

Sermon

Easter 7B/Sunday after Ascension

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Today is the Seventh Sunday of Easter, also known as the Sunday after the Ascension. Unfortunately we don't get my favorite Ascension passage this year. That would be where Jesus meets with the disciples, gives them Luke's version of the Great Commission, and then - whoosh - up into the clouds he disappears. My favorite part is where the disciples are standing around looking up and two angels (men in white robes) show up asking, "Why do you stand here gazing up to heaven?" We don't get that story this year.

This year we hear how the disciples filled the position vacated by Judas.

At the first General Convention, Peter explains how they got to this place - that the scriptures had to be fulfilled which foretold of Judas and Jesus. So now they needed to find a replacement to fill that position. They didn't want just anybody, so Peter gave a list of qualifications necessary for the job. First, it had to be a man, even though all the men had run away and it was the women who first returned to the tomb and first reported the Resurrection. Second, he had to be present from Christ's baptism by John through the Ascension. For us who read this, we might wonder how things could have been different if a woman, say . . . Mary Magdalene, had been chosen to fill the position. It also makes us realize that there were more disciples than just the typical twelve.

Nevertheless, the qualifications Peter put forward resulted in two names: Joseph Barsabbas, aka Justus; and Matthias. They prayed, cast lots, and Matthias was chosen to replace Judas. As Easter comes to a close this week, I want to spend some time with Matthias, the disciple who was present from the beginning and selected to take the place of Judas.

Think back to all the gospel stories, and other New Testament stories from Acts to Revelation, that you've heard over the years. Think back to bible studies and discussions. What do you know about Matthias? What story stands out about this man chosen to take the place of Judas? Don't worry if you can't think of any, because there are none. Today's story about the selection of Matthias is the first and last time he appears in Scripture. There's an apocryphal story that he traveled to Ethiopia where he was crucified. Another tradition says he was stoned and beheaded in Jerusalem. He may have been one of the 70 sent out by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Today he is the patron saint of carpenters, tailors, and those praying for perseverance and hope. Over the years, I have also maintained that Matthias should be the patron saint of every Christian.

First, why carpenters and tailors? Think about what those two professions do. They build things. They stitch things together. Sometimes they create plain things that are practical, and sometimes they create extraordinarily beautiful things. And whether plain or beautiful, we can admire and appreciate what has been created often without knowing who built it or stitched it together. We don't need to know who did the work to appreciate the work done.

Matthias is also the patron saint of those in prayer for perseverance and hope. This is a perfect role for him because he persevered in the faith, never losing hope in the power of the resurrection.

Matthias should be the patron saint of every one of us here. We are working to build something beautiful. We are working to stitch together a fabric of faith that is beautiful and protective. What we build and what we stitch together can be supportive and comforting, but it can also be challenging. And in 100 or 150 years, very few of us will be remembered. Most of us will have faded away into distant memory, a part of the great cloud of witnesses unknown to most people. Unknown, but still a vital part of the Church, and still called by God to serve.

In our own journey, we persevere. This thing called Christianity isn't easy. We may have been lulled into that way of thinking by any number of things, but it was never supposed to be easy. From the early days of persecution and martyrdom to today where we face indifference or ridicule for following an unpopular path, our faith requires perseverance. It is not up to us to shutter the doors. It's up to us to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ in a way people may not have heard.

That perseverance is lined with hope. We hope our message is heard. We hope we touch lives. We hope we inspire others to look into and question the faith.

This was Matthias. He was a disciple of Jesus from the time of Jesus' baptism until his ascension. He persevered in the faith. He placed his hope in the resurrection. He helped build up followers of Christ and the early Church. He helped outfit the people with whom he came into contact and clothed them for their own journey. He did all of this in virtual obscurity. The only thing we know about him for sure is that he was called by God to serve.

Isn't this reflective of most of us? We have been called by God to serve. We are working to build up the Church of God. We help to clothe others for that journey. We persevere in our faith and live in the hope of the resurrection.

Today, on this Sunday after the Ascension, we remember a man who is primarily known for being nothing more than a faithful follower of Christ. May we all strive to follow the

example of Matthias because, quite honestly, being a faithful follower who perseveres in hope is often the most difficult thing we do.

Amen.