

May 28, 2006

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

Acts 1:15-17,21-26

¹⁵In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶“Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus—¹⁷for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”

²¹So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²²beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” ²³So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” ²⁶And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

There are four Gospels in the New Testament; they record the life and words of Jesus. They are the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In addition to his biography of Jesus, one of those four, Luke, wrote another book about what happened next. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, Luke wanted to tell future generations about how the apostles acted. So he wrote another book and called it, straightforwardly enough, *The Acts of the Apostles*; usually, the title is shortened to “Acts”. It is the story of the Church. How it got started, how it grew, the concerns and decisions that became the Church we live in today, two thousand years later. Our first lesson this morning is from the book *The Acts of the Apostles*.

The Day of Pentecost is recognized as the birthday of the Church and that story is recorded in *The Acts of the Apostles*. It tells how the Holy Spirit came and the apostles were inspired, and Peter preached a sermon and three thousand people were baptized and everybody shared communion – which would be a great way to start a book called “*The Acts of the Apostles*”. But that story does not begin the book. That story comes in *chapter two* of the book and we will celebrate the Day of Pentecost next week. It will be a great celebration – but we’re not ready for it yet.

Today, we read from the *first chapter* of the Book of Acts. This is how the story begins. It says that Peter stood up among the believers (it says there were about 120 of them there) and he talked about the death of Judas. Peter said the Church was not ready. It was incomplete.

There is a wonderful, well-known Hebrew word, *shalom*. Often the word is translated as “peace”, but that is not the best translation. A better translation is “complete”. When a person is in *shalom*, that person is prepared, lacking nothing, complete. Peter observed that they were *not* complete. They were not ready.

Let us never underestimate the importance of preparation. Yes, the Church lives by the grace of God – but the people of God are called to prepare. We are to study, and learn, and imagine, and pray. We are called to gather for worship and share what we have. None of those things give us a relationship with God. They prepare us for God to come to us. They are the things we do because we are not yet complete.

The story of the Church is not about an unstoppable march to victory. The Book of Acts records the inspiration of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It tells about the conversion of Saul, who becomes Paul and carries Christianity all over the map. It tells about believers, and miracles,

and converts. It also records the stoning of Stephen and the execution of James. It ends with Paul under arrest in Rome. And the Book of Acts does not begin with the story of Pentecost. It begins here, with the story we read this morning; Peter stood up among the believers and noted they were incomplete. Before they would march off to be the Body of Christ in the world, Peter called the Church to stop and reflect by the body of Judas. Let us stand with the Church and remember this tragedy, it tells us important things about ourselves. Before the Body of Christ ever had a chance to be persecuted by Rome or shunned by the temple, it was first betrayed by one of its own. One of the twelve. Someone who had given much to be a disciple. They were incomplete. They were not ready.

They did something about it. Jesus was not there to give them instructions. They couldn't very well look for answers in the New Testament; it hadn't been written yet. But they would not just sit idly and mourn their deficiency. You know what they did? They had a congregational meeting. They had a prayer and they held an election and they got somebody to replace Judas. You might remember that the next time you give yourself an excuse not to go to a congregational meeting and roll your eyes about another election. The way this nascent church of one hundred twenty believers responded to crisis and prepared itself to be the Body of Christ was to pray, take nominations, and fill an office. They elected Matthias, incidentally. We know that, so they must have also been taking minutes.

The qualifications for the office were straightforward. The election would be for someone who had been part of Jesus' ministry and who would now witness to Jesus' resurrection. The scripture reads "So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection."

They made a decision. They filled their number and they prepared themselves as best they could to be the people of God. That is the beginning of the story of the Acts of the Apostles. It is a good deal more than a history lesson. Don't underestimate our connection with that band of believers. The story of the defeat of death had spread no farther than that gathering. Those apostles' faith and their teachings and all of their preparations are the reason we are here today. A short time after the meeting we read about today, the Day of Pentecost came. The Book of Acts tells us that Peter preached and people were baptized and they shared in communion. This morning, we are gathered in this place. We proclaim the same story of Jesus' death. One of our number will be baptized, and we will share in communion. It's two thousand years later and not that much has changed.

A little over a year ago, as part of a self-evaluation, everybody was encouraged to participate in a history of this congregation. A time line was put on the wall stretching back to 1972 and people were asked to mark events that were important to Peace Lutheran Church. Later, when I got here, I looked at the results and was interested to see that a lot of those events were when various people joined the congregation. It shows some insight to note that the importance of our ministry is measured by the *people* who are carrying out that ministry. As Peter tells us this morning, it is the people of this church who must become witness with us to his resurrection. Every name on that time line belongs there, but the time line should be longer. It should stretch for miles and it should start with Matthias joining the church. It should include all the witnesses to the resurrection since then because every one of them has made the Kingdom of God what it is today, and so they have had an effect on this congregation. We would be incomplete without them.

Look at our church this morning. Look at all the people who aren't here. Friends, neighbors we've seen, people we've never met, people who haven't moved here yet. This place is overflowing with people who aren't here. We are not complete. The Holy Spirit continues to inspire the church, but we are not always prepared. The way to prepare for the coming of

inspiration is to call our numbers together. We welcome everyone of every background, we need them to prepare for the Holy Spirit.

Our preparations sometimes seem mundane. They may be inviting someone to church. Maybe welcoming someone who comes to worship with us. Working to make this building a welcoming place or teaching a session of summer Sunday school. Peter and his friends did it with a vote to fill an unexpired term.

Whatever we can do to prepare for the Holy Spirit will make these lives of ours more than can be confined to this building or the date on today's calendar.

We live our lives in ways that proclaim Jesus has defeated death, because that is still the qualification to be in this number.