

May 12th, 2024

Acts 1:15-26 “Leadership by Lottery”

Judas Iscariot isn't a name that we bring up in church very much. He was one of 12 disciples who made up the inner circle of Jesus' ministry. He's best known as “the betrayer.” He's become the poster-boy for all sorts of moral lessons that the church has come up with over the centuries. As a pastor, I've counseled grieving families struggling with a loved one who has taken their own life. Sometimes the family's biggest fear in cases like this is the status of their loved one's eternal fate. I'll ask, “Why is that a concern for you?” They'll say, “Well, it's the unforgivable sin.” I like to think I'm knowledgeable when it comes to the Bible. There are five times in scripture that mention people taking their own life. Four in the Old Testament, one in the New Testament. *None* of these examples label the act as an “unforgiveable sin.” But I'll still ask, “Where do you get this idea?” And the answer is usually, “Well ... you know ... *Judas*.” Okay. What about him? “Well, he betrayed Jesus.” Yes. For 30 pieces of silver, he told the religious authorities where Jesus would be when he came to Jerusalem so that they could arrest him. “And he took his own life.” Correct. That's in Matthew's gospel, chapter 27. The New Revised Standard says, “When Judas, Jesus' betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, ‘I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.’ They said, ‘What is that to us? See to it yourself.’ And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.” Yes. Then the chief priests decided that they couldn't use that money as a temple offering, so they used it to buy a field where they could bury strangers. And then there's this story about how the man who bought the field had a messy accident that spilled blood on the field which fulfilled a prophesy from the book of Psalms. I still don't see how this relates to the eternal fate of your loved one. “Well, that's what I've always heard in my church growing up.” A-hah. There it is. It wasn't the first time nor would it or will it be the last time that the church filled in the blanks of

a biblical story to create a doctrine that adds additional trauma to loved ones who are grieving. Call that my mental health moments for mission.

Here's what concerns *me* about Judas – If God knows everything in advance and controls everything absolutely, how could it be that this all-knowing God chose a man who would reject and betray the disciples' mission by turning Jesus over to his enemies? And how could an all-powerful God who led Jesus to carefully choose these twelve apostles ... these men who would become the new patriarchs and representative leadership of God's reign on earth so carelessly lose one of them and be left with only eleven?

Judas' story raises all sorts of questions about Jesus too! How could Judas, who was chosen to be one of the privileged insiders of Jesus' earthly ministry fail to be fully persuaded that Jesus was God's chosen one? How could this be? And for all of us, from then to now, what does Judas's defection and the early church's response to it mean for our understanding of ministry and leadership in the church? And, while I'm on a roll, why didn't the disciples simply ask the Risen Christ about what they should do to replace Judas? According to Luke's gospel, they had forty days to ask him. That's an important biblical number ... almost as important as twelve. They had twelve apostles, but now there's only eleven. We've got to fix that! Why didn't Jesus just tell them who to appoint if it's so important to have twelve apostles? They clearly understood the mission of Jesus and the ministry that he was leaving to them in the context of that expectation. Twelve. Not eleven. Now the first thing this brand-new church of Jesus has to do is come up with a replacement for Judas. See, *this* is what interests me about Judas! This is worth investigating, and it does not involve traumatizing grieving families! Are we on board for this train ride? Okay!

The first thing I want to point out is that the way Luke tells this story makes it clear that Judas' failure didn't rule him out from returning and being accepted as one of the twelve. Judas' death made that impossible though. Luke deliberately lets us know that Peter is the one who failed

Jesus in a big way. But he lived. He repented and emerged forgiven and restored. He is now the key leader of this brand-new movement. Judas and Peter both failed. Both had turned their backs on Jesus. But only one had sought and accepted Jesus's mercy. Judas went to the religious leaders to seek forgiveness and found none. Peter sought and received forgiveness from the Risen Christ. Now, let me be clear as someone who has served on many clergy ethics committees: There are situations where leaders should have their standing taken away. I get that. But I also want to point out that all leaders in the church are failures in some way, shape, or form including me. That being said, I want to remind you that the leadership that Jesus delegates is always and only shaped by an acknowledgement of our shared brokenness and an absolute dependence on God's healing mercy. It is necessary that we all recognize our brokenness, including our leaders. "Uh-oh, this sounds like Jesse is leading up to some sort of confession." (I have sinned!) No. I'm okay, you're okay. We're okay. We are all flawed but forgiven.

The second thing in our scripture lesson I want to point out is the criteria that Peter uses to find a suitable replacement for Judas. He said that it must be someone who had been with them in person from start to finish. *And* it must be someone who witnessed *resurrected* Jesus. Here's where I need to remind you that the twelve apostles weren't the only people that were with Jesus from start to finish. There were *many* others -- men and women who were with Jesus throughout his ministry who could fulfill Peter's requirement. Now ... here's something to think about -- Peter's requirement would have ruled out two men who within a short time would become two of the most prominent leaders of the early church. James, who would eventually become the leader of the Jerusalem church, and the Paul, who would be the lead apostle to the gentiles. Neither of them had been followers of Jesus from start to finish. Paul didn't even become a *believer* until *after* Jesus' death and resurrection. This would become a big issue for Peter later on. So clearly there is no one definitive set of selection criteria for Christian leadership. But this first generation had to have something to go by so they could replace Judas. Because, you know ... *twelve*. Isn't it funny how the Holy

Spirit is constantly doing new things to gather new leaders. Even calling ones who were previously unqualified.

It wasn't that long ago that most churches agreed that women couldn't be pastors. But the Spirit opened the church's eyes and showed us how dull our ministry would be without female leadership. We've had some great ones here at FCC Chico. It wasn't that long ago that divorced people were excluded from leadership. Not many of our churches are still concerned about that. The church is still struggling and debating about whether folks from the LGBTQ community should be in leadership, but the Spirit is still at work helping churches discern whether this is an issue. This book is traditionally called "The Acts of the Apostles," but I prefer "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." This is the book where we learned about the conversion of the Ethiopian official a few weeks ago. The official was a racially and sexually "other" who never would have been accepted in a worshipping community. The Holy Spirit had other plans. Sometimes it just takes a while for us to catch up with what the Spirit is doing among us.

Here's my favorite part. Let's talk about how these guys ended up choosing Judas' replacement. They had two qualified candidates – one was a guy who was known by three names – Joseph Barsabbas Justus. We'll call him "Justus." The other was Matthias. Then the apostles did the next right thing – they prayed. "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry." Then what did they do? Did they vote? That's what we would do! No, they "cast lots," which in the case of ancient middle eastern culture is different than taking a vote. The soldiers who gathered around Jesus' cross cast lots for his clothing. They didn't vote – no one said, "All in favor of Maximus getting Jesus' sandals say, 'aye.'" No, it was totally random! The apostles might as well have tossed a coin or played "rock, scissors, paper!" That being said, let's remember that the process of selecting our leaders is not to be taken lightly. Peter and the other apostles had a plan, had specific criteria, and most importantly

they prayed. Please don't think the lesson here is that discerning God's will for you comes down to a coin toss.

I don't think that we as a congregation should cast lots to determine who our leaders should be, although that does seem tempting doesn't it? We can do it by lottery! Still, it's hard not to come to this conclusion given the story we have in front of us. I think it was an act of symbolism. People typically think Matthias was the lucky one for being chosen and Justus was the unlucky one for having been left out when the lots were cast. The most common uses of drawing of lots in the Jewish tradition was to choose a scapegoat to be sacrificed. Remember, the job description Peter gives for Judas' replacement is, "one of these must become a witness with us." Want to know the Greek word for witness that Luke uses? "Martura." That's where we get the word, "martyr." Matthias is chosen the way scapegoats were chosen. It was to fill the shoes of someone who may one day die, as many did, fulfilling his mission as a leader in the early church.

Matthias is never mentioned again after this. We have no idea whether he was martyred. We don't know whether he was a good and faithful servant of the church or a worse failure than Judas. That tells me that the importance of having twelve apostles doesn't seem to have lasted that long. It also tells me that the leadership of the church isn't made up of rock-stars with spectacular skill sets and performance indicators. It's made up of people like you and me. What a relief that is, right? That tells us a lot about how God works in and through the church. There aren't any really big or really small jobs in the ministry that Jesus has left us. We are all called to play a part and all the parts are important, whether they have high profiles or not. And all any of us are called to do is play our part, faithfully, and without seeking to draw attention to ourselves. When we *are* getting it right, all the attention is being drawn to Jesus. {{{{MARKER}}}}

As your pastor, I probably have the most visible leadership role among us, but this church is dependent on everyone playing their roles,

including various other leadership positions. Some of them are as low key and anonymous as Matthias, but they still need your prayerful support and encouragement. And maybe they also need you to step up and join them in a role that you haven't even imagined for yourself yet. Maybe you know that God is asking you to get involved in new ways and to offer gifts you haven't previously offered. We won't be casting lots or seeking to martyr you, but we do want you to understand and affirm your call which is an important part of the process of identifying our leaders. So if you're sensing that maybe there's a new task opening up before you, don't be afraid to come and talk with me or Peggy or Max or Georgeanne or Georgia or any of our Barbaras or other leaders. We are here to help you discern God's call. Because ultimately, when all of us are responding to God's varying calls on our individual lives, and all of us together are responding by becoming the kind of community God is calling us to be, then forgiven failures though we all be, we will truly be witnesses to the resurrected one, and to the resurrection life he is sharing with us, and shares with us now around this table and among these people.