
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Guided in Prayer

A Sermon by

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Scripture: Acts 1:15-26

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♫ God is still speaking,

What does it take to replace a disciple?

Well, if it is a despised disciple, like Judas, so despised the story goes that his bowels gushed out in a tragic death, a disciple is easily replaced.

What does it take to replace a disciple?

Look around the crowd! 120 people in the congregation of followers. Imagine yourself to be Peter and look at the faithful followers. There's Mary, the mother of Jesus. There are lots of other women, but she stands out. There are men, children. Probably if we counted, there would be a dozen different languages spoken. They were from all over the countryside and neighboring countries. There were Jews and Gentiles and Greeks and Romans. This man, Jesus, had transformed their lives, and despite all the odds, despite all the warnings, they weren't giving up. Some accused them of hiding in a small upper room, but what room holds 120 excited, passionate people? No, they had gathered near the Temple in one of those courtyards. We won't hide. Let us be seen. Priests, Romans, traitors. You can't scare us. You won't scare us. This is God's moment, the one we have been waiting for for generations. "Who will join the eleven?" Peter asks.

"Let us pray." Yes, that is what they did. They prayed, and then they cast lots.

Now, I was with Rabbi Plotkin the other day, a beloved rabbi of Phoenix, beloved to the community and even to this congregation. I asked him, "Tell me, Rabbi, what your tradition tells you of the casting of lots." "A good question, on which I have done extensive research," he said, "and for which I have no answer."

We just don't know. Nobody knows for sure. When we lost the Temple in Jerusalem and the priesthood, we lost the story. We lost the tradition. We lost the evidence. We think our people, the Jews, borrowed the casting of lots from the Ugaritic peoples, Ugarit being ancient Syria. The casting of lots maybe was pebbles, maybe gems, tossed onto a grid, a tic-tac-toe kind. The priests would have prayed for divine guidance when faced with a difficult choice, cast the lots, and the winner showed God's will. It is mentioned many times in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament of the casting of lots for Jesus' clothes at his crucifixion and here for the replacement of a disciple. Barsabbas or Matthias? Matthias wins. Not just 50-50 Las Vegas odds. Divine intervention odds. With this, it is the last we hear of Matthias, although he goes on to be a saint in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. And it is the last we hear of Barsabbas. Did he go away mad, or did he continue on being a follower of Jesus? We know Matthias became a champion of the Good News. He

must have been one who prayed for guidance, prayed with people, taught and believed in healing. Matthias, one of the crowd, chosen by prayers and casting of lots, becomes a leader and a saint.

This was a story of encouragement. The author tells the story, continuing it actually from Luke, that Jesus did more than die and ascend into heaven. Thursday was Ascension Day, and maybe you grew up in a tradition that considered that a high holy day. Not so much in my tradition. But the standing up of Peter, the rock, the one, this one I will build my church guy, Peter is saying, “This is not over yet. We are just beginning. Just wait. When we get a full slate of disciples, the Holy Spirit is going to come and watch us then!” We will celebrate that next Sunday with Pentecost, when these 120 become 3,000, baptized in the pools nearby the Temple. Peter stands up and leads. Remember the way in which he leads. He prays.

Annie LaMott, who writes on Christian spirituality, says that the two best prayers she knows are “Help me, help me, help me” and “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”¹ The ancient Hebrews would add, “I’m sorry” while the psalmists would add, “Oh wow” or some other expression of pure wonder. Some even may be uncomfortable or squeamish or unfamiliar with the word or act of prayer or praying. Think mind/body/spirit, oneness with the source of life, the balance of the universe and me. Even for progressive Christians, prayer is back in.

These days my prayers come in a couple of different forms.

Remember those prayers you wrote and hung on the cross the season before Easter? Each day, I pray a few of the cards.

Secondly, in the morning, most mornings, my prayer time is my meditation time. I am reading *The Last Lecture* by Randy Pausch. He is the Carnegie Mellon professor and imaginer diagnosed with pancreatic cancer who parted in the short chapters of his book ‘life lessons’. It is not a book about dying. Rather it is about living. Go for your childhood dreams. Seize every moment. Empower the dreams of others. Live your life.

Randy tells one story about his father, and it is particularly appropriate for this Memorial Day weekend. Did you know Memorial Day was established in 1868, in the aftermath of the Civil War, and called for the strewing of flowers on graves, lest we forget as a nation the havoc and pain that war has brought. Perhaps his story parallels your experience: Going through his father’s things, he says, “My dad had also saved a

¹ Anne LaMott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (NU: Random House, 2000), p. 82.

stack of papers. There were letters regarding his insurance business and documents about his charitable projects. Then, buried in the stack, we found a citation issued in 1945, when my father was in the army. The citation for “heroic achievement” came from the commanding general of the 75th Infantry Division.

On April 11, 1945, my father’s infantry company was attacked by German forces, and in the early stages of battle, heavy artillery fire led to eight casualties. According to the citation: “With complete disregard for his own safety, Private Pausch leaped from a covered position and commenced treating the wounded men while shells continued to fall in the immediate vicinity. So successfully did this soldier administer medical attention that all the wounded were evacuated successfully.”

In recognition of this, my dad, then twenty two years old, was issued the Bronze Star for valor.

In the fifty years my parents were married, in the thousands of conversations my dad had with me, it had just never come up. And so there I was, weeks after his death, getting another lesson about the meaning of sacrifice-and about the power of humility.”²

Third, these days my prayer life is about gratitude. For all I am and yet to be. For all I have and all I give away. For those who surround me and encourage, and for those who challenge me to be better. One of the most touching moments for me was when one of the congregation said, “Pastor, what can I pray about for you this week?”

Prayer may not always be the sit with your hands folded and eyes closed and words formed on your lips. Our prayers might be silence, or walking, or community prayer, or hands in Mother Earth gardening. Our prayer might be giving away what clutters our lives.

A university professor goes to visit a spiritual master. While the master quietly served tea, the professor talked about his spiritual quest. The master poured the visitor’s cup to the brim, and then kept pouring. The professor watched until he could no longer restrain himself. “It’s overfull! No more will go in!” the professor blurted. “You are like this cup,” the master replied, “How can I show your journey unless you first empty your cup?”³

² Randy Pausch, The Last Lecture, p. 94-96

³ <http://www.inspirationalstories.com/0/50.html>

I pray that you pray for the ministry of this church, that you pray for your pastors and leaders, that when you face a choice, a fork in the road, you stop and pray and then cast your lots.

A 13th century Sufi mystic Rumi prays this way:

There is some kiss we want
with our whole lives,
the touch of Spirit on the body.
Seawater begs the pearl
to break its shell.
And the lily, how passionately
it needs some wild Darling!
At night, I open the window
and ask the moon to come
and press its face into mine.
Breathe into me.
Close the language-door,
and open the love-window.
The moon won't use the door,
only the window.

Today we celebrate a baptism, and pray for a Spirit to blow in a new life. Today we celebrate people joining the community and pray for an ever-broadening circle of God's people coming in and going out to serve.

Today we receive the news of losing a beloved Associate Pastor and friend who has followed his heart, and his prayers, and his call, and we say the simple prayer, Thank you. Thank you, with thanksgiving and joy and sadness.

Today we pray for this Church's next steps, to discern with our Beatitudes Campus partners what ministry will look like in the days ahead. Imagine that: God too has a plan for our future, just when we thought we had it all figured out.

My prayer for these days ahead is that we will pray. With and without words. With our lives in regard to the lives of others. With a hope for peace.

Amen.