

We refer to it as the book of Acts, but its formal title is “The Acts of the Apostles.” The story starts out listing the eleven apostles left after Jesus ascension.

Peter and then Paul are the apostles who take top billing in this epic volume of the birth of the Christian church.

But there are other apostles, some named and some un-named, who populate this book; and today and for the next two Sundays we will hear the stories about the acts of some of these little-known apostles.

Read - Acts 1:15-26

Matthias – the disciple to replace Judas... This is the first church decision made without Jesus being present.

All we know about him is in these few verses at the beginning of the Acts of Apostles.

According to what Peter said, he must have been part of the company from the beginning, and he says this means from the time Jesus was baptized by John in the river Jordan.

So he was in the crowd in the synagogue in Nazareth when Jesus began his public ministry by reading from the prophet Isaiah and was energized by this man who claimed to fulfill those liberating words of God...

Matthias began walking with them along the shores of the Sea of Galilee; he heard Jesus preach and talk about things like the great commandment; he listened to the parables, and discussed with other followers just what Jesus meant by these stories; he saw Jesus healing the sick, touching the unclean.

Matthias was probably one of the seventy sent out by Jesus. Luke writes about them in his gospel as Jesus says, “the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few...” and then they go into their world with Jesus’ message and mission.

Matthias had been part of the company from the beginning all the way up the trail to Calvary; even to the time Jesus was taken up, ascended into heaven.

Now, in the upper room, Matthias was in the company of those 120 laborers gathered in the harvest field of the kingdom of God; and his name was chosen as the one to replace Judas, to restore the apostles to the proper number.

And look at the way he was chosen – they cast lots, tossed dice. This was an accepted way to make a difficult choice.

It was to make sure that there was no favoritism, no politics, no nepotism, no way for any dice to be hacked – the point was to ensure this was God’s will, not our will.

I’ve thought about that for our own church votes. When it’s time to elect officers, why not take all the names of our members; put them all in the baptismal font and those that are picked out – God tags you, you’re it!

But that’s another sermon for another day.

Now we don’t know what happened to Matthias after Pentecost. How he turned out as an apostle, what kind of apostle he was, we have no idea.

But what we know means a lot for us today.

Matthias, the disciple who replaced Judas, reveals the inescapable grace of God with the high call and demand of God within our lives.

Let me put it this way: Do you realize that you are the witness to the resurrection to a lot of people? Nobody else.

You and I stand in line with the eleven chosen by Jesus; we stand shoulder to shoulder with Matthias – because we are members of that company of believers who accept the challenge of the risen Lord *to discern God's will directing the church into the world.*

I'm reminded of Barbara Brown Taylor's words "that church is not a stopping place but a starting place for discerning God's presence in this world. By offering people a place where they may engage the steady practice of listening to divine words and celebrating divine sacraments, church can help people gain a feel for how God shows up—not only in Holy Bibles and Holy Communion but also in near neighbors, mysterious strangers, sliced bread, and grocery store wine."

It's the challenge we face in this changing world.

The same challenge facing Matthias faces us - to discern the mind of Christ, to know the will of God that sends the church into the world today.

On one hand is what Matthias learned from Jesus, the content of his gospel message, what Jesus talked about; and on the other hand, the reality of the gospel in the person of Jesus, the one he walked with and then saw ascending into heaven.

Of course, quite explicitly, Jesus' message was about love. He spoke about love for one another, he spoke about love for neighbors, and he spoke about love for enemies - those who were strangers, those who weren't like you, those who might "have it in" for you. He said that we were to love them whoever they were.

So what are we to do?

On one hand, we have Jesus' ethical principle of inclusive love, to throw your arms wide open and welcome, embrace all kinds of people.

And it's not easy.

Our ability to love is colored by jealousy and scarred by envy and limited by our selfishness.

We pull back our love at the slightest provocation, and we withhold our love because we've been hurt before.

Sometimes it's easier to curse than to bless, to shout others down than to sit down with them, easier to be loud than to listen.

The inclusive message of the love of God in Jesus Christ challenges us, and this may well discomfort and trouble us, as Christ's calling should discomfort and trouble us in all our relationships, the people we meet, the things we do.

For some it might be in the area of sexuality, for others it may be in the area of money and power, for others it will be in the area of honesty and integrity: any area of life where we wrestle with who we think God wants us to be, what it means to obey the calling of Jesus Christ.

Because following Jesus Christ costs something.

Because there, too, at the center of his teaching is this exclusive view about his person: that to follow him we must deny ourselves and take up the cross.

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples and Matthias must have heard it, too: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Sometimes we hear people describe their failing health, the loss of their job, their broken relationships as "the cross" that they have to bear.

While I don't want to minimize their suffering, I don't think that's what Jesus meant by "carrying one's cross." In Jesus' day, the cross was a political instrument executing the oppressive power of the Roman Empire.

The cross was the death penalty that the Roman Emperor used to deter people from challenging his power and authority.

When Jesus, referring to himself, announced that the Kingdom of God was near, that pronouncement was a direct challenge and threat not just to the religious authorities but also to the occupying Roman Empire.

To carry one's cross, to follow Jesus in the way of discipleship means to live in such a way that declares "Jesus is Lord," not the Roman Emperor, not the American President, not Wall Street nor Madison Avenue, not our parents, our spouse, or our children.

Jesus is Lord, and not our need for comfort, security, worldly success or power. But when we follow Jesus instead of these others, I guarantee they will fight back.

There they are, side by side - the inclusive call to love one another, and the exclusive call to take up the cross of Christ.

And they present to us an enormous challenge.

So what are we going to do, we who live in the 21st century? How are we going to live as followers of this Jesus, to go as the church into the world today?

It's not easy - never has been.

Like Matthias, we live between the first coming and the second coming, between a measure of insight and absolute clarity; we walk not by sight but by faith, like Matthias.

As the letter of Ephesians says: *"until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up (Isn't that something we need to hear today for how we live with each other in our churches, in our politics, in our opinion-masquerading-as-news shows: GROW UP!) *we must grow up in*

every way into him who is the head, into Christ, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

This purpose, this act of discipleship is what Carol was reminding us of last week as she encouraged us and laid out the importance of Stephen Ministry, I quote, "We are created in the image of the triune God, and if that means anything, it means that we are created for relationship, for interdependence, not for independence. None of us has everything it takes. We need each other."

The eleven apostles needed Matthias as much as Matthias needed them.

Like Matthias, we, too, are called to replace Judas and enter the story of the Acts of the Apostles.

Not the Systematic Theology of the Apostles, not the Book of Order of the Apostles, not the Policy Manual of the Apostles, not the "This is how we've always done it" Apostles.

No, simply "The Acts of the Apostles": spirit born, spirit driven, spirit led, going, doing, talking, showing, teaching, healing, helping, praying, sharing.

And what an adventure it is, to cast our lot with God's only Son as the church lives the gospel into the world.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.