

“Chosen”

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 1

New Testament Lesson: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Have you ever heard of the apostle Matthias before – outside of today’s New Testament passage? You haven’t. Matthias appears nowhere else in the New Testament (nor does the Barsabbas who was also known as Justus). And you might never have heard of either of them if we didn’t need to have 12 apostles, as Peter said, to fulfill scripture.

We’re much more familiar with the names of all the others chosen to be among the 12: names like Simon Peter, Andrew his brother, James the brother of John, and of course John who wrote the Book of Revelation. There’s Philip who converted the Ethiopian eunuch, and Bartholomew, to whom the risen Lord appeared at the Sea of Tiberius. We’ve all heard of Matthew the tax collector, doubting Thomas, James who wrote the self-titled epistle, Simon the Zealot, Judas not Iscariot whose real name was Thaddaeus, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

And then there’s Matthias. He doesn’t even get a description. But I’d like to give him one today. Let’s call him *Matthias the Chosen*. Let him stand for all who have been chosen. All those people – you and I among them – who have been chosen by God, and who in the end will largely go unnoticed; just another face in the crowd. That’s who Matthias and Barsabbas are at the beginning of our New Testament lesson. Two faces in a crowd of a-hundred-and-twenty. Only when the faith community has need of someone with certain experience and ability are they asked to step up from within the crowd. Peter stands among them and says we have a job to do. “One (who has accompanied us throughout) must become a witness with us to (the) resurrection.” In other words, we need a 12th.

Four weeks ago today, Gamecocks kicker and Hickory native Ryan Succop was chosen as the last man picked in the NFL draft, taken 256th overall, by the Kansas City Chiefs. What does it mean to be the last one picked? The 12th? Or in Succop’s case, the 256th; the one picked because that’s how many they need to make a team. For Ryan Succop, it meant becoming Mr. Irrelevant. It’s a real award. Mr. Irrelevant is the title that goes with what sportswriter Sean Fitz-Gerald called “the greatest NFL award you’ve never heard about.” But Ryan doesn’t see it that way. “I don’t really mind it,” he told The Associated Press. “I don’t plan on being irrelevant. I’ve been very blessed and I plan on making an impact right away. I’ve been blessed with the ability to do it and I’m looking forward to doing it.”

I don't plan on being irrelevant. Do you think Matthias might have said the same thing when he was chosen as the numeric solution to a last-minute problem: “We need a 12th”? I’d argue that Matthias was anything but irrelevant. That in fact, he accomplished a lot. First, he did what was necessary to be in the running; second, he said “yes” to the calling; and third, he was willing to grow as a disciple and become an apostle – one among those chosen for a certain job in the faith community – to inaugurate the church.

Matthias was in the running to become an apostle because he was a faithful follower of Jesus. Peter said it had to be someone who accompanied them throughout the time Jesus was among them, beginning from his baptism by John until his resurrection. That’s three years. And while there were a lot of miracles during those years, there was also a lot of arduous travel from town to town, and quite a few tough times. But throughout it all, it was important for Matthias to be there, even if he didn’t know how God might use him in the end, or if he was up to the task.

A few weeks ago a new book went on sale with the name "Bill Gates" featured prominently on the cover. The author figures people will do a double-take. But he says he’s used to that, adding, “I was still in my early 50s when my son ‘stole’ my name and – to avoid confusion with him – I became Bill Gates Sr.” In his memoir titled “Showing Up for Life: Thoughts on the Gifts of a Lifetime,” the father of the richest person in the world says he’s an optimist, like his son. He writes, “I believe in the combined power of men and women who ‘show up’ for the people they love and the causes they believe in. I’ve seen the power of *public will* to take on and surmount great challenges, and I believe our society works better when people think less about ‘me and mine’ and more about ‘us and ours.’”

When he was a young family-man instilling those values in a son destined to become *the* Bill Gates, no amount of optimism could have predicted there would one day be an award-winning philanthropic foundation carrying the Gates name. Bill Gates Sr. now has the honor of being one of three trustees – alongside Warren Buffet and Melinda Gates – funneling money to needy causes with the sole aim of enhancing healthcare and reducing poverty.

Just as it was for Bill Gates Sr., a lot of our life is preparing ahead of time for a calling we can’t even imagine today. It’s only in our showing up for life that God is able to work through us to improve the world. Matthias showed up – he became an active part of the faith community – and that was enough for God to work in his life.

The second thing Matthias did was say yes to the calling. Scripture tells us, “He was added to the eleven apostles.” He could have let someone else do it. If Matthias had said no, Barsabbas would have been a shoe-in. But he said yes. And he said yes ready to go where God might need him. He said yes, and he followed through. The Bible is full of examples of people who said yes and then fell short – Peter denies Jesus three times, and Judas betrays him. And although both of them gave up on God, God never gave up. Jesus redeemed Peter with a threefold charge to feed his lambs and tend his sheep. And another disciple was elevated to replace Judas as an apostle.

We can’t always be certain we’ll succeed before we say yes to the opportunities of life. Because the truth is, there will be times when we come up short. But God is able to use us even if we’re not a first-round draft pick. And God’s will will be done, whether we’re a help or a hindrance. When Matthias began following Jesus, he had no idea he’d be chosen as an apostle. Just like Barsabbas didn’t know he’d come in runner up. Neither one of them knew exactly what God had planned for their lives. We’re called to participate in the faith community without knowing the cost and the result. We walk by faith, and not by sight.

Bruce Larson, in his book, “Wind & Fire: Living Out the Book of Acts,” writes: “There’s something wrong with wanting God’s clear, indisputable guidance at every turn. As for me,” says Larson, “that feeds my inordinate need for a life of safety and certainty. ... There is no risk involved. But God wants a relationship with us more than He wants infallibility. He wants us to learn to trust Him,” says Larson. “Our witness to the world is that we can move out in faith trusting a God who is with us in every situation.” By focusing on what God desires for us and for our world, we can be assured of having an important role in life – whether we ever know it or not.

Matthias replaces Judas Iscariot, who himself was chosen as an apostle – chosen by Jesus, and thus chosen by God. And in the end, Judas chose to betray Jesus. Why and how this happened has been debated down through the centuries. In his biblical commentary on Acts, Robert Wall asks, “How is it possible that someone handpicked to lead the people of God as a member of the apostolic circle then dies in accordance with God’s scripted plan?” His answer: “God’s selection is never coercive, but collaborative. God’s instructions are provisional and must be obeyed to be implemented. God’s sovereignty is never at the expense of human freedom.” What Wall is saying is we have to follow God’s guidance if we expect to see God’s will be done in our lives. If Matthias had rejected his

calling as a disciple, he would have never been available to become an apostle.

The third thing Matthias had to do was be willing to grow into that role. Peter called for someone willing to “become a witness with us to (Jesus’) resurrection.” Matthias couldn’t know what that would entail. And even though he didn’t have a distinguishing track record as a disciple, he was willing to take on an even greater role as an apostle. Only through being true to his calling as a disciple was Matthias ready to serve as an apostle. And when the need arose, he was able to step up and become one of the 12, even if he was the last one chosen, and even if he never knew the importance of his place there.

Being No. 12, being someone like Matthias, is more than just filling the last spot. Or said another way, filling a spot means more than you might think. The followers of Jesus needed 12 apostles not just to fill a spot, but to fulfill scripture. The 12 apostles represent the 12 tribes of Israel, which is *biblical shorthand* for “all God’s people.” Restoring the number to 12 symbolizes the restoration of Israel, God’s people made whole, the Kingdom fulfilled. The 12 apostles and the 12 tribes symbolize – and give witness to – the completion of God’s plan for humankind. They symbolize it, they don’t complete it. That’s our job, as followers of Christ; to stand with the faithful in completing the work that has begun, work begun by the first disciples of Jesus.

And if we follow the example of Matthias the Chosen, we’ll first want to affirm our choice to be a member of the faith community, a follower of Jesus Christ. Second, we’ll want to try on the new roles God might put in our lives, and third, be willing to grow into those roles as best we can, knowing that our measures of success are not how God measures success.

So how does all of this take shape in our calling as Christians? The calling Jesus puts forth in our lives is really not that different from his calling of the last apostle among the 12. While the selection of Matthias may seem random, it actually followed a process that reflects certain values that Jesus instilled within the community of faith. They followed scripture – as Peter said, it had to be fulfilled. And they prayed, saying, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen” And they picked wisely. It wasn’t just anyone among the 120 who could become an apostle. It had to be someone who was close to Jesus, traveling along side him in the faith community day-in and day-out.

Part of our role as Christians is to shape our lives according to scripture. And to pray that we might know God’s will for our lives. And to choose wisely. Each of these ways of drawing closer to Jesus – scripture,

prayer, and life choices – are supported by, and lead to, life in a community of faith. We draw closer to Jesus, not just through reading scripture, praying and attending worship, but in how we chose to live our lives. You know that – if you have daily devotionals, participate in a small group, stay for fellowship after church, take flowers to shut-ins, serve on a committee, volunteer in our Christian education programs or in the community, or any of the many things people feel called to do at Westminster as active members of the community of faith – you know how this makes you feel closer to Jesus, more fulfilled inside.

Of course, we can't always be certain of the result when we make that extra effort to be a part of the faith community. We never know what will come from putting ourselves out there. Maybe we'll hear just the right passage of scripture that will follow us throughout the week, or be able to help someone through a tough time, or put a smile on the face of a lonely soul, or contribute to an important decision at a committee meeting. OK, that last one about being at a meeting might be a stretch. It's hard for us to imagine that something as mundane as showing up for another committee meeting will bring a sense of divine purpose. It might, but it might be hard for us to see that.

And that's OK, too. Being part of the Christian community is not always about being lit up inside, inspired, fulfilled, transformed. Sometimes it's mundane. Matthias was largely forgotten. He may have doubted he ever made a difference. He may never have known. If he did, we certainly didn't hear about it. But being a part of the faith community isn't always about getting something out of it for ourselves. In fact, it's usually through selfless giving that we are surprised to get the greatest sense of fulfillment. Being part of the faith community is not about us; it's about God.

The risen Lord's final instruction to his apostles was to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In baptism, we become part of the community of faith. And because the apostles fulfilled the role chosen for them 2000 years ago, we have the opportunity to fulfill our role as Christians. You have been chosen as a follower of Jesus. How will you – how will I – reflect this calling to be a follower of Jesus Christ in the choices we make?

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