



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 17, 2015

“Casting Lots”

(Acts 1:23)

Rev. David K. Groth

“So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas...and Matthias. Then, they prayed, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry....’ Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles” (Acts 1:23ff).

COLLECT: O King of glory, Lord of hosts, uplifted in triumph far above all heavens, leave us not without consolation but send us the Spirit of truth whom You promised from the Father; for You live and reign with Him and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

The driveway leading to my parents' home is about a quarter mile long. One day, we discovered a dead skunk next to it. It stank. The dog wanted to roll in it. It needed to be buried. My parents were going out that evening, so they assigned the task to my brothers and me. We quickly agreed it was better that one person should do this for the good of the whole. So Andy put three straws in his hand: two long and a short. The short straw, of course, got the short end of the deal. Paul chose first and slowly pulled out a nice long straw. Two straws remained. I put my fingers on one. Andy tightened his grip and said, "You sure you want that one?" After some deliberation, I tugged hard. Out came the short straw!

Shovel in hand I cautiously approached the problem; Andy and Paul stood at a safe distance, hoping to be entertained. I'm still not sure how it happened, but as I shimmied that shovel underneath the skunk, so carefully, so gently, somehow that action triggered a terrific discharge. It was as if something detonated. It got in my hair, my hands, on my pants. Hoping to share the experience I ran toward my brothers, but they were older and faster. They locked me out of the house and through a window called me "Pepe Le Pu." Eventually they lobbed out some shampoo and soap and told me to use the hose, which I did, numerous times. It helped a little. Mom and dad came home early with cans of tomato juice and that helped a little more. I haven't agreed to draw straws since.

The Bible says that after Judas took his own life, they needed to replace him, so there would be twelve disciples, again, or, as our passage now calls them: apostles. They did this by casting lots. Here's how it works. The names of the candidates were written on stones of about equal size and

weight. Those stones were put into a clay jar and were then shaken until one fell out. The one whose name was on the first stone to fall out was elected to office. In this case, the stone with Matthias' name fell out first, so he became the twelfth apostle.

I've always wondered about that. It seems like a random and accidental way of doing things, especially for an event of this magnitude. One bad apple in a group of twelve can have quite an impact. Wouldn't it have been better to simply choose the man they thought was best? I wonder how it made Matthias feel. Was he confident it was God's will, or did the randomness bother him. And I wonder how it made Barsabbas feel, the man not chosen.

Casting lots seems odd to us, but among the Jews it was a natural way of doing things. This was not a form of gambling, which was forbidden among the Jews. But casting lots was an Old Testament provision the Lord gave his people. It determined, for instance, which goat was to serve as the sin offering and which was to be released into the wild as the scapegoat (Lev. 16:8-10). Casting lots determined how the Promised Land was to be distributed among the twelve tribes of Israel (Josh. 18:10). It determined the duty assignments of the priests in the temple (Lk. 1:5-9). Occasionally it did turn into a form of gambling. You recall how soldiers cast lots for the seamless tunic of Jesus (Jn. 19:23-24). That's different from what's going on here. But by casting lots to determine the twelfth apostle, they believed they were allowing God to have the final say. To a certain point, they used their reason. One of the criteria was that all apostles must have personally witnessed the resurrection. So they narrowed the field down, but then prayed and gave the Lord the opportunity to make the final decision.

What can we learn from this? I'm not advocating that we resurrect the practice of casting lots this side of Pentecost. In fact, this is the last time the Bible ever mentions "casting lots", just days before the Spirit, the Counselor, was given at Pentecost...and that's no accident.

But it seems to me we sometimes forget to include

the Lord in our decision making. We rely solely on our own decision making skills, and the Lord is left out of the equation altogether. Small wonder then, that we agonize over some decisions, and then, and afterwards, may doubt whether we made the right one. The big decisions can feel like a roll of the dice, and we question whether we bought the right house, chose the right major, are working in the right job. So how do we make decisions we know are good and God pleasing?

Here's an example. A young couple in St. Louis came to me for counsel. They were without children, but had already suffered multiple and devastating miscarriages. In their grief, they had many questions. Was the Lord telling them they shouldn't have children? How long should they keep trying? Did the Lord want them to adopt? I couldn't answer those questions. I encouraged them to keep praying about it, but I also encouraged them to set a time line and entrust the decision into the Lord's hands. So for example, they might pray, "Lord, we pray it's your will to bless us with a child and we're going to keep trying for another year and a half. If, however, you desire we should adopt, beginning November 1st of next year, we will start the process."

I don't think the Lord feels pinned down or manipulated when we pray to him like that. I think he rather likes it when we take him seriously, when we look to him for guidance and leadership. It gives him freedom to lead us and be our God, and gives us freedom to be his people and follow where he leads.

Now we can't do that with every decision but can do that with some of the big decisions. For example, "Lord, you know I'm planning to make this career move. If this is not your will for me, make it abundantly clear and throw all kinds of obstacles in the way."

How else do Christians make decisions? In many ways, we make them the same way everyone else does. We weigh the pros and the cons, the risks and the benefits.

But people of faith have other things to consider as

well, beyond just our own self-interest. For example, what would the Lord want us to do? Sometimes he makes decisions very easy for Christians. For example, if Scripture prohibits the action in question, God has already made your decision for you, right? Don't do it. Let God be God. One way he leads us is by saying, "Thou shalt not . . ." And he does this for our good . . . not to be a killjoy. You cannot expect God to bless you or the decisions you make if you refuse to obey his commands.

The small decisions also matter. We face hundreds of them every day . . . what we're going to eat, whether we're going to exercise, what we're going to watch on Netflix. Over time, those small decisions turn into habits, habits that we don't think about. So, if we make the small decisions well from the start, we don't really have to worry about them. However, if we don't make them well: if we make bad small decisions, we will probably make bad big decisions.

For example, if you make bad decisions about how you spend small amounts of money (for example, impulse buying, or spending money you really don't have), if you do that with small amounts of money, you'll probably do the same with large amounts (going on a vacation for which you didn't save). Similarly, if you can't be trusted with dimes and quarters out of the soda and coffee can at work, you probably can't be trusted with much larger amounts of cash.

Another example: marital infidelity never starts out as a full blast affair. It starts with what we might *think* of as harmless flirtation. Get the small things right and we don't have to worry about the big things. Similarly, those who allow themselves to be pulled in by soft porn will probably be pulled in by the other kind. So the key is to make good and God-honoring small decisions. "One who is faithful in a very little" Jesus said, "is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much" (Lk. 16:10).

Christians also have to concern ourselves with the impression we give to others. The world says, "Don't worry

about what others think. Just do your own thing.” But as Christians we *must* be aware of the witness we’re giving. What was it that Jesus said? “It would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone hung around your neck than to cause one of these little ones [in the faith] to fall into sin” (Luke 17:2). And Proverbs 25 says, “Like a muddied spring or a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked” (v. 26).

Of course, prayer should be a part of Christian decision making. If you’re struggling with a decision, pray about it. But if you’re going to pray about it, be ready to accept and obey God’s answer. Proverbs 3 says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths” (vv. 5-6).

Study God’s Word to see what it says about the decision you face. His Word helps us make God-pleasing decisions. Though ancient, I challenge you to find any present day issue which is so new that it makes God’s Word irrelevant. His Word remains a lamp unto our feet and a light for our path (Ps. 119:105).

When you consult God’s Word for help with decisions, be sure you’re not the only one who holds to your interpretation of Scripture. Remember, you have blind spots and ulterior motives that sway your decisions. You are no exception to the rule. Proverbs 16 says, “All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the LORD weighs the motives” (v. 2).

Seek counsel from other trusted Christians. It’s easy to find someone who will tell you what you *want* to hear. But look for a trusted Christian friend or pastor or counselor who will also tell you what you don’t want to hear.

Seek counsel from Christian men and women who are further along in the journey. My first parish out of the seminary, I was called to be an assistant pastor. The senior pastor was there two weeks before he left to start teaching at the seminary. Rather suddenly, I was the sole pastor of a very large congregation and school in a changing

neighborhood. Which means I was in way over my head! But there were three retired pastors in the congregation. Krentz, Von Dielingen, and Strickert. They had over a hundred and fifty years experience between them as parish pastors. There was nothing I was facing that they hadn't seen many times before. So I sat down with them regularly, and their wisdom proved invaluable.

Listen also to that still small voice inside of you that sometimes says something just doesn't feel right here. I really believe the Holy Spirit still guides us. More than once, I've called on people not because the circumstances really warranted it, but because *not* calling on them just didn't feel right. I wasn't at peace. Very rarely have I ever regretted making those calls. I don't think of it as pastoral intuition. I think the Holy Spirit nudges us yet today, whispers to us. Listen to that still small voice. Of course, the Spirit will never prod you to disobey God's Word. That would be the devil, world, or your own flesh whispering in your ear.

Finally, even when you want to, that does not mean you'll always show good judgment. You and I have and will continue to make bad decisions. Your decisions and mine have left behind real messes. And we will continue to make bad decisions, sometimes willfully, other times because we don't know any better. We're thoroughbred sinners living in a sinful world. But we have a God who loves us nonetheless. We have a God who can work good in spite of and sometimes even through your bad decisions. We have a God who can teach us to make better decisions. Will Rogers said, "Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgment." And be glad that God is gracious and merciful and forgives us even of the willful disobedience. The blood of the Lamb cleanses us of those stains as well.

Christian decision making.... In our text, the early Christians used their reason up to a certain point, and then they stopped short, and prayed, and gave the Lord room and freedom to act in their lives. They cast lots and the lot fell to Matthias.

This side of Pentecost, we won't be casting lots as they did. However, with them we will be casting our lot on the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They knew, as do we, that he is trustworthy. We can trust his commands are good for us. We can trust him as our Guide, our Shepherd, our Counselor, and our Savior. Whatever poor decisions you've made in the past, and whatever decisions you face today, you can cast your lot on him, our God and Savior. Amen.