

Sermon – 5/13/18
“What about Justus?”
John 17:6-19 and Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
7th Sunday of Easter

Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
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About eight years ago I found myself at the edge of a significant decision. I had felt that it was time to move on from my former congregation and community but I was uncertain about what was next. Going through the process of discernment can be difficult. I sent out my Personal Information Form I read Ministry Information Forms of churches. I prayed and interviewed and listened and tried to imagine where God wanted me to serve and where God wanted our family to live. Finally I received a call from a church letting me know that I was one of two candidates that they were considering as their next Head of Staff. A week or so later I received an email that I had not been chosen but thank you very much for my interest. Trying to figure out what God wanted me to do was starting to feel like being the last kid chosen for that team sport at the playground.

In reading the Acts text for today I found myself remembering that moment from my life and wondering...how did they make that decision? Did they just roll the dice to decide who their next pastor was going to be? I mean – it worked in the Ancient Near East – perhaps that is as good a way as any for us to discern God’s will for our lives and for the church. Perhaps we should suggest that method to our Pastor Nominating Committee. Or to the nominating committee that is choosing our elders and deacons as officers for the class of 2021. Or... maybe not. It may have worked for the early church, but casting lots just doesn’t seem like a good idea anymore. God speaks to us through prayer and worship – in conversation with God and one another. We believe that the Holy Spirit leads us together, as a community, in our decisions.

Well - regardless of how that decision was reached by the other church’s PNC – had they not reached that conclusion we very well may not have ended up here at DCPC. So – in hind sight - I am really grateful that they offered the position to the other person because it created space for God to guide our family here.

More times than not when I have looked back on my life I have seen clearly where God was guiding me. Even when things didn’t work out the way I thought they should, when I stayed in the game and continued to seek God’s will I found that I wound up where I thought I was supposed to be.

In Acts, we read about the early church as they tried to discern how to move forward as a community following the ascension of Jesus. They had been instructed to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit who would fill them with power – would fill their sails – so to speak – and guide and equip them to accomplish the mission they had been given. In that ten day space what else could they do but pray, wait, and try and get organized. Part of that organization led to a conversation about leadership. Judas was no longer with them and needed to be replaced.

It was a practical but also a theological matter. The 12 disciples were connected theologically to the twelve tribes of Israel – God’s chosen people through whom the nations would be blessed. It was crucial for that number to be complete. The criteria for leadership is interesting – Judas’ replacement had to be one who had been with the group from the baptism of Jesus until his ascension into heaven – one who could fully bear witness to the life, mission, and purpose of Jesus Christ – one who could proclaim with certainty the resurrection of our Lord. And so Matthias and Justus were chosen as candidates and Matthias was chosen by the casting of lots to succeed Judas. Neither Matthias nor Justus are ever mentioned again in the New Testament.

I would like to think that both remained engaged and committed to the church – that both received the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – that both were sent out to share the good news of God’s reconciling love in Jesus Christ – that both cared for widow and orphan and fed the hungry and clothed the naked. That both participated in worship and helped the church grow from that 120 or so people gathered in Jerusalem into a transformative global movement. I’d like to think that they both stayed in the game. But we don’t know. Matthias had a position – he was now one of the 12 - so perhaps it would have been easier for him not to simply drift away. But what about Justus?

He certainly had a choice. Don’t we all? Psalm 1 which was referenced in our Call to Worship describes the choice that we all have – to either walk in God’s righteousness and love or to live only for ourselves and to show little care for the wellbeing of our relationship with God and neighbor. The one who chooses the former will be like a tree planted by living waters. The scriptures teach us that Jesus came to fulfill the law and the prophets – to bring us back to these foundational principles which are life and relationship giving rather than life and relationship destroying. Justus would have known this. And perhaps he would have also known the content of Jesus’ prayer which we read about in John 17.

In that prayer Jesus clearly stated his concern for the wellbeing of his followers. He knew what kind of opposition they would face in the world. He knew what forces existed that would attempt to block their progress, tear apart their community, and destroy their mission. So Jesus prayed for their faith to be strong. He prayed for their protection and for their unity. And he prayed that God would continue to sanctify them – that is - to make them holy – to keep them on the path of righteousness and love – committed to being in right relationship with God and neighbor.

Our Confirmation Class members make their public profession of faith today. They are not just joining Davidson College Presbyterian Church as a corporate entity – but they are becoming part of the Body of Christ. And they (you) commit themselves to Jesus and to this community – even with doubts in their hearts and minds – because they have found some measure of truth and comfort and strength and encouragement as a part of this community and in this journey of faith.

They become part of the church at an interesting time. The North American church exists today in a culture that is at worst hostile towards and at best indifferent to the organized church. Some of us get upset about the fact that there are so many things competing with Sunday morning worship. Some of us get upset about not having prayer in school or in other public settings. Some of us think that the culture is drifting away from the “faith of our founding fathers.” Well – perhaps all this is true – but I don’t think these are the things that concerned Jesus. I think Jesus prayer for protection was from those forces in the world that would either tear the church and its membership apart from the inside or make it so comfortable that it ceased to be relevant in the world.

I think that Jesus was concerned about the evil that would cause the church to normalize the messages the world sends us – of pride and arrogance and greed and judgement and dishonesty. I think that Jesus was concerned about the apathy that would lead us to focus on programs and ministries that make us all feel better about ourselves rather than those that address the real issues of a hurting world that would lead others to a living faith in a God of love and grace. I think that Jesus was concerned about us settling for a cheap imitation faith that ultimately leaves people empty and wanting for more rather than truth which satisfies and sets us free.

Jesus intercedes for you and for me because we are the church called to carry out God’s mission. Next week we celebrate Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit but of course we believe that the Spirit is already here – comforting, strengthening, guiding, inspiring, connecting, uniting, convicting and transforming lives. Your life, my life, his life, her life, their life, the life of Matthias and the life of Justus. Yes, Justus! The one that wasn’t chosen but the one who knew Jesus and loved him and believed him and wanted to witness faithfully to him in the world. Justus serves as a reminder to me that we need to look

out for each other and make sure that each and every one of us stays the course, remains faithful to our calling and continues to serve Jesus Christ and bear witness to his love and grace in the world.

Several years ago Will Smith starred in the movie *Pursuit of Happiness*. Part of the movie describes his attempt to land a position with a Financial Company. He does this by going through an Internship program. There are many interns that work their tails off in competition with one another in order to secure just one position. They put in long hours, serve as gopher for the boss, make cold call after cold call, study to pass a written exam and the list goes on. Only one of them gets the job. Friends - that is **not** the church! Yes – there are various positions and callings but each one of us will always have a place here and we will always be welcome to share our gifts and to participate in the mission of this community of faith. We are not in competition with one another. We are on the same team. The person sitting next to you is your teammate – dedicated to your success and to the completion of our shared mission – the mission of Jesus Christ – the mission of God.

Once upon a time there was a baseball game. The away team showed up to play. Just as the umpire was saying “batter up!” the catcher for the home team arrived and took his place behind the plate. The center fielder didn’t show up at all but sent his regrets. The third basemen likewise failed to come to the game because he was up late the night before. The short stop was present but he had left his glove at home. Two of the outfielders were away for the weekend but said they were there in spirit. The pitcher went to the mound and looked around for his teammates. His heart was heavy because their positions were empty. The game was announced, the visitors were in the stands, and there was nothing to do but pitch the ball and hope for the best. But in addition to pitching he had to cover first base and third base as well as short stop and center field. When the absent players heard about the loss...they were all upset. They held a meeting and decided that they wanted a new pitcher.

Friends – we’re all in this together. The gospel calls us to stay in the game. It calls us to an action – and that action is love. It is for those who are willing to follow Jesus and give themselves to the kind of life that he modeled – a life that we often see modeled in our mothers – one of self-sacrifice, nurture, support, and encouragement. No matter whether you are a Justus or a Matthias, or a Peter or Paul or Mary or Martha or Chloe – we are called to be a part of this beautiful community and to journey with one another in faithfulness and love. There is much in the world that would threaten this unity and this work. There is much that will threaten the living out of this good news. So may we walk together in grace as we honor the prayer and petition of our Lord Jesus Christ. And may we receive God’s Spirit anew and use whatever gifts we have to fulfill God’s calling.

To God be the Glory! Amen.