his position as head of the Church as well as of the Empire promoted Christian unity of belief but distorted the mission.<sup>1</sup>

Not exactly what Jesus had in mind just a few hundred years earlier.

But in Peter's time, Jesus was the acknowledged head of the church. Peter and the other apostles all leaned on God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit for guidance. They would have laughed at the thought of the emperor calling the shots, and then they would have cried.

Eventually, different church forms came about, right around the time of the Reformation, of which there were more than one. Churches began modeling themselves on their own forms of self-government – Presbyterians and Congregationalists, for example. In the 1600s, a group of Congregationalist Separatists left England and settled in Plymouth, followed a decade later by some non-Separatists, who settled in Boston.

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 that humans gravitate to when their focus is not on God and the Word. Prayer helps focus and clear the mind. It helps us seek the will of God.

But when we pray, do we trust God to reveal that divine will in some unmistakable way? Would we know it if we saw it? Do our hierarchies get in the way and tangle us up in our need to control outcomes and influence people?

In modern times, many churches have tried to get back to what Jesus intended for us as faith communities.

Some have established mottos from John's Gospel. For the United Church of Christ, that motto is, '*That They May All Be One,*' from verse 11. The UCC was formed from several

streams of Christian tradition in 1957, but it took years of discernment, informal conversation, and argument before that happened. What eventually brought these different traditions together was faith and spirit and a sense of common purpose.

We took our motto from verse 17, ‘*Sanctify Them Through Thy Truth,*’ carved in the woodwork above me. ‘Thy truth’ is God’s Word, meaning Jesus. To sanctify means to set apart as holy. We are thus set apart for a holy purpose by Jesus Christ.

And what is that purpose? Luke calls on us to become apostles to Jesus’ resurrection. That’s the primary task. And then we can focus on the poor and the hungry.

When the eleven remaining disciples sought to replace Judas with a new apostle, they prayed to Jesus to reveal who that should be by rolling the sacred dice. That really only works when you have just two choices.

So, how might God’s will be revealed to us in this complicated world? How do we manage expectations? When we pray, do we begin by saying, ‘Lord, reveal to us your will?’ Are we patient enough to listen carefully and observe the world to see what happens next?

And if not, what else do we gain by praying?

A wise man named Unknown once said that it’s not what we gain but what we lose: anger, greed, insecurity, and fear.

We are still in the world but not of it, and God is still at work in us and around us. Knowing God is present is a comfort, but it also helps us live a fully engaged life in the world, knowing its needs and problems, always seeking God’s will, and being energized by God’s truth, Jesus Christ.

May we remain as steadfast and faithful as the apostles, may our faith sustain us in an uncertain world, and may God always guide us in prayer.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1737/constantines-conversion-to-christianity/>