

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

In the preceding scriptures in the book of Acts, Luke the writer of Acts, has described Jesus' ascension into heaven. Jesus was standing with his disciples where they watched as he was taken up into the sky. Now that he had left the earth, the disciples began to plan out their mission and realized they needed to replace Judas Iscariot. It is a common assumption that they believed they needed twelve men to symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel, I really don't know if that is the reason they saw the need to replace Judas, but they saw a need to have their number be twelve.

They determined the replacement would be one of the faithful followers who had been with them since the death of John the Baptist. They decided on two men, put their names into a container, and prayed, believing that when the draw was made it would be the Holy Spirit who guided the choice. To us this seems like an odd way to choose a leader, but in the time of Jesus this would have been a common practice.

Bill is a fan of the Andy Griffith Show, so we've watched a lot of episodes. There is one called "The Jinx" where a man named Henry always seems to be around when bad things happen. Some of the townsmen decided he was a jinx and constantly teased him. It got to the point where the teasing was so intense that Henry decided he was going to move away from Mayberry and get a new start. Of course this made everyone in town feel bad about their remarks, and they wanted to do something to convince Henry he wasn't a jinx. They devised a plan to make Henry feel lucky by rigging a tv giveaway at the upcoming social event. Everyone at the event, except Henry, was in on the plan. The way the drawing was planned was everyone got the same number and all the numbers in the hat were the same so that when the number was drawn there would be no chance that Henry's number wouldn't be the one that was drawn... it's just that none of the others would claim it. When the number was announced no one said anything, not even Henry. When they checked the number Henry had drawn, they found out that he had pulled out the tag of the hat showing the hat size. Their plan failed.

Unlike the people of Mayberry the disciples pulling a name out of a hat was grounded in prayer and trust... they prayed and trusted that God would direct them to the right man. Prayer was the key. The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus praying. The very first church I served, Stateline United Methodist, had the iconic portrait of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane hanging behind the altar. It portrays Jesus kneeling with his hands on a rock, folded in prayer, reminding us that Jesus would have chosen a different way to proceed to the conclusion of his ministry. He prayed so hard that he sweated drops of blood. But he was willing to follow what God wanted. He had a direct lifeline to heaven, and he didn't doubt the answers he received. Jesus took the time to pray.

How often do we take the time to pray? Prayer is a connection with God and the more you practice it the closer you draw to God, and the clearer his will for your life becomes. Robin Maas writes in the study *Crucified Love: The Practice of Christian Perfection*, "Just as it makes no sense to tell someone, 'I love you more than anything in the world, but I just can't manage to find the time to be with you,' it makes no sense to claim that we have no time for prayer. When we love someone we naturally want to spend time together; and when we are 'in love' with someone, we make the time to be with our beloved." (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989. Pg 49). Do you love God enough to set aside daily time for prayer? Prayer is one of the most powerful things we can do in life.

There are some misunderstandings about prayer that we need to clear up if we are going to have a prayer life like that of Jesus. First, prayer is not a technique. There is no such thing as a "bad" prayer... it is a conversation with God. As much as we want to put our best foot forward, God already knows our situation. God knows how we feel. We don't need to wait until our bad

feelings are cleared away. We don't need to use fancy language. Prayer is a time for you to be who you are, to be yourself with God.

Second is about our approach to God. The mystic Guigo talked about four rungs in our ladder to God. In ascending order they are Studying, Meditation, Prayer, and Contemplation. First, study the word of God, and it doesn't absolutely have to be what is found in the Bible, although that is a good place to start. Reading Christian books, listening to Christian music, watching Christian movies, even singing hymns can marinate us in the presence of God and how God interacts with the world.

The next rung is meditation. Meditation as in quietly thinking and reflecting upon God. Scripture memorization, reflecting on scripture, or repeating the mantra "Lord, have mercy" are also ways of meditating on the word of God. Meditation is our speaking and God hearing. Prayer is God speaking and our hearing God. Meditation is asking God for help and direction. Prayer is receiving God's help and direction. Prayer is God coming to us. Meditation is our talking to and thinking about God. Prayer is God talking to and thinking about us. Prayer is offering ourselves to be what God wants, listening to what God can do for the world through us. To pray as Jesus prayed is to practice being in the presence of God - listening and talking, sleeping and waking, sitting and walking.

Finally in Guigo's four rungs is contemplation. A Greek monk described the journey of prayer in this way: "When I begin it is ME and GOD. Then it becomes GOD and ME. Then it becomes only GOD." Contemplation, the highest form and most mystical stage of prayer, is the point at which we go beyond consciousness of praying. "When we contemplate," someone has said, "we no more know that we are contemplating than we are conscious of our own sleeping." Contemplation releases the soul from thought and image. It is the closest we come to union with God. Real praying is God moving in us through the Spirit. Real praying is the Spirit of God praying in and through us, making us into the likeness of Christ.

So you see, the disciples didn't simply throw two names into a hat and pick one out. Once the two men were chosen by human guidelines, the choice of the new candidate was turned over to God. The lots cast were used to exclude human will, allowing God's hand to select the apostle. Prayer had maintained the frail beginnings of this community and now through prayer the apostles trusted God to continue building up this new-born body of Christ.

And there is the key, trust. Trusting that God's will will be revealed. Then having enough trust to carry out God's will no matter how illogical it may seem, although it will never be something that causes harm to another person. There once was a young man who upon leaving a Bible study wanted to do God's will so strongly that he prayed fervently for God's will to be revealed. He felt as though God was telling him to buy a gallon of milk. He did. Then he felt directed to go to an address that was an apartment building and go to a specific apartment in the building and knock on the door. Feeling kind of foolish the young man did what he felt he was being directed to do. A distraught woman answered the door and the young man could hear a baby crying in the background. He said, "I don't know why, but I felt as though God was telling me to bring you this milk." The woman cried, "I have been praying to God for milk. We are out of money and the baby is hungry and needs milk."

The young man trusted God enough to do what to him seemed strange (buying milk) and frightening (going to a complete stranger's door). Are you willing to trust God enough to do God's will?

All glory be to God.