

“We’ve Been Chosen”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26

How many of us voted on Tuesday? That’s pretty good. Considering the average turnout for the primary ranged anywhere from 16-30%, I’d say you all are well above average! As we all know, we went to the polls on Tuesday for the primary election, exercising our constitutional right to freely choose candidates on the ballot. And as I look out over this austere group of people, I’m pretty sure all of us did not vote the same way! That reflects our varying and differing opinions on how our elected officials should approach the challenges we face as a city, state, and country.

Now, I’d like you to switch gears for a moment and ask you to think about a time when you were chosen for something. One of our earliest memories of being chosen might be from our childhood on the school playground. We’re all grouped together to play kickball or some team sport, and the captains start choosing. And that’s when our anxiety rises. Will we be picked first? Will we be picked last? Our self-esteem is directly tied to when we are chosen and by whom. For some of us, this was always our favorite time in school, as we excelled at sports and were often chosen near the beginning. For others of us, this was always our most dreaded time in school, as we weren’t adept athletically, and often were chosen at the end, what felt like a necessity by the captain. How and when we are chosen for something can impact us in lasting ways.

Or think about a time more recently when you were chosen for something. Maybe you were asked to serve at your child’s school for a special project, and after excelling at that endeavor you were nominated and chosen to serve as leader of the parent teacher organization. Maybe you had put in for a promotion at work, and after waiting patiently you received word that you had been chosen for that new job with greater responsibilities. Maybe you had applied to multiple colleges or graduate programs, and you received word that you had been chosen for the program you were most excited about. Maybe you were asked to serve in a leadership role here at church, and after being nominated for election, you were chosen to serve as an elder, a deacon, or a trustee.

When we are chosen for something, it makes us feel valued and loved. It causes us to feel as if someone else believes in our abilities and treasures what we have to offer. The flip side of that is when we are not chosen for something, we do not feel valued or appreciated. We can take it personally when we are not selected by a group or an organization, and we can question whether we are accepted or loved for who we are.

As I look back on my life, I feel very humbled by the number of times I have been chosen for special opportunities or occasions. I remember feeling particularly moved and overwhelmed when our congregation was chosen to receive a Clergy Renewal Grant from the Lilly Foundation in 2012, because I knew of many other colleagues who had not been chosen for that program. I also remember feeling especially grateful in graduate school when I was chosen for the Parish-Pulpit Ministry Fellowship from Princeton Theological Seminary, which allowed me and Debbie to spend a year overseas before our respective calls began in the church and hospital chaplaincy. Those are two experiences which I hold on to and feel deeply grateful for being chosen, and consequently I know God shaped and molded me in significant ways through those experiences of being chosen.

This morning's scripture tells the story of the church's first election. As I joked last week, it's like the nominating committee is doing its work! But this story from Acts is not just about filling a slot on the leadership council. It reminds us that God moves in a variety of ways to choose women and men to serve as disciples. And even when we are not chosen for a specific role, we are nevertheless chosen - always and forever - through the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

To set the scene, let's consider what has happened immediately before this. The risen Jesus has spent forty days with his disciples, and they have shared in fellowship and prayer with one another. Jesus even promises them that "you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (1:5). Jesus tells them that they "will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). And then, after saying this, Jesus ascended up into the heavens from the mount called Olivet.

Once they stopped looking up, the disciples returned to Jerusalem, traveling a day's journey to get back to the holy city. They gathered together in an upper room - the eleven remaining disciples, as well as several women and other followers of Jesus (1:14). They were tired, probably bewildered and anxious, trying to decide what to do next. They knew that they were promised the Spirit's arrival soon. But what were they supposed to do in the meantime? How long would it take? Weren't they supposed to be doing something more?

Leave it to Peter to get things moving and break the awkward silence. Peter stands up among those who were gathered together - we read it was around 120 followers of Christ - and, in a sense, makes a motion to the congregation. One of the original twelve disciples, Judas, is no longer with them. He, of course, betrayed their Lord and then took his own life. Instead of moving forward with the eleven they have, Peter believes it's important to keep with tradition.

Peter then states the primary criteria for being nominated to replace Judas: it needs to be someone who knew Jesus personally. "One of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was

taken up from us - one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection” (1:21-22). And when you consider the total number of disciples, there’s a specific connection with their Jewish heritage. Noel Erskine states: “They needed to be mindful of their ancestral roots going back to the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve sons of Jacob. An important aspect of what it meant to establish the new Israel of God was that twelve apostles should be in place as witnesses to the messianic kingdom inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus” (Noel Erskine, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 528).

So, knowing the criteria for candidacy, there are two who are nominated. One is named Joseph, or Barsabbas, or Justus - he must have been known by many names, or at least was known in many circles by different names. The other is Matthias. Both must have been with Jesus since his baptism by John in the Jordan, and stayed with him through his ascension just days earlier. We don’t hear anything about their theology or their views on church growth and evangelism. Nothing is said about their families or their character. We only know that they were put forward for nomination to be the twelfth disciple - actually the thirteenth disciple, but we won’t get bogged down in semantics.

Two things strike me about what we read here in Acts. One is that if the criteria stated by Peter is that the person needed to have been present with Jesus from his baptism to his ascension, a woman would have been just as eligible and qualified. We even read earlier in this chapter that they were all gathered together, “with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus” (1:11). I know that the culture of that time was very male-dominated, which is likely why the disciples chose a man to replace Judas. But I also wonder what it would have looked like had a woman been nominated for election that day.

The second is did you notice how they chose between Barsabbas and Matthias? (pull out a die) “And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias” (1:26). Isn’t that incredible? These 120 followers of Jesus, who had gathered that day in an upper room, rolled a dice to determine who would be Judas’ replacement. Can you imagine how it would look if when we hold our congregational meeting each year to elect new officers of the church, we placed in a hat the names of those who are nominated, pulled one out, and said, “Betty’s our new elder!” That seems totally random, doesn’t it?

Or maybe not. Jeffrey Peterson-Davis writes: *The witness of the text is that the eleven disciples and the entire congregation had every confidence that this simple process of casting lots was, in fact, the way to determine the will of God in this circumstance. Matthias was the follower who was selected to be the twelfth apostle. There is no evidence in Scripture to suggest that the choice was anything but right. Of course, there is no other mention of Matthias at all in the whole of the Bible.*

Even more interesting, though, is the fact that we know the name of the runner-up. Joseph, called Barsabbas and also known as Justus, is one of those

amazing characters in the narrative whose place in history is fixed, not merely because of what he did or did not accomplish, but because of the fact that he is named . . .

Can we imagine how Joseph/Barsabbas/Justus must have felt when his lot was not drawn? We might imagine ourselves back on the kickball field with the two remaining kids, each wanting to play but only room enough for one of them. When one is chosen to fill out the last team, the other is cast to the sidelines to watch the game and lick their wounded ego. Is that how we imagine Barsabbas? Or can we imagine that he was called in another way to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus? It is interesting to remember that we know as much about this one who was not selected as we do about the one who was (ibid, 528-530).

Whether we are chosen by a group for a specific leadership role, or whether we are not chosen for that one opportunity we had so deeply desired, we are all chosen by God to be God's beloved children and disciples of God's Son, Jesus Christ. How? Through the waters of baptism and God's unmerited grace.

Whether we are one of the twelve apostles, or whether we are one of the unnamed followers of Jesus, we have been chosen by God for discipleship. Whether we are a pastor, an elder, a deacon, a trustee, or a member of the church, whether we are a lifelong believer and active participant in the church, or whether we are walking through the doors after a very long time of being away, we have been chosen by God for discipleship. Whether life is going just as we had planned it and we are on an emotional high, or whether life is falling apart all around us and we couldn't be any lower, we have been chosen by God for discipleship.

God chooses us to serve. Sometimes it's in obvious ways, like an election in an upper room. Sometimes it's in subtle ways, such as an encouraging word from a friend, or an unexpected opportunity to help. That's the power of the Holy Spirit, which we will celebrate next Sunday on Pentecost. You never know how it will move and act - but you know it will move and act according to God's love and purpose. As we prepare for the Spirit's arrival on Pentecost, may we all hear, see, feel, and know once again that we are chosen by God. Chosen to love in Christ's name; chosen to serve as Christ served us; chosen to enlighten the dark shadows of this world with the light of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.