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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 12, 2024
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
Matthias

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

“And the lot fell on Matthias.”

The story in Acts of how Matthias became the thirteenth apostle has always intrigued me. And not just because I am partial to the name. After all the drama with Judas, including some which is simplified in today’s reading, maybe because the people who put together the lectionary decided we have had enough of Judas at this point in the church year... after all that drama, Matthias gets elected to replace him and then is never heard from again. You could almost miss this story in all the excitement between the Ascension and Pentecost.

But I am glad that the lectionary includes this story, because I believe it tells us something important about how God works in the Church and in our lives.

Now even if we have indeed had just about enough of Judas, we have to acknowledge how much his betrayal hurt. It hurt Jesus of course. Of all the awful things that happened during His passion, even with all the physical pain and torture, I bet it was Judas’s actions that wounded Him most deeply. To be betrayed to death by one of your closest companions, to have supped with the one who would later that night look you in the eye and deliver you to your enemies... That must have cut Jesus to His core.

But I think we forget sometimes that Judas’s betrayal also hurt the other disciples. They have been a band of brothers for more than three years, and none of them saw it coming. Judas walked out on them, too, the night of the Last Supper. And by going to the Sanhedrin to sell out his Lord, Judas also brought public shame on Jesus and His disciples. His actions could have undermined the witness of the apostles and brought suspicion on the Church from the beginning. It is only by God’s grace that Judas did not do more damage, and his tragic end reminds us how dreadful it is to turn your back on God.

But the disciples do not let this betrayal derail them from their mission. That is a good lesson for us, too. There is probably nothing in this world that is as painful and demoralizing as being betrayed by someone you trust. This is true

in personal relationships, and it is true in corporate and institutional settings as well. When a spouse has an affair, a friend turns her back on you, an employee steals from you, a trusted youth leader molests your child... these are betrayals that can so blindsides and crush us that life comes crashing to a halt. If this happens to you, remember that Jesus knows what it is like to be stabbed in the back. And Jesus is the One Who can help you heal; He is the One Who is always faithful and Who can bring good from even the darkest sorts of treachery.

But back to Acts. The disciples know they need to replace Judas. Their number, twelve, is significant. It mirrors the twelve tribes of Israel. They cannot afford to wallow in grief and anger over Judas; there is work to be done. Immediately after Jesus is taken back up to heaven, they gather together in the upper room where they have been staying and they begin to pray and ask for God's guidance. This includes the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and His brothers. This detail, that they came together in "one accord with prayer and supplication," is included in the verse right before where today's text begins, and I wanted to point it out. The first action a Christian should take before any decision or in response to any difficulty is to pray.

And this is where Matthias comes in. We know nothing about him, other than his name, but he is one of two candidates proposed by the large group of disciples (the text says there were about 120), the other being a man named Joseph called Barsabbas. The only piece of information we have about either man is that both had accompanied Jesus for the duration of His ministry. So both could legitimately fit the bill as eyewitnesses and thus as apostles. As both candidates were equally well-qualified for the job, the disciples cast lots, and the lot fell on Matthias.

This might seem strange to us. Drawing straws, basically, to make such an important decision? Wouldn't it have made more sense to put the matter to a vote? Better yet, why not have each candidate give a little speech to explain why he is the one best qualified for the job? This is a really crucial role in the history of Christendom here. Icons will be made of this apostle. Churches will be named after him. Shouldn't the candidates at least have to give their personal testimony, or maybe explain to the group their own action plan for evangelizing and spreading the gospel, so that the other disciples can make an informed choice? And shouldn't there be other people who get up and vouch for his character and credentials?

In other words, shouldn't the new apostle be chosen on the basis of his merit?

The reason I think that this story is instructional for us as a church and as individuals is that it reveals something important about this notion of merit and what it means for our own life of discipleship.

As a society, we are divided about a lot of things. We are polarized over issues of race, religion, politics, and a whole host of social issues. But if you are really looking for a fight, try debating the legitimacy of meritocracy with a cross section of the American public.

A meritocracy is a society run by people chosen on the basis of their skills, abilities, or accomplishments. For much of American history, this was a big selling point. The European countries that the first colonists and immigrants left behind were not meritocracies at all. They were countries, England being the primary example, where class and station determined your lot in life. Read a Charles Dickens or a Jane Austen novel, and you will be struck by how much your inherited wealth and social standing could dictate the course of your life, what profession you held, whom you could marry, and what circles you could belong to.

Many immigrants came to this country because it was seen as a land of opportunity. It was a place where you could make your own way, and it all depended on your intelligence and willingness to work hard. I think most of us now would acknowledge it was never so simple. In addition to our shameful history of slavery and racism, in which people of color were disenfranchised almost entirely, there were many other obstacles to success that affected some groups of people more than others.

As a nation, we have come a long way in providing equal opportunities for all races and ethnicities. That is to be celebrated. But as many folks are quick to point out, there are still barriers and overt and covert forms of inequality that undermine the ability of some people to succeed on the basis of merit alone.

So today, we find ourselves in the midst of a vicious cultural fight. Some people deny the very possibility of a true meritocracy and they demand policies that will even the playing field for groups who they feel get left behind. Others cry for a return to meritocracy and a society where the smartest and most ambitious are rewarded and no one is granted any special privileges.

No, I am not going to weigh in on this debate! For one, the situation is far more complicated than my speedy little summary makes it seem, and for another, it is not my place or my calling to comment on political or sociological issues.

But as I was thinking about today's texts, it struck me that the story of how Matthias became the thirteenth apostle has something to say to us about the role of merit, talent, and personal accomplishment in our lives as Christians.

For one, Matthias is chosen in a manner very similar to the way the first twelve apostles were handpicked by Jesus. It seems random, but we know that Jesus had His reasons. We also know, from the stories of the other apostles, that they were not high status or impressively talented individuals. They are distinguished by their ordinariness. But they learned from their Master (and from their mistakes!) and so they grow into the roles that Jesus calls them to.

None of the original apostles have a dramatic backstory, either. Only Saint Paul fits this bill, and his backstory as a persecutor of the church is not flattering in the least! The others are unremarkable and aside from their willingness to be martyred for their faith (for tradition says that all but John were martyred) they stayed unremarkable. And Matthias may just be the most unremarkable of all. As soon as he is elected, he fades again into obscurity. Being a disciple, even one of THE TWELVE disciples, is not a path to personal glory or status. It is not an opportunity to indulge in worldly ambition. It is a chance to heed Jesus's call to a life of service.

On the other hand, it is not that abilities and gifts *don't* matter in the church. The book of Acts alone is packed with the names of individuals who stand out for their leadership ability or other spiritual gifts that they use to build up the church. As Saint Paul reminds us, "the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body." (1 Cor 12:12) It does not matter if you are Jew or Greek, slave or free, high-born or low-born, male or female, MENSA smart or below average, you play an indispensable role in the society that is the Body of Christ. God does not choose you on the basis of your gifts, but He wants you to use the gifts He gave you to serve Him and others.

This is most certainly true in the church. Some are called to be prophets, some to be teachers, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors, says Paul. (Eph 4:11) Can we not extend this to the rest of our lives? Some He calls to be doctors, some to be auto mechanics, some to be artists and some to be accountants, some to be fathers and mothers, some to work a job to care for their family, some to volunteer their time to minister to strangers. Some people will find great satisfaction and success in their career, and some will drift from job to job. Paul himself made tents on the side, and we never even find out if he was the best tentmaker in town. I suspect not, since his energy was directed elsewhere! Not every career path is glamorous; not everyone

will achieve riches, fame, or status in this world. And no one, no one, is less precious in the sight of God on account of what they do or do not accomplish.

We are only too painfully aware that secular society has its winners and losers. Whether you are for or against meritocracy, there is no political system or ideology that will ever change that simple fact. But the Christian church is a counterculture. It is not designed by God to be a mirror of the world but a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven. And in this counterculture, the operative word is not merit but grace.

It is grace that saves. It is grace that sanctifies. It is from God's grace that we receive our talents and gifts, and it is by His grace that we learn to put them to use. It is grace at work when remarkable people share their knowledge and skills with the world: inventors, artists, surgeons, builders, and others whose abilities make the world a better place. And it is on account of grace that we understand that the people who seem to have *nothing* to offer, who have not achieved any measure of worldly success, are equally precious in the sight of the Lord. The secular world often operates as though life were a zero-sum game, a competition for limited resources in which only a few can come out on top, but Jesus says the last shall be first and the first last, and all are welcome to come to His table and receive the grace He offers freely.

The story of Matthias, chosen by lots, is a story of grace. Grace directed the decision to choose him and not Barsabbas, and surely it was grace that gave him the courage and the ability to carry out his mission. The same is true for all the apostles and all the disciples from the book of Acts down to the present day.

Remember that wherever you are in life, whatever your status, however much you have or have not benefited from privilege, wealth, intelligence, good looks or good luck, in Christ, you have everything. In Christ, you are chosen. The lots have been cast, and you are one of the disciples.

So how will you use this privilege? How will you use your gifts? How will you serve your Lord?

Remember that the Church is a counterculture. It is here that we are being molded into citizens of heaven, not learning to conform to the ways of the world. In God's Kingdom, there are no winners or losers, no place for vain ambition, personal striving, or cutthroat competition. Here you are accepted not on account of your merit but on account of Christ's grace. But that doesn't mean that the world does not need you, your love, your faith, and your God-given gifts, to improve society and to point people to the Giver of all gifts and

source of all grace. As a disciple, you should cultivate your gifts for the benefit of your brothers and sisters in Christ and for the betterment of all. Always remember that you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Whatever your gifts are, be they mighty or humble, the world would be a sadder, darker place if you were to keep them hidden away.

To Jesus, Giver of the greatest gift of all, be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.