

Opening a New Chapter

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

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

A preacher was trying to contextualize the exercise of “casting of lots” in today’s reading, as they picked a new Apostle. The leader numbered each paper bulletin in an inconspicuous place. Then, at the start of the sermon time, drew a slip of paper from the pulpit and called out the number of the “winner.” When the person with that number is identified, tell them that they have the honour of being selected to preach next Sunday.

As with so much of our rich collection of Bible stories, letters and teachings, there are so many questions arising from this first chapter of Acts for me.

One question for me: Why Peter? Peter, who denied knowing Jesus, who was often a little too quick to say things. Peter, nonetheless, is tapped by Jesus to lead the community. Luke ends the Gospel with Jesus appearing to his friends, blessing them, and is then “carried up to heaven” according to Luke. Luke then continues the Story into the Book of Acts, beginning chapter one with the trauma among Jesus’ followers, an empty spot among the 12 Apostles. Might this be somewhat like filling an empty Council position at St. Andrew’s?

I have another question: Why rolling dice to elect a new leader? Where did that come from? God working through a game of chance? I don’t have an answer for that one.

Then another question, upon electing Matthias. What happened to Matthias? We never hear from him again in the Bible.

Sitting with questions, as our Moderator Carmen Lansdowne said numerous times at last weekend’s Regional Council AGM, “rumbling with the Bible” – struggling with questions, not rushing to answer them, forces us to contend with very real dilemmas, frailties, fears we live with. I’m going to leave those questions out there, hanging.

If we happened to look at Matthias again, there are stories about Matthias and his ministry outside the Bible tradition. However, I think that there is something more important at the heart of this story, more essential than literal facts. I sense a glimmer of Good News, here in this time where the Jesus community are traumatized by betrayal and death.

Isn’t it remarkable how the community *cooperated*. They used this strange game of casting lots to pick an Apostle. I wonder what this says about how that community saw God as potentially working through a game of chance. That story, though, says more to me about the “community” they had become – how they come together, how they work together and pray together. A word, how the community cooperated¹ in their most stressful time.

The truth we know in our human existence is that new chapters – endings and beginnings – can at best be unnerving, at worst, fraught with fear and doubt. Personally

¹ That they cooperate is a point made by F. Scott Spencer in this past issue of Working Preacher (workingpreacher.org) in the May 12, 2024 Commentary on Acts 1:15-17, 21-26.

speaking, I feel least grounded when I am grieving – my emotions are frayed and I'm often not thinking properly. Perhaps some of you can relate.

Think about when you and I ended a relationship, or said good bye to high school friends as you moved to new things. How about coping with a death of someone who we loved and admired? So, imagine those disciples, that diverse community of opinions, different engendered perspectives, very diverse socioeconomically. Wouldn't there have been enormous potential for conflict in this group, given the challenges that they faced, without Jesus physically with them.

Right now, I'm reading through a book entitled "Wait – Is this Racist?"² as we build up a team here at St. Andrew's to explore how we might become anti-racist. As you can imagine, I'm coming to terms with the reality that I, as a white male with other societal privileges, am not only unhelpful at times to challenging a racist system, I can be hurting the cause. But the author makes a helpful distinction for me between a privileged person feeling "guilt" and "shame". Guilt is good, the author says, so long as it motivates changes in attitude and action. Shame, on the other hand, is not good. Shame can paralyze us when we know we are part of a system, and guilt embeds itself into us. At times like that, we might avoid the truth of the situation, fearing the uncertainty of leaning into the things we can, and must, change.

I say this, then, as I think again about the situations of Peter and Judas. Peter, definitely betrayed Jesus. He felt guilty, but he returned to the community that welcomed him back. Whereas Judas, I suspect, was awash in shame for what he did, and left his community. He took matters into his own hands, doubted that the love and forgiveness of his community would welcome him back. That was a tragedy. That is a tragedy, in Biblical terms, every time a child of God does not return to the loving community.

So, my friends, I'm thinking about us, today. How do we become that community that has the faith to carry on in spite of challenges, uncertainty, even as we may face fear and doubt? How do we ground ourselves in the spirit of that original Book of Acts community that came to call themselves the Way – following Jesus who called himself in John "the Way, the truth, the life".

How do we intentionally show up for one another, love one another, encourage one another to speak truth in times of transition? How do we, in spite of people making errors of judgement, abandoning our community, even criticizing our community, welcome them back with open arms?

How do we find the courage to lean into truth telling in this new chapter of St. Andrew's life, as our "Doing Discipleship" conversations near the completion in June, and as we, you, discern a path forward in the Fall? Of course, I am no psychic, and do not know what lays ahead for you, me, for us. But you and I are firmly grounded in a faith tradition that assures us that we are not alone as we open new chapters in life. So as the surprising wonder of Pentecost looms just around the corner, may we hold firm to the belief that God has a vision, and our job as followers of Jesus, as collectively the community of Jesus here at St. Andrew's United Church, our call is to embrace God's vision, together. Amen.

² *Wait Is This Racist?: A Guide to Becoming an Anti-racist Church*. Kerry Connelly. © 2022 WJK Books