

They Also Serve...

As we come to the end of the liturgical season of Easter and prepare for our celebration of the Day of Pentecost, I'm going to tell a couple of stories out of order. The truth of the matter is that I just couldn't get a good preaching handle on the lectionary texts for today, so I'm borrowing one from next week. Next week has a double set of texts anyway as it is both the seventh Sunday of Easter and the Sunday closest to the traditional Feast of the Ascension, which is next Thursday, so it can spare a text or two. So, next Sunday, you'll hear something from me about the Ascension and today we'll consider this story about Matthias, whom the Roman Catholic Church celebrated with a feast day this past Thursday, May 14. That sounds like good enough reason to me to bump up this scripture a week, how about you?

Now, aside from the passage I just read, how many of you remember other stories in the New Testament about Matthias? Anyone? Anyone? Bueller? Well, that was a trick question – there are no other stories in the New Testament about Matthias. We hear about him and about Joseph Barsabbas Justus in these few verses and then both of them disappear entirely from the Biblical record – never heard from again. There are some traditions or legends about Matthias in writings from the early Church but nothing with the authority of Scripture. So this morning, I'll pass on some of those stories but then I want to talk about what the disappearance of Matthias might mean to us. Is there a lesson here for us about how we go about living under the calling of Christ? Are there elements in this story that we should avoid? Did Peter and the rest make a dreadful error by appointing this man? Why on earth should we pay any heed to this most obscure apostle?

Let's begin with what we can know, or "sort of know," about Matthias. First of all, there is what Peter says about him in our Scripture this morning. He met the qualifications that Peter set out for Judas' replacement as a member of The Twelve. He had been a member of the larger group of Jesus' disciples, "beginning from the baptism of John," so he had likely first been a disciple of the Baptizer or at least a spectator when John baptized Jesus in the Jordan. Matthias had then been a faithful disciple of Jesus, according to Peter, "until the day when he was taken up from us," the day of Jesus' ascension. He was likely one of the Seventy whom Jesus sent out to preach and teach during his earthly ministry and he was clearly one of the 120 who continued to gather in the upper room where Jesus had celebrated the Passover with The Twelve. That much is certain. He was a man who knew Jesus in the flesh, who as Peter said could be "a witness with us to his resurrection," and he was a man that Jesus knew and had called, albeit to a different task.

Church tradition concerning Matthias and his work is contradictory. Some sources say that he stayed in Judaea, preaching the Gospel powerfully until he was stoned and then beheaded. That is why he is often portrayed in portraits of the saints, like the one of the front of our bulletin this morning, with an open Bible and an axe, although some say that the axe symbolizes the power of his preaching rather than the instrument of his death. Some sources say that he traveled to Ethiopia, where he preached to cannibals. Others say that he took the Gospel to Colchis, an ancient kingdom on the Black Sea roughly equivalent to the modern Republic of Georgia, and that he was crucified there. Many early Christian authors cite a book called the Gospel of Matthias, which no longer exists. According to David Ross of Rice University, "the Gospel of Matthias was, at one time, almost as popular as the Gospel of Thomas as witnessed by its use by Origen, Eusebius, Ambrose, Jerome, and the Venerable Bede." The late second century

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theologian, Clement of Alexandria, cited a document called “The Traditions of Matthias” and wrote that its author was also known as Zaccheus, the tax collector, which seems unlikely. Oh, and Church tradition also tells us that Matthias is the patron saint of tailors, carpenters, those who suffer from smallpox, and reformed alcoholics.

But, as I said, there is none of this that we know for sure, which begs the question, “Why don’t we know more about the 13th Apostle?” He’s a little like the Fifth Beatle – we may know the name but all that’s significant about him is that he was once a member of an important group. (And, by the way, at least everyone can agree that Matthias was the 13th Apostle – there are a huge number of people who’ve claimed the title “the Fifth Beatle.”) So why did Matthias slip into obscurity? A number of explanations are common. Robert Deffinbaugh of the Biblical Studies Foundation, whose prolific commentaries you can find at Bible.org, offers an extensive list of just what was wrong with Matthias and his selection in an article called “Getting Ahead of God.” Here are his top three reasons for why Matthias didn’t deserve the honor of being an apostle:

“(1) The action taken was prior to Pentecost, before the Holy Spirit had come upon the apostles to guide them.

(2) The apostles were “taking action” when Jesus had specifically commanded them to wait, until the Spirit had come on them (in Acts 1:4).

(3) Jesus had chosen all of the other apostles (as it says in Acts 1:2), and He had given them no command to choose a replacement for Judas...”

All of these are good arguments and grounded in the Scriptures. Deffinbaugh doesn’t even make reference to the argument I heard most often growing up in Southern Baptist churches as to why Matthias is no longer mentioned after his selection. The problem, I was taught, is that Matthias was chosen by lot – the disciples indulged in a game of chance to fill this important position!

Now, I’m not interested in this morning in defending or condemning the modern gaming industry. I don’t play myself but that has more to do with my competitive nature and the odds against me than with my Southern Baptist upbringing. I’m opposed to state-run lotteries because I think they encourage people to spend money they can’t afford and are therefore a kind of regressive tax. And I’m very aware, from my work with those who live on the margins of society, that gambling can be an addiction as devastating as narcotics or alcohol. But that doesn’t have anything to do with Matthias. The fact of the matter is that the attitude of Peter and his fellows in turning to lots to choose their new colleague was clearly one of seeking God’s will and they were following well-established Biblical tradition in using the method that they did. Listen again to the prayer that Peter offered prior to the casting of lots: “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” The apostles were relying on God to control what might be considered random chance.

In fact, this was a common expectation in the ancient world. You may remember the story of Jonah, when the sailors caught in the storm threw lots to determine who was responsible for the anger of the gods. In the Hebrew tradition, we find that God directed Moses to use the drawing of lots to apportion the Promised Land among the tribes of Israel as well as to determine which goat to drive into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement. Lots were used by the prophet Samuel to select Saul as the first King in Israel and lots were regularly drawn to determine what

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roles priests and Levites would take in worship in the Temple at Jerusalem. This practice continued until the final destruction of the Temple under the Romans. In the Gospel According to Luke, in the story of the birth of John the Baptizer, we read that his father Zechariah “was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.” It was by this “chance” that Zechariah was able to have his famous conversation with the angel who told him of his son’s God-given destiny. For faithful Jews like Peter and the rest, the lot was a respected way of discerning God’s will. Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the LORD’s alone.” If this sounds odd to us, I wonder how many of us regularly or in times of trial resort to allowing our Bibles to fall open “at random” to find a word from the Lord for the day?

The problem with all of these arguments for the disappearance of Matthias is that they ignore the obvious. It’s not just that there is no mention of Matthias after Acts 1; there is no mention of The Twelve as a body after Acts 6:2 and no mention of any of The Twelve by name other than Peter after the execution of James the son of Zebedee in chapter 12. Indeed, after chapter 12, even Peter fades into the background as Luke’s focus switches to Paul and the way he carried the Gospel to the Gentiles even to the very center of the Empire, Rome itself. There is no record in the Bible to match the legends that “Matthias was spreading the “good news” over a wide swath of the ancient world” as John P. Chase of All Saints’ Episcopal Church in San Francisco writes, not because there was something defective about Matthias’ ministry but because that’s not the story that Luke was telling.

So, contrary to Deffinbaugh and many, many others, I’m willing to give Peter some credit for doing his best in a difficult situation and probably, based on historical precedent, coming up with the most Godly plan available. Yes, Jesus had told them to wait until the Holy Spirit came and the promise of the Father was fulfilled. But remember, they didn’t know that the fulfillment would come on the day of Pentecost and be accompanied by tongues of flame and the ability to speak in other languages. We have the advantage of knowing the rest of their story. Peter, assuming the leadership role that Jesus had given him, was doing his best to prepare for the next step in their mission by following the blueprint that Jesus had left. Jesus had appointed twelve apostles; therefore there should be twelve apostles.

This argument is not as simplistic as it seems. The naming of twelve apostles by Jesus had a deep resonance for his disciples. Robert Linthicum writes, “The followers of Jesus believed that the church was the “new Israel” made up of a new “twelve tribes” (disciples) built upon a “new covenant” (or “New Testament”) and Law made between God and God’s people and brought about through the work of a “new Moses” (Jesus) at a “new Mount Sinai” (the cross on the hill of Calvary). But how could the church constitute the “new Israel” with only eleven “tribes” (disciples)? The leaders of the church had to appoint a new twelfth disciple to take the place of Judas.” But of course, the mission of the Church was rapidly expanded beyond the boundaries of the Children of Israel and the concept of the new twelve tribes gave way to a vision of the Beloved Community in which “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus.”

So, what about Matthias? Was he somehow flawed in character or tainted by his selection process? Or was he truly, as his name suggests, “Mattithiah -- the gift of Yahweh”? There is no

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way to know but I suspect that Luke's inclusion of this story in his account was meant to honor rather than to denigrate poor Matthias. After all, the Gospel was not promulgated in those early days just by Peter and Paul with occasional assists from Stephen and Philip and the rest. There are so many men and women who must have been key to the early missionary effort and the life of the Jerusalem church who rate only the briefest of mentions in Acts or the letters of Paul, sometimes just as a name in a list of names. We do not hold the writings of the early Church Fathers or Church tradition in the same reverence we give to the Scriptures but God's truth is in those ancient works and there is nearly always a grain of truth behind legends. So, perhaps Matthias was a mighty preacher and a fearless traveler who lost his life in the service of his Lord in a land far away or in the same city where Jesus had suffered and died. Or perhaps he was just an ordinary man, doing his best to live up to the honor accorded to him, praying every day for guidance and to be allowed to use whatever gifts he had to bring glory to God.

As I read the story of Matthias, I am put in mind of the great English poet, John Milton. At the age of 44 in 1652, he began to lose his eyesight and was completely blind within two years, probably from glaucoma. He expressed his confusion on why God would grant him literary gifts only to seemingly revoke them with blindness in his poem, "*When I Consider How My Light Is Spent*":

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide;
"Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or His own gifts. Who best
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best. His state
Is kingly: thousands at His bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait."

At the very worst, I think, the Scriptures' silence on the work of Matthias after that fateful cast of lots may tell us that Matthias was one of those who served by standing and waiting, just an ordinary fellow trying to keep up with the giants of the faith like Peter and Paul and John and James the Just.

But isn't that the kind of model that we need, the one who does his best to live an ordinary life in the light of God? Dan Clendenin writing about Milton and Matthias says, "Patience, humility, availability, and even resignation to the inscrutabilities of divine designs all serve us well. Whoever we are and wherever we are— an obscure apostle or a struggling poet—every person can "serve Him best" right where they are, even those "who only stand and wait.'" Audrey L. S. West, an adjunct faculty member at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, said the following to students preparing for graduation: "So, here we are, ordinary people, heading into graduation, into summer, into new ministries in new settings or into the same ministries in the same settings. As we put one-foot-in-front-of-the-other let us be grasped NOT by visions of the

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spectacular, but by visions of the ordinary. Not thinking that "real" ministry happens only in the big time, but knowing that real ministry happens in God's time. It happens in the normal stuff of life; in the small, in the simple, in the living out of the life to which we have been called – even as ordinary as that life might be. And when we think of the great call stories of the Bible, may we remember that this story – Matthias' story, Joseph-called-Barsabbas' story, OUR story – this ordinary story is a great call story, too.”

Of course, sometimes even ordinary people are capable of extraordinary things. Paul Rusesabagina has been called the Oskar Schindler of Rwanda and his story inspired the film “Hotel Rwanda.” His autobiography is entitled An Ordinary Man. Those of you who remember or have studied World War II will know the name of Admiral William “Bull” Halsey, who said, “There are no extraordinary men...just extraordinary circumstances that ordinary men are forced to deal with.” Perhaps under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the apostle Matthias did achieve extraordinary things. And, given extraordinary circumstances, so may the Holy Spirit inspire us to achieve extraordinary things. But it’s more likely that the Spirit will fill us in order that we may do the little, ordinary things that go toward building up the Beloved Community. It’s more likely that we will be called on to perform the small acts of love and justice and righteousness that mark us as branches in the True Vine that is Christ Jesus. It’s more likely that the Spirit we feel burning in us, straining in us to give birth will result not in grand, spectacular acts of ministry but in the day-to-day gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Let us give God thanks for such “ordinary” gifts for of such is the Kingdom of God, the building of which is the ministry to which each and every one of us is called, on days both ordinary and extraordinary, on this day and on every day until our Lord comes again. For the gifts of the Holy Spirit to us “ordinary” folk, thanks be to God.