

Message for the Last Sunday of Eastertide: Gods Will Will Be Done. Based on Acts 1: 15-17, 20-26

We've been reading the book of the Acts of the Apostles for each of these 6 Sundays after Easter. And I have yet to preach on any of the readings from Acts—until this week. So, I thought it good to understand some of the basics of this book.

Do you know who is said to have written the book of Acts? It is attributed to the same writer as the gospel of Luke; in some circles it's considered the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Here's why scholars think this.

**Luke 1** <sup>1</sup>Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup>just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, <sup>3</sup>I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup>so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

**Acts 1** <sup>1</sup>In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning <sup>2</sup>until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup>While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; <sup>5</sup>for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

Hearing this may lead you to wonder 'Who was Theophilus'? Scholars think that he may have been an early church patron who supported Luke or a supporter of the early church, or it is also speculated that it could really be anyone who is in search of understanding of Christ. When we break the name down

→ *Theo*: Greek for God    *philus*: from the Greek word *phileos*, love, as in love for one's brothers & sisters

→ So, Theophilus means one who loves God!

The book of the Acts of the Apostles is the history of the early church, it's a time of trial & tribulation—all the challenges and successes of putting organization into what is becoming a New Way of Living, living out a life of faith based on the teachings of Jesus the Christ. The book of Acts documents the early Church's history and was written about 80-90 AD. So, there's the basics about the book of Acts.

Now, our text for **today** begins with "In those days Peter stood up among the believers..." Which is an unusual way to begin any reading, as it begs the question: In which days? So, we need to put that too into context. And the easiest way to do that is to simply read the few verses that come before where our gospel reading started from. I'll be reading from a contemporary translation (CEV) Acts chapter one, verse three.

<sup>3</sup>For forty days after Jesus had suffered and died, he proved in many ways that he had been raised from death. He appeared to his apostles and spoke to them about God's kingdom. <sup>4</sup>While he was still with them, he said: Don't leave Jerusalem yet. Wait here for the Father to give you the Holy Spirit, just as I told you he has promised to do. <sup>5</sup>John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. <sup>6</sup>While the apostles were still with Jesus, they asked him, "Lord, are you now going to give Israel its own king again?" <sup>7</sup>Jesus said to them, "You don't need to know the time of those events that only the Father controls. <sup>8</sup>But the Holy Spirit will come upon you and give you power. Then you will tell everyone about me in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and everywhere in the world." <sup>9</sup>After Jesus had said this and while they were watching, he was taken up into a cloud. They could not see him, <sup>10</sup>but as he went up, they kept looking up into the sky. Suddenly two men dressed in white clothes were standing there beside them. <sup>11</sup>They said, "Why are you men from Galilee standing here and looking up into the sky? Jesus has been taken to heaven. But he will come back in the same way that you have seen him go."<sup>12-13</sup> The Mount of Olives was about half a mile from Jerusalem. The apostles who had gone there were Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon...and Judas the son of James.

After the apostles returned to the city, they went upstairs to the room where they had been staying. <sup>14</sup>The apostles often met together and prayed with a single purpose in mind. The women and Mary the mother of Jesus would meet with them, and so would his brothers.

So, **those** were the days where our reading starts; during the 40 days after Jesus was resurrected, during which Jesus spent more time teaching his followers in his resurrected state. So on day 40, according to Luke, he ascended into heaven. If you look at the church calendar for this month, you would note that the day of the Ascension of the Lord was this past Thursday. And today, being the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter, is why we read this scripture from Acts on this day in the church calendar. Jesus has ascended, but has not yet sent the promised Holy Spirit to come among them. When does that happen? Pentecost—50 days after Easter and we celebrate that next Sunday.

So, it was in those in-between days that the 11 apostles along with the other believers began re-grouping, preparing, figuring out how to do the mission and ministry that Jesus had commanded them to do, while they were awaiting for the Holy Spirit to come upon them and empower them. And rather than waiting around, twiddling their thumbs, they began planning, organizing, structuring a system of how to proceed with this new Way of Jesus. They began with the leadership of those to whom Jesus had specifically called and allotted to them his ministry—the apostles. And they were 1 short, and they felt it necessary to bring the number back up to 12. Peter seems to have emerged as the leader and spokesperson, however he doesn't choose the replacement. Instead the apostles go to the larger group of believers, searching for their input for someone to replace Judas Iscariot. So, why was it important to them to have 12 in the leadership team? Well, Jesus chose 12 disciples, there were 12 tribes of Israel, it seems they felt strongly that continuity was important, a connection to the distant and longer term past. Peter even goes to scripture, to the book of Psalms in fact (69.25) for justification of their decision: 'Let his home become desolate, with no one living in it.' It also says, 'Let someone else take his position.'

They also felt it necessary to have among the 12 a follower who had been with Jesus for the entire time of his ministry, from his baptism to his resurrection. Two men were proposed, Justus and Matthias. Then they prayed and asked for God's intervention and then cast lots! Now, there's a process. They didn't vote, but gambled for it -- rolled the dice! Now while this is bizarre for our way of thinking, according to one source I read, not at all uncommon and quite acceptable for the time.<sup>1</sup> It was considered as a way for God to intervene by controlling the dice to determine the outcome. So, Matthias wins, and interestingly, we never hear of him again<sup>2</sup>. And also of interest, the need to replace the other original apostles as they die doesn't continue as part of the ongoing organizational structure of the Church.<sup>3</sup>

So what are we to make of all of this, what are we to take out of this scripture passage? Was a 12<sup>th</sup> apostle really needed? Were they actually fulfilling God's will in choosing a replacement, or is this a biblical example using scripture to prove a point? You really can use the bible to prove just about anything you want. Should the 11 have waited for the promised Holy Spirit to come upon them before making decisions such as this? And you know, this is one of those biblical discussions you could argue round and round, without being able to come to a solid conclusion. The various commentators I read this week each hold differing opinions on this, so what are we to make of all this?

Well, let's look at what we do know.

We have a group of believers who are sincere in their desire to live the Way of Christ.

The leadership connected together to plan the future on behalf of the larger group of believers.

Give them credit, in good faith, the 11 agreed with a decision to move forward, admittedly based on a past model, and took it to the membership for ratification. The membership agreed and made a choice—they put forward 2 names. And

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Lindeman: Commentary on Acts 1: 15-17,21-26 from

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3659](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3659). Accessed May 9.18

<sup>2</sup> Noel Leo Erskine in Theological Perspective for Acts 1: 15-17,21-26 in Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol 2. p. 530

<sup>3</sup> A. Katherin Grieb in Exegetical Perspective for Acts 1: 15-17,21-26 in Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol 2. p. 531

then they prayed. They prayed for God's intervention on their intentions. And what happens? Well, the church is born, the Way of Christ spreads. If you read Acts there is much derision and contention about how the church proceeds in those early days. A very big issue was if it was necessary to follow Jewish laws to be a follower of this new way, to be a follower of Jesus? The model of the 12 tribes of Israel for the Church rather falls by the wayside. As time goes by, Paul's influence on the early church increases—and he wasn't one of the first 12 apostles either, which was also a point of great argument. We hear less of Peter and the other apostle's leadership. And yet, the church grows, the gospel of Christ spreads.

What strikes me is the similarities between then and now, some 2 millennia later. There is most definitely a model of faithfulness there for us to follow, maybe without the rolling of the dice method! We too have congregations with a group of leaders doing their best to make decisions on behalf of the larger group, and bringing those decisions to the larger group to vote on and then help to implement as we move forward as disciples of Jesus. Do things go the way we figure they will? Not always. Do we always make the right decisions? Probably not. But, do we move forward in good faith, seeking the path that Jesus would have us on, doing God's will in seeking and bringing the Kingdom of Heaven on earth?

That is what is crucial, are we doing what Christ has called us to as a community of faith. Are we doing the Mission and Ministry of Christ? That's what it means to be a church, believing in Jesus the Christ, and move forward in that faith in the one who loves and forgives us, doing all that we can with the gifts we have been given, listening for and being open to the movement and direction of the Holy Spirit, searching the scriptures for God's word and praying together for God's wisdom and God's will for us. Because we know, God's will will always be done. Amen.

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