

*Big Decisions*

Acts 1:15-17, 21-12; John 17:6-11

Decisions, decisions, decisions. Everything changes for the disciples when Jesus leaves. After depending on Jesus to make all their decisions, suddenly they need to make decisions aplenty. And some of them are momentarily big.

Today is the festival of the Ascension, and it marks a major transition in the identities of both Jesus and his followers. He is no longer merely local, but also transcendent; they are no longer followers, but also leaders in the spread of the Kingdom of God. And when one leads, one must make decisions.

The first recorded decision initiated by a disciple after Jesus leaves is made by the great Decider himself, Peter. "I am going fishing," he decides. (John 21:3) Even though Jesus has risen from the dead, he is nowhere to be found, so Peter announces that he's heading back to his old haunts, to earn a living the old-fashioned way. Six of his friends join him. They find their boat and nets, and go back at it, with no success. After a night of fruitless effort, Jesus greets them from the shore – not with a scolding for deciding to go back to the life they'd left behind for his sake, but to bless their fishing expedition. He tells them where to let down their nets, and they are rewarded with a record-breaking haul. Peter makes a bad decision, and his companions join him in it, yet Jesus blesses them – and immediately renews his call to trade fish for sheep, and the rest is history. Jesus doesn't abandon or disown his followers when they make bad decisions. Thank God!

Soon Jesus' followers need to make other big decisions. Acts 6: Who will take care of all the widows and orphans that the apostles can no longer manage? Acts 8: What should be done about the mess in Samaria where all kinds of people want to be part of the Jesus movement, but haven't been properly instructed or baptized? Acts 13: Who should be sent to Asia to spread the news of Jesus Christ? Acts 11 and Acts 15: How should the church apply established biblical norms to converts from outside the Jewish community? And the list goes on.

Today's text from Acts 1, taken from the lectionary for this coming Sunday, is located in the twilight zone between Jesus' ascension and Pentecost. Jesus' followers know well what they have lost; but they have no idea yet what they will soon gain. But at least they know they are to carry forward Jesus' message of the kingdom. And they have to do so without him there to call the shots.

Today's story is almost comical – the disciples are sitting in Jerusalem doing nothing, and they get antsy. Surely they should be doing *something*. And so Peter, demonstrating the same form he showed when he proposed a big building plan on top of Transfiguration Mountain, suggests in today's lesson that maybe one thing they could do while they're just sitting there is to change their staffing plan. They are evidently the first Presbyterians, for at least two reasons: (1) they assume that when they don't know where they're headed, the first thing to do is to reorganize; and (2) they decide to restore the staff roster to 12 precisely because "that's the way we've always done it." If Jesus had 12 disciples, but only 11 are left, by George, we need to find a twelfth.

So they set to work. What are the criteria for an apostle, anyway? Should be in the *Book of Order* – wait, we don't have one yet. Again they show some Presbyterian DNA by deciding

that what matters most is that whoever they pick should have been through the same intense three-year training program the rest of them had been through. No short-cuts on that!

The process of decision-making in the apostolic community is highly variable. Once or twice the whole church votes; at other times the leaders decide together, and sometimes a single apostle governs. Regardless of how a big decision gets made, it always begins with intense prayer for guidance. Apparently the church is more concerned about its preparation of heart before the Lord than about the form of the decision itself.

Saint Augustine famously offers this advice about decision-making, "Love God, and do what you want." Why then do people who love God not agree on all decisions? Perhaps what matters most is not the particular decision we make, but the underlying love of God that motivates us.

So in our text, something as crucial as who will be the twelfth apostle is decided by flipping a coin. Really?? First, let's be clear that there is no magical thinking here, that somehow God will take possession of the coin in that critical moment before it lands. Second, the apostles don't abdicate responsibility in deciding who should be on the ballot. They insist both candidates meet all the necessary criteria for apostolic ministry. Third, they are willing to take a risk. Jesus had chosen neither of these guys to be among the Twelve, though they certainly were available to him – by choosing these two candidates, the apostles were willing to go beyond the safe zone of Jesus' own selection process. Even though Jesus knew Judas would betray him, he offered his disciples no hint about how to replace him. They have to step out on their own apart from his input.

The text doesn't say so, but it is no great stretch to imagine that at least some of the apostles likely preferred one candidate over the other. But their love for each other and trust in God superseded their individual preferences this way or that. They were equally ready to go with Justus or Matthias. The results of the vote mattered less than the relationships of those who were making the decision, and their shared confidence in God's trustworthiness to guide them well.

Today's story is but one instance of a principle that gets expressed in numerous ways among the apostles – what matters most when we need to make a big decision is that we surrender our need to keep everything in the church under our control. Casting lots was not the apostles yielding to luck, but relinquishing the need to control the church's mission.

Jesus prays in our Gospel text that his followers will be protected from the world, even as they remain in it. Tied to this prayer for their protection is his prayer for their unity: "Protect them in your name that you have given me, that they may be one, as we are one."

From what does he pray them to be protected? Certainly not from opposition. To the contrary, he teaches them to expect the same opposition he has faced. It's not the hostility of the world, but the way of the world from which his disciples need to be protected. Their unity for which he prays is the core substance of that new way that goes against the grain of the world.

Some 100 years after Paul's time, Tertullian testified that the love that bound Jesus' followers together was what had fueled the Christian church's growth. Unbelievers saw among Christians a way of living together that was radically different from their own. Instead of people living in the tug-of-war against each other that ruled their world of socio-economic relations,

Christians deferred to, defended, and cared for one another unconditionally. It was this way of love that constituted the primary Christian evangelizing force in a hostile world.

The community that selects Matthias is free to do so by way of a coin toss because (1) they love each other enough not to need to have their preferred candidate win, and (2) they are confident that God will direct them well if they get out of God's way.

Their prayer as they stand on the cusp of the vote is telling: "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen." They approach their vote with genuine humility; they don't know everything they need to know in order to make a decision this big. So they ask God: "Show us which of these two you have chosen." Not "help OUR choice to be right," but "help us trust YOUR choice."

Some time ago I made a semi-facetious proposal to our Executive Committee: "What if we loved each other so much that, when it came time for a big vote among us, we voted not for the outcome we want, but for what the person beside us wants?" Of course, if we did that all across the room, the vote tally would be unchanged; all that would change is *who* votes this or that. But what if we were as ready to trust God to lead the way as the apostles were when they cast lots? I don't know that God will intervene in how the coin falls; but I DO know that my decision to let a coin toss rule concretely demonstrates my readiness not to be in control.

Jesus' posture in Gethsemane is replicated in the apostles' prayer and action as they undertake this, their first significant vote as the "Church of the Ascension": "Your will be done, Father God! Not ours – yours!"

Their next big vote expands their circle of ministry still further – seven new leaders are ordained to the office of deacon by election of the congregation. As in the election of the twelfth apostle, the leaders once again defer the right to make the decision – this time not to a coin toss, but to the will of the people, which is no more predictable in most cases. What stands out in both Acts 1 and Acts 6 is the holy nonchalance of the apostles in matters that are critically important. They trust that the same God who has called them from being nothing to becoming Christ's ambassadors can be trusted also to direct the selection of those who will be their allies in ministry.

You may have noticed that we are scheduled to vote on some things today. In one sense, nothing is at stake; the constitutional amendments on which we will be voting have already passed. The *Book of Order* language on marriage is going to change; that is already settled. If a mere flip of the coin is ever appropriate in church votes, this may be the time. Yet how we conduct this vote still matters. A lot. Are we willing to approach the vote with a genuine openness to God? Are we willing to say, honestly, "Not my will..."? No matter which way the vote goes?

I am not saying that the items on which we are voting do not matter. They do. So did the appointment of Matthias. *It mattered too much for the apostles to settle it with a fight.* If God could not be trusted to carry them forward whichever way the coin flipped, they had might as well abandon operations altogether. If our success as the church of Jesus depends on our getting all the decisions right about doctrines, practices, or strategies, God help us! Thank God for Jesus' assurance that he will build his church, and not even hell itself can prevail against it.

Our decisions today will probably be in the news tomorrow. What will be the more important story: how we decide, or what we decide? What sort of actions today would most

likely lead others to want to learn more about who we are, how we live, and what is the nature of the Gospel we proclaim?

Yes, sisters and brothers, we have big decisions before us. And the biggest of them all is whether we will love one another as we have been loved, as we seek together to “let go and let God” rule among us. May the Lord help us toward that end!