

“Why Mathias?”

Psalm 1, Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26

7th Sunday of Easter/B, May 20, 2012

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Jesus has finally left his friends, for good. No really, he is not coming back this time, not for breakfast on the beach, not to calm their fears in the Upper Room. Jesus has finally ascended into heaven. The disciples believed Jesus was never coming back when he was crucified. They were wrong. Easter reminds us that Jesus destroys our understanding of death and life. For forty days Jesus has periodically appeared to his disciples; eating and praying and helping them prepare to move forward.

To some these extra forty days may seem a bit cruel. When we watch someone die we do not expect them to return to us days or weeks later. Perhaps that is why it is so difficult to let a loved one truly go when it is their time. When you are present at the moment of death you may watch the line on the machine go flat and the beeping cease, but it is difficult to accept that your loved one is truly gone. You hope for one more breath, one more heartbeat, one more rise of the chest. Each post resurrection appearance of Jesus is a gift. It may be a strange and terrifying gift, but a gift none the less.

Before Jesus ascends into heaven he promises to appear again, however they will not know when that time might come. First he must send the Holy Spirit and in order for the Holy Spirit to come, Jesus must depart. It is time for the disciples to take up the mantle of leadership. The remaining eleven disciples returned to Jerusalem with the others. This is where the church is born. I know we celebrate the birth of the church at Pentecost. This is where it truly began. Everything could have ended here if they had not moved beyond their fears to receive the Spirit and establish the body of Christ.

First they must take care of some unfinished business. They need to find a replacement for Judas. This replacement ceremony happens the week between the ascension and Pentecost. There were some simple criteria to be considered for the open position. You needed to have been a part of the ministry from the beginning, from the baptism of John until the day when Jesus was taken from them. According to the story, only male disciples were eligible. They proposed two names, Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus and Mathias. They prayed and then they cast lots to decide who would become the next disciple. This would have been something like flipping a coin. It is important to seek God's guidance when making important decisions. It seems a bit odd that in the end the final decision comes down to chance. I imagine it might be like discerning two candidates for a church's next senior minister and then flipping a coin to decide who it would be. Perhaps that is the only way to assure that it is in fact God's will. Heads it's Barsabbas, tails it's Mathias; Mathias "wins."

Who among us can authenticate that any decision we make is truly from God? I suppose we can never be completely sure. We trust that if we pray about a decision and invite the Holy Spirit to speak to our hearts, the decision we come to will be accepted as God's

will. It is easier to say “thy will be done” than to actually allow God’s will to be done. When the lot is cast and drawn, it is Mathias that is chosen to replace Judas.

Why Mathias? We really don’t know. He apparently was one of only two men to meet the criteria. It are told this is God’s will that Mathias is chosen to fill the empty position. How different might it have been if they had considered a woman to replace Judas? It would not have been the custom of the day to consider a woman for such a position, however, this could have been the disciples shining moment to show the world that their Way was different from all others.

One can trace the discrimination of women in ministry back to this moment. This is where the concept of apostolic succession begins. There were perhaps some women who had been part of this ministry from John’s baptism until the end, however they were not considered viable candidates. I believe the church missed an opportunity to model Jesus’ radical inclusivity, that this ministry of love and inclusion was something different from anything they had ever experienced. The women were the only ones to remain with Jesus at the cross when the male disciples had denied and cowered and fled. The women overcame their fear and grief to attend to Jesus after his death. The women told the others that Jesus was not dead and would meet them in Galilee. It was their faithful witness that kept the movement alive in the wake of such sadness and tragedy.

Despite her faithful service, her leadership among the women, her contribution to the ministry, and her witness to Jesus’ resurrection, Mary Magdalene’s name never came up. Not a single woman was considered worthy to be part of the elite twelve, the original founding believers. Imagine how different it would have been if the Spirit had led them to call a single woman to this level of leadership?

The Rev. Dr. Renita Weems wonders, “How different history might have been if Peter and the other apostles that week leading up to the festival of Pentecost had the courage and vision to elect a woman as the apostle to replace Judas. Had the disciples such courage and vision to elect Mary perhaps those of us with leadership gifts would not have been forced, as women have for centuries, to defend our right to preach, teach, and hold leadership positions in the church (or in our culture)... If only Peter had stepped forward and defended Mary’s candidacy, reminding the audience of her leadership and contribution to Jesus’ ministry and that, as one of the first to witness Jesus’ resurrection, she was especially qualified for the job, the church today would probably be a radically different place for both its male and female followers.”¹

As a woman in ministry, I grieve this decision. Why would God call women to serve so faithfully and courageously in Jesus’ ministry only to be overlooked at this moment? We proclaim that Jesus came to break down barriers, to make visible those who were invisible, to give voice to those who were not heard. Why then were women to egregiously overlooked? Jesus modeled radical inclusivity however; he did not invite a woman to be one of the twelve disciples. If God created us in God’s image and fashioned

¹ Renita Weems, “The Gospel of Mary,” *30 Good Minutes*, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, January 16, 2005,

us male and female, unique yet equally valued, it is a shame that in some churches women are still seen as unfit for leadership, lesser than, not good enough.

I am grateful that in many places women are finally accepted as equal partners in ministry. I admit that even in our progressive denomination, there are still many places where prejudice against women in leadership still exists. There are many churches that have yet to call a female senior pastor. My son once looked at the list of ministers in the narthex and asked Dick Allen why his mother's name was not there. He told him that was the list of "senior ministers"; however that is not what it says. If you look the plaque says "ministers" without distinction. That is how God sees it as well. We are ministers, without distinction, however that is not what people experience. My son was right. His mother's name is missing from the list of ministers, as is any other ordained minister, male or female, that has served in any capacity beyond senior minister.

I admit placing my name on a plaque does not authenticate my ministry. Its absence does however, perpetuate a misperception that senior ministry is more important than other ministry and that role is honored above others. It perpetuates an ecclesiastical "separate but equal" mentality. The women who were early disciples were no less worthy of the title of "apostle" than the twelve men who were selected. As is true today, the church would not have survived without the faithful service of many women. It is time to honor those women, to bring them out of the shadows and fully authenticate the work that they were called to do.

Renita Weems goes on to say, "After years of being at the mercy of systems of which you are not a participating part, you find in yourself the reason to change it – for others. After having to stand silently by while others make the decisions that will most affect your life. Mary represents every woman, man, minority, who knows what it feels like to be shut out of every economic, political and ecclesiastical institution in the world, begging for voice, begging for vote, begging for visibility." We want more than a name on a plaque. Women in ministry long to be valued and appreciated, to break through that stained glass ceiling. Even though we have come a long way, there is still a long way to go.

I met a young woman at the conference annual meeting last week. I introduced myself as Audrey's mother. Audrey had been part of a video presentation where people reflected on why church matters to them. She said she was a "PK" (which means preacher's kid) and doesn't mind always having to be at church. This young woman commented, "Oh, it must be difficult to have a dad who is a minister." I said, "Oh no, I am the minister." This young minister is currently serving on her church's senior minister search committee. She is likely to meet a lot of women like me; mom and minister.

We proclaim a radical hospitality for all people in our churches and then fail to challenge or even recognize the prejudices we carry toward women in ministry. I believe it is fear that drives this prejudice. Jesus' ministry was based on love and we know, perfect love casts out fear. I suspect there was an element of fear at play the day Mathias was chosen to become an apostle. I would pray that the same would not happen today. Today imagine the Nominating Committee presenting two names to replace the departing Judas.

After prayerful consideration, the one chosen to serve would as likely be a woman as a man. There were two candidates that day, Mary and Lydia. They cast lots to decide who would serve. Her name was Mary. May it be so! Amen