

Who, me?

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

May 16, 2021

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

The choosing of leaders in our culture has always piqued my curiosity; from the fairly straightforward political processes, to elect a party leader, to the mysterious process of a papal enclave electing a new pope. Sometimes surprising choices are made. I don't know about you, but I fervently believe that our United Church of Canada somehow seems to elect the Moderator we need at a given time.

Moderator Robert Smith and the national church leaders had been struggling with the question of whether or not to apologize to Indigenous peoples for church's collective sin, the legacy of residential schools. He came here, to Sudbury for our national General Council meeting in 1986, after a long and arduous journey, no one knowing what would happen. As it turned out, our church elected to apologize publicly, the Right Rev. Bob Smith speaking those words so sincerely.¹

That same General Council in Sudbury then elected Anne Squire, the first laywoman to assume the role as head of our Church. Another deeply emotional issue was pressing on the hearts and minds of United Church congregations; the theology of affirming people from the LGBTQ community as Ordered Ministers in The United Church of Canada. Congregations were polarized, the church tested, as Moderator Squire said:

I think the church is being tested by fire. It could be burned to ashes — but it could be strengthened and tempered like steel.²

The General Council she convened in 1988 made a statement³ that opened the door to faithful gay and lesbian church leaders, to being Ordained or Commissioned. A very tense time in my congregation, needing faithful leaders.

We all know that the best decisions are made intentionally, patiently making sense of the facts, made prayerfully. We know, waiting can be painful. Peter didn't have patience. Scholars are baffled by this story today in the book of Acts. Jesus had just ascended to heaven; the community of those who followed Jesus were the leaders. The story is baffling because rather than focusing on the mission, they made it their first priority to elect a new apostle to fill the gap left by infamous Judas. Sure, they prayed before began casting lots.

Jesus had said that the Spirit would come to them powerfully. Couldn't they wait for that Spirit to come, to guide them? In this quick election, two names were shortlisted – Justus (also called Barsabbas) and Matthias. Peter laid out the criteria for who could be an apostle, so there certainly were women like Mary, Jesus' mother – who were with Jesus from baptism to his resurrection. As it turned out, neither Justus nor Matthias appeared in any of the biblical stories to follow.

¹ The text for the Apology can be found at <https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/apologies-response-crest.pdf>

² "Sexual orientation and the pulpit". Maclean's Magazine. May 30, 1988.

³ *Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality*. To see the "big picture" of how the United Church became more inclusive, see <https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/lgbtqia-two-spirit-timeline.pdf>

Church historian Justo L. Gonzalez is quite candid:

What went wrong with the selection was they placed issues of organizational structure before that of the mission of the church. Their failure to wait on the gift of the Holy Spirit made the disciples pre-empt the authority of the Spirit by focusing on matters of church structure rather than the new mission to the Gentiles, as is made clear in the later chapters of Acts. ⁴

This is a good reminder to us, followers of Jesus, people of Spirit, to ensure that Spirit is at the heart of why we do things; perhaps with that foundation, our structures will evolve. We never heard again about Matthias, or Justus who came in second. But we can be sure that they didn't stop serving, risking, loving.

Who is "Justus" or "Matthias" among us, today? Who are the little-known faithful leaders and creative servants?⁵

That Thursday crew who came into the office on Thursdays – Leigh and Freda and Pat – it seems so long ago to set up for Sunday worship. Jill and Jeannine who quietly, creatively set up the sanctuary. Roger and Mallon who have been here almost every week; without them there would be no worship, but you don't see them. How about the many who stepped forward to bake muffins, to pick up and deliver the muffins to downtown programs where people who just barely survive from day-to-day can have a healthy treat?

I think of our Resource Team who quietly and regularly keep an eye on our financial and property resources, our Stewardship Team who inspire us to become more involved... the Worship Planning Team who helps me, us, to adapt as we try to offer meaningful worship in pandemic times.

Justus and Matthias, though never heard from again, they quietly served in risky and bold ways, even if they don't get any credit.

Jesus called you! And you who might not be serving in some capacity, yet, you're pondering it. Jesus is calling you, too. Who me? Yes you! Amen.

⁴ Feasting on the Word, "Theological Perspective" Noel Leo Erskine *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*

⁵ Barbara K. Lundblad "Homiletical Perspective" Ibid.