

## “And the Lot Fell on Matthias”

Acts of the Apostles 1:15-17, 21-26

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Though we don't know much about Matthias, the story of his selection to fill the leadership gap created by the departure of Judas is an important story for the life of the church.

What we have here is the earliest evidence of a church nominating committee. A need for leadership has been identified. Two individuals have been named as candidates to fill that leadership void. And then, the members of the nominating committee pray! They pray for the gift of discernment. Who does God have in mind for leadership in the church at this particular time? Both Matthias and Justus have spiritual gifts for ministry. The eleven surrender the matter to God.

I say it is an important story for the church for several reasons. Judas had been one of the original twelve disciples named by the Gospel writers. That group of twelve had become a tight community of leaders, doing everything together for a period of three years or more. The selection of Matthias signals the beginning of the handing off of the mantle of leadership. Those who had first been entrusted with the Gospel are now welcoming newcomers into the circle of leadership. This is so essential in every local church, passing the mantle of leadership to those who may not have been leaders when it all got started, but who are fully present now in spirit, in wisdom, and in generosity.

Twenty one years ago, when I attended my first executive board meeting, I believe I was the youngest person in the room. When we gather this week on the fourth Tuesday of May, I believe I will be the oldest person in the room. I see this as a healthy trend.

The mantle of leadership has been passed to a new generation. That does not mean our elders are any less revered, any less needed; it means that God is setting the stage for the next era of servant leadership. Matthias is alive and well at South Church! We are not told what happened to Justus, the one not selected to replace Judas, but if I know anything about nominating committees, I believe they found another way for him to volunteer!

The next truth this story reveals to the church is the working assumption that God has someone in mind for each and every ministry the church imagines; and that prayer is the avenue for discerning who that person is.

Many many years ago, I was sitting with our Missions Board as they were planning the menu they would serve at the homeless shelter in Hartford known as the South Park Inn. The discussion centered on whether to serve mashed potatoes out of a box that just required adding hot water and stirring, or whether to serve a whole, baked Idaho potato to each person. One person on that board raised her hand and spoke from her own experience of having lived in a homeless shelter once upon a time herself. She simply said, 'a baked potato will make a homeless person's day.' Let me tell you, 120 baked potatoes never looked so good! Reflecting on that incident as a theologian, I would say that God had a hand in raising up that woman to serve on that board at that time in history. Her leadership transformed our way of thinking. We stopped thinking in terms of convenience for ourselves and started thinking about how to make a homeless person's day! Her leadership did not arise out of a college education or a military command or a Fortune 500 business board room. It arose out of the common experience of her own life. To this day, I quietly thank God for her leadership.

The story in the Acts of the Apostles doesn't reveal what Matthias was good at or what he knew well, just that God had him in mind to fill a leadership role.

One of my core beliefs is that everybody here has some insight, some talent, some experience, some hobby, some passion that has been in the freezer long enough. It's time to thaw out these frozen assets. This is what Jesus meant when he chided the disciples, 'don't hide your light under a basket; let it shine for all in the house to see.'

Here's an example. In 1977, the English teacher at Dupree High School in our town on the Cheyenne River Reservation called and explained they were doing a unit on the poets of Puritan New England, and would I be willing to come and talk about the poetry of Reverend Edward Taylor. Little did she know that I had been confirmed in the church in Westfield, Massachusetts that had been founded by Reverend Taylor in 1679! I knew a little bit about his poetry, not enough for a lecture. So, I called the church, spoke with the historian, and discovered there is a chapter in the book published to celebrate that town's tercentennial anniversary, a chapter on the poetry of Edward Taylor. The author of that chapter is Dwight Call, who at that very time was the director of the Sioux YMCA and lived one block away from me! How Providential is that! So, I thanked the English teacher for her invitation but referred her to a true expert in the field of Puritan poets. Dwight gave the talk! When I think back on that incident, as a theologian, I see that God raises up the right person and the right time for the right reason!

This summer, the Stewardship Committee and the Board of Discipleship Education invite us twice a month, on Sunday mornings, to share with the children that one special skill or insight we may have gained in the course of our lives. It might be we have an Edward Taylor scholar in the congregation! It may be we have someone who knows the right way to plant an avocado pit in a bowl of water such that it sprouts shoots of green straight up tall.

I told the stewardship and board of discipleship education folks I am confident Matthias is still among us. Some of you have already spoken up!

The next truth found in the Matthias story is revealed in the confident language of the prayer that is offered by the nominating committee. They begin by praying, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart...” What we have here is a simple profession of faith. The ones praying reveal their theology. God knows everyone’s heart. The \$64,000 word for this is ‘omniscient’. God is omniscient, having all knowledge, knowing everyone’s heart.

One of my basic beliefs is this: whenever God entrusts a ministry or a mission to a local church, God also knows someone who has the heart for nurturing that ministry or that mission.

Here are three quick examples of what I mean. There is no doubt in my mind that God has called South Church into a ministry that prays constantly for those among us who are ill or wounded or discouraged. And it is just as clear that God raised up knitters to hand-knit prayer shawls, warm garments created by loving hands, blankets of grace. When those of us who have received a prayer shawl wrap ourselves in the delicate yarns, we know we are wrapped securely in the arms of God. I had no clue who in this church knows how to knit. But God knows. God knows everyone’s heart.

There is no doubt in my mind that God has called South Church into a ministry of feeding the hungry. And it is just as clear that God has raised up many willing hands. When Food Share gained permission to take over the Varney Farm in South Windsor, planting and harvesting two acres of fertile land, several of you showed up with gloves and hoes and strong backs! God even raised up one of our master gardeners!

Several young teens got involved! Two people in their 80's were found on their knees pulling weeds and plucking up ripe egg plant.

Others have become gleaners, harvesting apples and sweet corn and turnips on local farms. I had no clue who in this church loves to get their hands in the soil, but God knows. God knows everyone's heart.

There is no doubt in my mind that God has called South Church to get involved in the battle to end the spread of AIDS. And it is just as clear that God is shaking loose some of the resources needed for this life-saving work. The Endowment Committee just allocated \$3000 for a ministry known in Malawi as SAMALA. These brave health workers are making an impact by going directly to those most likely to be spreading AIDS: the traveling sales people, the sex trade practitioners, and the bicycle taxi operators. This is AIDS education way beyond the bill board and the pamphlet and the radio message. SAMALA is direct and personal and caring. These are faith-based men and women who believe in the sanctity of life and they are called by God to be instruments of deliverance. I had no idea where that much money might be found to sustain SAMALA'S ministry, but God knew. God knows everything.

As those earliest disciples prayed for clarity in selecting a new leader, they prayed with confidence to an omniscient God!  
If you happen to be on the nominating committee, this Bible story is for you! If you happen to be on the stewardship committee, this story has your name written all over it. If you are on one of the board of discipleship education teams, this story is worth reading. AND...if you are a person ready to share the talent God has given you, only say the word.

If you are into photography, God has something in mind for you!  
If you are into baking, God has something in mind for you.

If you are into non-competitive games, God has something in mind for you.

If you are into keeping a journal, God has something in mind for you!

If you are into the interpretation of dreams, God has something in mind for you.

Okay, I'll stop there. What I know is that Matthias lives! In the greatest of hope, Amen!