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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/17/2015, The Seventh Sunday of Easter
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26, John 17:6-19

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon this morning is about a man named Matthias. We read about him in our First Lesson, from Acts 1:

²⁶And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was enrolled with the eleven apostles. (Acts 1:26, RSV)¹

MATTHIAS — HIS WAS A GENEROUS SOUL

If you were to do a concordance search on the name “Matthias,” you’d find that we never again hear of the man. He is enrolled in a very distinguished group: the college of apostles. And I hope that he served faithfully in his ministry. But he did not gain renown for his work. He lived, served the Lord, and died, and the rest of us never hear tell of him again. We just have this brief mention of him in Acts.

But I figure that’s alright. Most of us will try to serve Jesus faithfully all our days, but few of us will be long remembered. Still, of such faithful service, the Church is made and the world is made better.

There is one good thing we can certainly say about Matthias: his was a generous soul. The man had hung in there a good long time. He was with Jesus and the rest from the beginning – our text says that he was with them from the baptism of John until the Ascension of Jesus — but only now does he begin to shine. In a way, he has been second string all this time. He’s been waiting on the bench. But he murmurs no word of complaint when he is enrolled with the Twelve. He does not exclaim, “Well, it’s about time!” And he does not pout: “Oh, *now* you come to me and want me to join your group – now that Jesus has left and ascended into heaven!” No, Matthias simply and humbly is enrolled in the college of apostles, turns to his ministry, and life goes on.

ST. PETER — RECONSTITUTING THE TWELVE

This story is set somewhere within those ten days between the Ascension of our Lord and Pentecost Sunday. The followers of Jesus are gathered in Jerusalem. That’s where Jesus had told them to wait for the Holy Spirit to come upon them.²

¹ This sermon was inspired by a sermon by dear old pastor, Rev. Raymond Shaheen, “A Man Named Matthias,” back in 1962.

² ³To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. ⁴And while staying

So, they wait. But they are mindful that something stupendous is about to happen to them – the Holy Spirit is soon to be outpoured on them -- and that they are soon to launch out on the adventure of ministry in the name of Jesus. Peter wants to get them ready for this. He wants to complete their number. He wants to reconstitute the Twelve, representative of the twelve tribes of Israel. Eleven will not do. Eleven does not seem right. Judas has died, by suicide. The betrayer of our Lord is gone. Peter wants to fill his place so that the apostolic college will seem full and ready to go.

It turns out that Matthias is not the only anonymous saint gathered there in Jerusalem. The Bible says that there were about one hundred and twenty disciples in that gathering (Acts 1:15). Most of them we do not know. We will have to wait till heaven to get to meet them and to hear their story. I hope that they will think well of us. They were a heroic generation. They were the founders of the church. They were the ones who believed in Jesus when everything was still barebones – when there were no lovely church buildings or beautiful vestments and paraments, when the sophisticated and skeptical Roman empire considered them to be idiots, out of synch with the modern world, and perhaps even a danger to society. These one hundred and twenty early disciples were our ancestors in the faith, and it will be an honor to meet them in heaven someday. But while they were on earth, these folks were like Matthias. Compared to the Twelve, they were on the bench, quiet, and unknown. But when Matthias, one of those benchwarmers, was called forward, he stepped up. He was enrolled among the Twelve.

STEPPING INTO THE GAP

Matthias is the patron saint of those who step forward into the gap. And in this, he is the patron saint of each of us, for the church is always losing someone, and the church always needs someone else to step forward and take the place. You and I are like that. We have stepped into the gap of leadership in the world and in the church. And someday, God willing, there will be someone else to step in the gap when you and I have departed.

You might well have experience of that in your vocation. After years of faithful work, you might be made a partner in your law firm or medical practice. You might gain tenure in your teaching position. You might become Captain in your firehouse or police department. You have taken the place of someone who has departed. And someday you will depart too. God willing, there will be someone good to take your place.

with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me, ⁵for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 1:3-5, RSV)

CONFIRMATION SUNDAY

This matter of people departing and others stepping forward is much on my mind these days as I think about our upcoming Confirmation liturgy. It is next Sunday — Pentecost Sunday. Bishop Robert Rimbo will be here for that. We scheduled this day two years ago and have been looking forward to it all along. It is a moving event in the life of our young ones when they publicly confess their faith in Christ and we pray for the stirring up of the Holy Spirit in them. So for them, for these young people, their Holy Confirmation is a good and moving thing. But for the rest of us, their Confirmation is also a good and moving thing... because we are getting older, and we are getting more tired. And for all we know, the span of our lives is dwindling. But our love for the world and our love for the church remains strong, and so we know that we need Matthias. We are like Saint Peter of old: We know we need a Matthias to be enrolled among us. We need someone to step into the gap.

Interestingly, *we* were young once too, which means that there were people back then who were hoping and praying that we would prove to be Matthias – that we would be the ones to step forward into love – love for our neighbors and love for the church. You have all done so in some measure, and you have reason to take some satisfaction in that. But if time and strength remain, perhaps we can be even better Matthiases. Our world and our church sure needs such people.

So, come Confirmation Sunday, May 24, as we watch our young people being prayed for, let us pray for ourselves the same good prayer we pray for them: that is, let us whisper a prayer for ourselves that the Holy Spirit will be *stirred up* in us too in the years that remain. For we do not want to be dull and listless in serving Christ. The world and the church need more from us than that. We need to let ourselves burn even more with the Spirit of Jesus, manifesting something of him in this old world, helping our neighbors thereby and bringing some glory to him who deserves glory, even Jesus Christ our Lord, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.