

“The Forgotten Apostle”

Reading: 1 John 5:9-13; Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

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I preached a sermon several years ago in which I told the story of how I was never particularly good at kickball or other playground games in middle school, and how therefore I have had the experience several times of being picked last. Some people never have that crushing experience of being the one nobody really wants on their team but someone has to take you, but I think most of us have been there at some point or another, whether it was on the playground or for a job or some other setting. But the thing is that right after I told that story several years ago — I’m not sure if it was later that same day or the next Sunday, but it was soon — we had a church picnic out in the pavilion out back, and the children organized a game of touch football or something, and they invited me to play. And they were choosing teams, and the two team captains were arguing over who would have me on their team. And at long last, I was the coolest kid on the playground. It may have come twenty years too late and it may have had something to do with me being twice the size of anyone else in the game, but I was finally the coolest fifth grader on the playground.

Because I have had the experience of being chosen last, I have a soft spot for Matthias. The few brief passages we read today in Acts are the only place in the Bible he is mentioned. He holds an awkward place in our biblical story. We don’t hear anything about him before this passage, and we don’t hear anything about him afterward; he just appears, takes his place, and disappears. There aren’t even very consistent church traditions about him afterward, and usually you can count on church traditions to come up with *something*, even if it’s made up. One tradition has him heading north to Cappadocia, one has him heading east to the Caspian Sea, one has him heading south to Ethiopia, and one has him dying right there in Jerusalem.

On top of his obscurity, you’ve got to consider his position. He’s not taking the place of a beloved leader who is retiring after a long and fruitful ministry, and neither is he taking the place of someone who served boldly and faithfully and gave his life in service to God’s kingdom. No, poor Matthias has to follow Judas Iscariot, Jesus’ betrayer, the traitor and one of the most hated villains of all time. It’s hard enough to come into a position after someone has done their job well, but it’s much harder when your predecessor’s name is practically a curse word. In fact, we get a few verses in the middle of this passage inserted to remind us of just how bad Judas was: using the thirty pieces of silver he received for betraying Jesus, he buys a field, where he falls over and dies in particularly gruesome fashion. Peter at least seems to be softening the blow a little bit by using Scripture to argue that we’re not electing a successor to Judas, but we do have a space that needs filling.

And then on top of that, you have the fact that not all generations of Christians in the meantime have been terribly kind to Matthias. Not only was he chosen last by his own peers, many people since then have said that he didn’t deserve to be chosen at all. The argument is that Peter jumped the gun in electing someone to round out the Twelve Apostles, saying that Jesus already had someone else in mind — namely Saul of Tarsus, who would become the Apostle Paul when Jesus appeared to him personally (no casting of lots for him!) — and so it wasn’t Peter’s place to do what he did. As evidence, they point to the fact that there’s nothing else said about Matthias in the Bible, so he must not have amounted to much. Never mind that fact that there are several other Apostles about whom we have basically no information in the Bible. And furthermore, though Paul argues that

he is an apostle, he never claims to hold a place among the Twelve, so there's no reason to suppose he thought of himself taking Judas's place.

Like I said, I have a soft spot for this forgotten apostle, this companion in being chosen last. Even though his story takes up only a few verses in our Bible, and even though not everyone appreciates his story, Matthias reveals quite a bit to us about the kingdom of God. We've been asking for several weeks what more the work of Jesus does beyond allowing for the forgiveness of sins and the conquering of death, and we've spent this season between Easter and Pentecost diving into these stories of the first generation of Christians immediately after Easter to see how the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus impacted them, and we've seen a number of things. Matthias, brief though his story is, shows us even more.

This story comes to us at a seemingly strange point in the story, almost like an interruption. It follows immediately after the ascension of Jesus, forty days after Jesus was raised from the dead, when He suddenly disappears into heaven to begin His reign over His kingdom. It was the natural next step for Him in His story, since one should expect the victorious King to then ascend to His throne to rule, but it came as a surprise to His followers. The next big event is Pentecost, just a matter of days later, when God the Holy Spirit came in power and filled the church, sending them out on the mission of Jesus. Matthias's story, however, gets stuck right in the middle of these two great events, and it might feel pretty out of place, especially since it never gets mentioned again.

But it's not a mistake or an interruption; it's quite deliberate. It's significant that this is the first thing we see Peter leading the church in after Jesus' ascension. The number twelve is an important one in the history of God's people, since God chose the family of Abraham as the beginning of His work of redeeming the world, and over time that family grew into the twelve tribes of Israel. The Israelites had so much of their identity wrapped up in those twelve tribes: there was the history and the character of each of those tribes, there was the fact that each tribe was tied to a specific piece of land that was their promise from God, and there was the reality that many of the tribes had failed to follow God in the past and had been taken into exile as punishment, and many of them never returned.

So the twelve disciples that Jesus chose out of His larger body of followers were very significant: we might say that in a spiritual sense, these twelve men were a reconstitution of faithful Israel. They were representatives of the whole nation, responding faithfully to the work of God in Christ, and through them, God showed His faithfulness to His promises. So when Peter calls the church together after Jesus' ascension to choose a twelfth apostle, he's realizing that God is about to do yet another significant thing, and those twelve tribes need to be accounted for, so to speak. Matthias, therefore, represents God's fulfillment of His promises to His ancient people.

But there's more, because of the criteria Peter uses in choosing candidates for this position. This is not a purely open election for anyone to throw their name in the hat. Peter restricts it to those "who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us." Matthias and one other man qualify; obviously Matthias was a man of faith and constancy who had been seeking God for many years. But here's Peter's reason: "For one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection." There is a shift taking place: no longer are the Twelve intended to be merely representatives of faithful Israel

from the past, they are now intended to be witnesses of the message of Christ in the future. The church is not the new and improved version of Israel, because Israel was defined largely by being born into the family. Now the people of God are defined by witnessing the risen Christ. God's ancient chosen people are present at this moment of God's faithfulness, but now God is expanding His invitation to include all who respond to Christ.

So this forgotten apostle Matthias is showing us God's faithfulness to His promises of the past, and he's showing us God's intent for the future, to build a nation of people who have encountered the living Christ. But more than that, Matthias underlines God's chosen method. A lot of people give the church a lot of flack these days, and we have to admit that a lot of it is deserved. The church has made some terrible mistakes through the centuries, and it has not always reflected the image of Christ well. And even when the church has been doing fairly well at its mission, we often hear people today complaining about how institutionalized the church is, and how Christianity is a relationship, not a religion. And again, there's truth in that; being a member of the organization of the church is much less important than knowing Christ in a way that transforms your life. But here we see Peter realizing the need for a continuation of the message of Jesus through an organized group. The church is part of God's plan. People are still coming to Christ today because that first generation of witnesses planned to pass the message on to others, and in so doing they preserved the true message of the gospel and passed down the authority of Christ's ministry.

That certainly doesn't mean that God doesn't work outside the church, and that the church has the corner on experiencing God. But it does mean that an important part of God's story is the continuity of the organized body of believers passing the truth and the faith down from one to another. The church is the bride of Christ, and so it would be abnormal to try to live a Christian life and completely reject the church in all its forms.

And so Matthias shows us the importance of the body of Christ in God's plan, but he also shows us the importance of an individual life lived faithfully for Christ. Again, we know very little about this man, but we know that he was steadfast in seeking God. He was apparently a disciple of John the Baptist before Jesus started His ministry, so Matthias was committed to repentance and sacrifice. He was a follower of Jesus from the start, and he was there all throughout. He didn't get fed up and leave, or reject the hard teachings Jesus gave, or cower before the powerful people who opposed Jesus, or abandon the kingdom of God when Jesus was crucified. And, as far as we know, he didn't complain when twelve of his peers were elevated above him. In fact, I'm pretty sure Jesus Himself even had something to say about the least being the greatest in the kingdom of heaven when some of the twelve began arguing about who was the greatest.

Matthias is an illustration for us of the importance of remaining steadfast in the faith, sometimes without anyone noticing. He's an example to us of the need for humility in our lives, because humility is a kingdom virtue that God can use mightily. And again, especially considering that Matthias was coming after Judas, taking a job that not many would want, wondering if there would be questions and comments about whether anyone should do this, he's a reminder that sometimes the work of God comes in unexpected ways and sometimes it pushes us beyond where we're comfortable, if only we're willing. And he's a reminder to us of the importance of the church, of God's great work in calling us together and sharing the stories of Jesus and our experiences with Him and passing those stories on to others. May we all do as well as this forgotten apostle.



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