

Justus, Matthias, and the Rest of Us
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Acts 1: 12-17, 21-26

When I was in middle school, there was a very popular trend sweeping across church youth groups in the United States. WWJD bracelets, short for “What Would Jesus Do” were seen on just about every wrist in just about every color. The idea, inspired by a novel published several years earlier, was that you would have a tangible reminder to ask the question “What Would Jesus Do” in every situation that presented itself, especially the challenging ones.

Years later, long after the fad had passed, I encountered the book “The Spirit of the Disciplines” by Dallas Willard, in which near the beginning he talks about the flaw in the thinking behind the WWJD movement, which is namely the suggestion that “to follow Jesus simply means to try to behave as he did when he was ‘on the spot.’ There’s no realization that what Jesus did in such cases was, in a large and essential measure, the natural outflow of the life he lived when he was not on the spot.” It would be a bit like trying to mimic what you see in a game from a favorite athlete - a batting stance, a certain style of basketball shot, without emulating the countless hours of repetitive practicing of the basics.

In today’s passage we drop in on the disciples in the first chapter of Acts. These disciples had left their homes and their families to follow Jesus. They had placed their hopes and dreams upon him and staked their very lives upon his message. They watched in horror as it all seemed to come crashing down when Jesus died. But then they saw him alive. And just when they were getting used to having him around again he leaves them in rather dramatic fashion - ascending to heaven. They had been through so much together and while they are still trying to make sense of it all the bitter truth sinks in that their friend - one who had experienced everything they had, one who had shared in their ministry, and was one of them, Judas - had betrayed them and was now gone. So now what?

And so the book of Acts begins to tell the story. But the title Acts of the Apostles, as it appears in our Bibles, is really misleading. Because as the story unfolds, it goes to great lengths to show that it is not about what the apostles do, but is fundamentally about what God is doing through them. Here in this first chapter we see them following the first command of the risen Jesus. Within the first few verses of the book Jesus instructs the apostles to remain in Jerusalem and wait there for the promise of the Father, referring to the baptism of the Holy Spirit they would soon receive.

Therefore the first great act of this eager bunch, ready to change the world, fired up from time spent with their Rabbi who was raised from the dead was not a spectacular miracle. Their first great act was to take a long Sabbath day's walk back to Jerusalem and wait. All they have to go on is what Jesus promised them. But that seems to be how Jesus equips his followers - with promises, not schedules. In his book on Acts, Matthew Skinner writes, "To live like this — waiting — requires just as much courage as if Jesus had told them to go out immediately and change the world on their own." I think he's right because it takes courage to die to self - to lay down your own will and trust in God's will when it is hard to see on your own.

Though it seems like waiting is tantamount to doing nothing, in this case it is far from it. They gathered together in - I love this detail - an upper room (there's probably some good vibes there) and they devoted themselves to prayer. And they look to Scripture in hopes that it would speak into their present situation.

The first order of business as they wait is to replace Judas, restoring the number of disciples to twelve. Remember, at this point, the followers of Jesus still constituted a movement within Judaism, and so the number 12 was symbolically and theologically important, echoing the 12 tribes of Israel. The criteria they put forward, a man who accompanied them during the time beginning with John's baptism through when Jesus was taken up from them, narrowed it down to two - Justus and Matthias. And I love what happens next.

They pray, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And then a thundering voice from heaven said, "I choose Matthias." Except, that's not what happened at all. They pray together for God to show them the one and then they cast lots...which is pretty much like calling a coin toss...or rock paper scissors. That is how Matthias was chosen and frankly I'm a little surprised Justus didn't beg for them to at least do best out of three.

If this isn't a passage Presbyterians can really get behind, I don't know what is. I mean, we're not always all that comfortable with dramatic, spontaneous prayer. But a nice, orderly process for making a decision? Mmm. That is right up our alley. What I love about this is that the story isn't presented as if casting lots is plan B after the prayer didn't yield any revelations. It's told as if the way God shows them the one is by somehow being present in the very ordinary process of making a decision by the casting of lots.

As you read on in the book of Acts, the apostles go on to do some amazing things. But they don't arise from out of nowhere. First, they do the basics. They cultivate a life together where they wait on God, immerse themselves in prayer, and they dwell in Scripture. They expect to see God at work in the ordinary. This prepares them for their vocation to be witnesses to Christ's resurrection.

Friends, that is our vocation too. Today, we welcome 27 young women and men who have journeyed through confirmation together. Today, they (you) join the church as members and to be a member of Christ's church is to be a witness to his resurrection. This isn't just in the sense of believing Jesus rose from the dead, but it's in the sense of giving account to others how that changes everything. A Christian is one who witnesses to all of the ways that death does not rule the day. A Christian is one who, in light of the reality of resurrection, spreads love and not hate, peace and not violence, wholeness and not fragmentation.

Sure, when you look at the life of the Church, it might often appear to be so unbearably normal and ordinary. But that is just us practicing the basics. Stick around long enough, and you will see these same ordinary church folk doing radical acts of justice and mercy, loving one another with a kind of love found nowhere else, staring death in the face without fear, and countless other ways in which God is moving in and through us all.

May it be so.
Amen.

Resources used or cited

Skinner, Matthew L. *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts*. Brazos Press, 2015.

Willard, Dallas. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. Family Christian Press, 2001.