

Filling the Gaps

John 17:1-12

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. 2 For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. 3 Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

4 I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. 5 And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

6 "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. 8 For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.

9 I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. 10 All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them.

11 I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name-- the name you gave me-- so that they may be one as we are one. 12 While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

Acts 1:12-26

2 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. 13 When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

15 In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) 16 and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus-- 17 he was one of our number and shared in this ministry."

18 (With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. 19 Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that

is, Field of Blood.)

20 "For," said Peter, "it is written in the book of Psalms, "'May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,' and, "'May another take his place of leadership.'

21 Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

23 So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. 24 Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen 25 to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs."

26 Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

In John 17, Jesus prays for his disciples. For those whom he has called, and taught, those whom Jesus traveled with, and trained to carry on in the ministry of spreading the Good News – Jesus prays a special blessing. A blessing for God's providence, and God's protection.

I have kept them safe, Jesus tells the Father, and as I take leave of them now, to come into your presence, I ask that you would do the same, for none have been lost, Jesus says, save one.

That one, of course, is Judas, one of the 12 disciples, Jesus' closest companions. It was Judas who went to Jesus' enemies, and for a fee of 30 silver coins, negotiated Jesus' capture in the garden of Gethsemane, telling them that he would betray Jesus, identify him in the darkness, with a kiss.

Through the course of Jesus' torture, trial, and execution, not much is said about Judas, other than a reference in Matt. 27, which says,

3 When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. 4 "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." 5 So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

6 The chief priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money." 7 So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. 8 That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day.

You may have noticed that the verses we read today, from the book of Acts, tell a different ending to Judas' story. In Acts, Judas dies in the field that purchased with those ill-gotten gains.

Why the difference?

I can't tell you.

What I can say is that the inconsistencies between Matthew and Acts are likely for the same reason that each of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, differ in the order and in the details by which they tell of Jesus' birth, life, ministry, and death.

We can look at Acts in the same way because the Acts of the Apostles, as it is fully titled, is really just volume 2 of the Gospel according to Luke. If you look at the introduction to Acts, verse 1:1 this is what you read, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach 2 until the day he was taken up to heaven..."

Go back and look at the opening of Luke's Gospel, you'll see that it too is addressed to

this same mysterious “Theophilus.”

Why, when the books of the New Testament were being set down and put into the order we have them today, they didn't make Luke the last gospel, so that the two butted up against each other, or made the title of Acts something clearer, like “Luke, Part II” or “Luke, the sequel” I haven't the least idea.

Acts takes up story of Jesus and his disciples starting with a day 40 days after Jesus' resurrection, the day when Jesus leaves earth, and rises into heaven. This event marks a holiday that was celebrated on Thursday of this week by many Christian churches, the Feast of the Ascension.

By starting Acts where he does, Luke sets up a great contrast between his first and second books.

Luke's Gospel begins with Jesus' arrival; we see a leader with no followers.

Acts begins with Jesus' departure, leaving a group of followers (about 120 we are told) without a visible leader.

The beginning of Luke's Gospel begs the question, “What is God up to?” Acts opens with Jesus' small band of disciples wondering, “Where do we go from here?”

I find Acts a very interesting book because that question, “Where do I go from here?” is one that I ask an awful lot.

As we read in today's passage, one of the first questions the disciples take up is what to do about the empty seat that Judas' death has left behind.

Why was that important? Why did Peter feel that it was necessary that there be 12 disciples, why bother trying to reconstitute the exact number Jesus chose?

There were only 120 Christians in the entire world at that time, what difference would it make if there were 11 apostles or 12?

The answer has much to do with the event that follows in Acts chapter 2, which we will celebrate during our service next week, the descending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Here in Acts Luke says that the primary job of an apostle is to witness, to testify, to talk to others about Jesus' resurrection.

When the Spirit comes to them, giving them power to speak in other languages, the first people Jesus' apostles witness to are fellow Jews, the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel. Having 12 apostles to mirror the 12 historic tribes of God's special people gives credence and credit to their claim that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise, the Messiah and Savior long awaited for. Having 12 apostles maintains continuity with the history of the Jewish people, the first ones to hear and receive God's invitation to new life in Jesus Christ.

So the 11 gather the believers together; they call a congregational meeting to order. Two persons are nominated for the position – Joseph, also called Barsabbas, also called Justus, and Matthias.

These two having been seconded, and confirmed, Peter, their moderator, entertained a motion to close nominations.

(Any of this sound familiar? What, you think we made up the way we do things all by ourselves?)

And then what did the disciples do? Do they vote? Do they call the question?

No.

Instead, Luke says, they pray. They ask God to make his will known. "O Lord," they pray, "you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these believers, this guy with three names, or this other guy with just one, that you want us to call "apostle," that you want to stand for you and for your church."

And after they pray, then do they take the vote?

No.

Instead of asking for a show of hands, instead of passing out pencils and ballots, what does Luke say that they do?

They cast lots. They didn't cast votes, they cast lots. Two altogether different things. Casting a vote is putting your own opinion forward. Making your voice heard.

Casting lots, on the other hand, is a lot like rolling a dice. Like pulling a ticket out of a hat. Like playing bingo. You're not in charge of the result. God is. The only choice you make is that you agree to abide by the result.

Strange as it may sound, God's people had been making important decisions this way for a long time already. All the way back to the time of Moses, when the God's people were still wandering around in the desert, on their way from Egypt to the promised land, the chief priest wore a special container around his neck from which he would cast lots. The lots even had special names, as described in Exod. 28:30, where God

instructs Moses to,

“put the Urim and the Thummim in the breastpiece, so they may be over Aaron's heart whenever he enters the presence of the LORD. Thus Aaron will always bear the means of making decisions for the Israelites over his heart before the LORD.”

The Bible doesn't contain a single detailed description of what Urim and Thummim looked like, what they were made of, even of exactly how they were used or interpreted. Yet there are many examples of how God's people depended on them, on casting lots, to determine God's will – what God would have them do, where God would have them go.

Especially during this election year, that may strike our American democratic sensibilities as really odd – perhaps even as careless, as just plain stupid. But that's how it was.

And that, Acts says, is how Matthias was chosen. How he was selected to take Judas' place at the table of the 12 apostles called and chosen by Jesus Christ. The decision was made by casting lots – by drawing straws, by flipping a coin. And then, once elected, Matthias is never mentioned in the Bible again. That's right, this passage is the first and last and only direct reference to Matthias in all of Scripture.

What can we take from all of this?

First, its a good reminder that the church, that the body of Jesus Christ which remains visible and present in the world, is not a democratic one. (That's democratic with a small D.)

Jesus is no longer physically present with us, his followers, but still we are called to

follow in his footsteps, to follow his lead, and his alone. We are the body. Christ is the head. In case the metaphor isn't already clear, the head is where the eyes and the brain are. The feet and the hands, the arms and the legs, the heart and the stomach, they go where the head tells them.

The church, each and every congregation of it, belongs to Jesus. As such, the church runs not on popularity polls or majority opinion, but according to the will of it's Savior and Lord.

Secondly, any decision that comes before the church must start with prayer. The believers in Acts cast lots, but only after they pray. Only after they communed with, sought the advice of, only after they listened for God's voice did they seek an answer.

We would be wise, as a church, and as individual members, to act less and pray more. Speaking for myself, and my wife will gladly attest to this if you want to ask her, I am sure I could have avoided so much backtracking, so many do-over's, so many mistakes and course corrections, if only I had stopped first. Stopped and prayed. Stopped and listened. Stopped and given God the chance to show what he wanted, what he willed. But if you're like me, you think it's just so much easier to just plow on ahead. Until you realize that you've no idea where you're plowing to, or why.

I've also been thinking about this passage in light of where our congregation, where this church is at. The past few years have brought many changes to this church – changes in leadership, both pastoral and of elders. We've had a change of treasurer, a change of Clerk of Session. It's brought changes in who's here on Sunday morning, new faces mixing in with the old-timers, stealing their pews, taking their parking spots.

As far as I can tell, all these changes, both the additions and the replacements, will continue into the future. In two weeks, I'll be installed. This temporary pastoral

relationship will become more permanent. You might be stuck with me for a long while. And I with you. Let's pray for each other.

We are still in need of a choir director, organist. Brittany is wonderful, a God-sent gift, but graduating in a few short weeks. Need to pray for that. Pray for her, as she anticipates the next role God prepared for her. We should all be in prayer, daily, asking for what God would have us do with our music, and with whom.

We have new people coming to worship, to live in faith with us. They find this church not by our will, but by God's hand at work for God's special purpose, for their lives, and for life of this church. Let us pray for them. For their full inclusion into this church family. For our openness to their ideas, insights, their calling to serve as Jesus' witnesses in this place, even perhaps in a way that has - gasp - never been done that way before.

Just as God has a hand in creating gaps, in our church and in our lives, so too God has a hand in filling them. May our eyes be open to that process, to God's plan, and may we meet those changes with our knees bent in prayer, our hearts filled with the hope of Jesus' constant presence with us, and with our bodies wholly committed to God's care.

22 Cast your **cares** on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.
Psalm 55:22