

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 Prayer/serendipity/leaving room for the Spirit, May 13, 2018

What do these two processes have in common with each other and with our lesson from Acts 1?

As I've probably mentioned before, each year, the Moravian Church publishes a small prayer book called "Daily Texts" that is one of the most commonly used devotional booklets in the world. Each day is assigned two Scripture verses, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, followed by a brief prayer. Many people in our Synod, at the urging of our Bishop, use this particular resource, including myself. If you're interested, let me know, and I'll tell you how to get one for yourself. So, how are the daily verses chosen for this frequently utilized prayer book? That's the first process I want to highlight. Several centuries ago, the Moravian Church established that all Scripture verses for the Daily Texts would be selected from about 2,000 passages chosen. Each year a group of people meet to prayerfully select the verses for every day of the complete year. Each verse is either a promise, an encouragement or an admonition. The selection takes place in this way, a way that might seem strangely random: all the 2,000 verses are written on slips of paper and placed into a container of some sort. Those chosen to pick the verses for that year reach in and take out a verse at random to be assigned to the next day in the rotation---but only after a prayer for the Spirit's guidance has been said prior to each of the 365 picks. This takes a bit of time, as you can see. But, through this process, room is left for the Spirit to be a part of the selection of every verse for each of the days of the year.

The second process I'd highlight this morning is that of our own denomination in regards to electing a Bishop, which last happened in 2014. By the time of the Synodical or Churchwide Assembly at which a bishop is to be elected, the field of candidates has been narrowed down to a top tier of maybe 5 or 6 pastors. My husband was a part of this process way back in 2008, some

of you may recall. At that point, the narrowing process continues, as ballot after ballot is taken to reduce the number of candidates—either until only one remains, or until one gets the total percentage necessary to be elected. The candidates speak at several points in the process, highlighting their visions for the Synod, and then, before each vote is taken, there is a time of prayer. Prayer that the Spirit's will would be reflected in the votes that follow. Room is left for the Spirit to be a part of the process.

And that's what both of those examples have in common, isn't it? Room is left for the Spirit to be active in a process that is predominantly ruled by legislative ordinances or rules of procedure of some kind. And that's what we witness in our lesson from Acts 1 as well, as we will see.

The tiny and fledgling beginnings of the Christian movement had a problem in Acts 1. The problem had a name: Judas. How could these early Christians understand Judas' betrayal, particularly in light of the fact that he was one of Christ's hand-picked 12 disciples? Was Christ a poor judge of character, or what? Peter provided the answer—the event of Judas' betrayal was to fulfill Scripture. And Judas, in a sense, provided the means by which Christ was crucified, and so raised. Meaning that even in a dark way, Judas fulfilled a purpose that God used for good. Having done this bit of Scriptural interpretation, Peter then faces a more clear and present dilemma—how shall they replace Judas? From the hindsight of 2000 years later, we might ask—why do they need to replace Judas? Why can't they just go along with 11 disciples instead of 12? But that question reveals that we don't think like 1st C. Jews. 12 was a sacred number to the Jews. There were 12 tribes of Israel. These earliest Jewish-Christians saw the fledgling Christian movement as a kind of new Israel, and therefore—there had to be 12 disciple-leaders. 11 just didn't cut it.

Given that necessity, how then, to proceed? Well, first came the procedural rules, the legislative requirements, if you will. They decided that this disciple needed to be, like they all were, an eye-witness to Jesus' ministry from start to finish—from Christ's baptism at the Jordan by John to his crucifixion and resurrection. A disciple is literally one who has learned at the feet of the Master. They reasoned that if one was to join the disciple rank, they had to have had the opportunity to have literally sat at Jesus' feet and heard his teachings first hand. A fascinating realization to briefly insert here is that the greatest of all the apostles, Paul, did not meet this requirement. He could not have been promoted to the rank of disciple by this standard. He had never met Jesus in Jesus' earthly life, and he had witnessed none of the key events. Yet he, more than anyone, shaped and grew the early Church by breaking down barriers between Jews and Gentiles. But, while fascinating, that is not germane to our immediate issue. Just helps us to realize that sometimes the Spirit may have a different agenda than we do—and that sometimes our human perspective on requirements may not be as important to God as to us. Returning to our text, at this point, Peter and other early Jewish-Christians are still thinking like Jews, and they want to find a 12th disciple to round out this understanding of a new Israel. Using their eye-witness criteria, they narrow down their field of candidates to two men: a particular Joseph and a particular Matthias. And having gone through their orderly legislative process up to this point, the process now takes a surprising turn--- they're not going to hear presentations, they're not going to read resumes, they're not going to vote. Instead they cast lots, of all random things to do, and they *precede* that casting of lots with prayer. They, too, leave room for the Spirit to move freely in the midst of this predominantly legalistic type process. And they are affirming the importance of prayer.

Let's think about prayer for a moment. I have a friend from high school days who lives in the Twin Cities. She's mostly an atheist, but also kind of a spiritual seeker. She recently asked me if I believe in prayer. Certainly a question worth asking. It probably won't surprise you that I responded "Yes, I do". It maybe also won't surprise you that I then proceeded to flesh out my answer, probably giving her far more than she bargained for. Never ask a pastor a theological question if you want a short reply. Because I continued---but what do I mean by saying that I believe in prayer? Do I believe that I can give God marching orders and God will hop right to it? Can I snap and God will jump? Obviously, believing in prayer doesn't mean that I get to call the shots and God is my willing minion. So, we can't judge the efficacy of prayer by whether or not we always get we ask for, to be blunt. But, I believe in prayer. I bet a lot of you do, too. And we don't simply pray that God will jump when we snap. As CS Lewis famously said, "I don't pray so much that God will change circumstances around me, as that God will change me." Do you believe in prayer? Why do you believe? Why do you pray? I pray so that I can be assured that I will be open to the ways that God is moving around and within me, and so that I can trust that God is in the mix, bringing good out of evil and healing out of brokenness. Prayer is ancient, universal, and somehow wired into our human DNA, it would seem. But, our lessons today challenge us to think about prayer, as my friend did for me. In Acts we see the inclusion of prayer as part of the process of choosing the new disciple. This is a corporate prayer, done by a community of faith. And in John 17, we are overhearing Jesus in prayer, a personal prayer done by one individual. This prayer is really long, and it's called the "High Priestly Prayer" by Bible scholars, and it takes up several chapters in the Gospel of John on the night before Jesus' crucifixion. In the portion we read this morning, we saw Jesus pray for his friends and followers. He asks God to protect them; to sanctify them, meaning to sustain them in their faith; and to send

them out as ambassadors for God. It is absolutely safe to say that Jesus believed in prayer; He does it all the time. And you know, his prayer for those he loved doesn't sound so different from the prayers we might pray for ourselves and those we love. Don't we pray that God might protect those we love, that God might sustain and bless the growing of those we love, that God might use us and those we love in ways that build up God's grace in this world? To make a brief allusion to Mother's Day, I would be surprised if there was a Mom or Grandma or Auntie present here this morning who hasn't prayed just such a prayer for a child---maybe even an adult child well into middle age! I'm sure that's true for Dads, Grandpas, and Uncles, too. If the saying holds that "there are no atheists in foxholes", I have to wonder if we could also say that no parent is a true atheist. In fact, maybe no one who loves anyone is a genuine atheist, but finds themselves resorting to prayer in times of need and anxiety. So, the first question raised in our lessons this morning could be—do we believe in prayer? And following from that, if we should be audacious enough to respond Yes, we do believe in prayer, then comes this next question—*do we pray?* The hows, whys, wherefores aren't important, what matters is simply---do we pray? If you find the language of traditional prayers to be meaningful and beautiful, and you pray at set times, do so. If you prefer to pray spontaneously, from the heart, on the fly, do so. Probably, most of us do some of each—that's great. However works for you, don't worry about doing it "right", just pray. Just do it. That is a response to the first question these texts raise, that of prayer as a practice worth doing.

And the second question raised, particularly in Acts 1, is –do we, as a church, whether the Christian church around the world or as Knife River Lutheran Church, make room the Spirit to be a part of our processes, our legislative, routine, logistical matters? This is an important question, because clearly, human beings love rules. And let me say, we love them with good

reason. Human nature requires that if any group of people is together for any length of time, rules will be needed to provide boundaries and guidelines for interaction. It's very romantic and sweet to think that isn't so; but realistically—it is. It just is. Our Synod Assemblies always include a parliamentarian whose job it is to keep track of the process by which we do things as a Synod. Robert's Book of Rules remains the gold standard, and delightfully, for many years our Synodical parliamentarian happened to be named Robert, so everything aligned perfectly.

Here's an example of why we need Robert's rules: During a debate on the floor of the Assembly the responsible following of rules and procedures means that all of us do not simply stand up and shout out our thoughts about whatever irritates us simultaneously. Would that honor God or build up the Kingdom? Not! Instead, one person at a time approaches a microphone, identifies themselves, and respectfully speaks for 3 minutes or less *to* the issue at hand. Much better than a shouting match, as you can see. Rules are good. They protect and guide life. Scripture, along with other ancient codes of law around the world, contains rules and guidelines. The national ELCA has a constitution and a set of by-laws that orders its activities; our small congregation has a constitution and a set of by-laws that orders our activities. Our church council just spent some time reviewing and updating our congregational constitution this past fall, to make sure it aligned with the ELCA and that it met our needs. And this is a good and godly thing.

Nevertheless—we all know that rules and guidelines, constitutions and by-laws, can become burdensome, wearisome, and lifeless. Instead of guiding and directing, they can simply constrain and restrict. While Robert's Book of Rules is dear to the heart of parliamentarians, most of us find the *Scriptures* to be far more life giving and inspiring. And although we likely find the 10 Commandments to be helpful guidelines, I suspect that most of us would choose different kinds of passages as those which have truly freed our spirits or comforted or inspired us. The

honest expressions of pain or joy in the psalms; the words of Jesus when he tells that those who grieve or struggle are blest in God's kingdom; the prose of Paul when he declares that nothing separates us from the love of God in Christ Jesus---these are the kind of words that give our souls wings. We need laws and procedures, but we never want to let them crowd out the Spirit. And the Spirit is always and essentially—*free. Undomesticated. Beyond our management. And therefore, a little scary.*

So, we are wise to ask ourselves how we, while appreciating and respecting the role of good order in the church, can also leave room for the freedom of the Spirit's movement among us. Whether we're celebrating our 90th anniversary or putting together a VBS program or considering how to renovate our kitchen, we want both good order and the freedom of the Spirit to enter in. Looking back at some of our past celebrations and accomplishments, from Dawn and Dale's wedding reception skit to building the columbarium and so on, I think we are able to find that balance! If we keep in mind the notion that God's Spirit has a mission and is up to something in this world, and that we, as the church, are looking to be a part of that something, then it is crucial that we intentionally include the Spirit in our deliberations and actions. We attempt to do that with prayer before meetings, with prayer during times of worship, with prayer prior to a time of food and fellowship. Kind of like those early disciples in Acts 1. We want to leave room for the Spirit to be a part of our process as a church. Because, as we all know, we as church don't exist for ourselves; we exist to be a part of what the Spirit of God is already up to in this time and place in which *we* find ourselves as disciples. At Knife River Lutheran Church, we always seek to be the heart of this community. And we always seek to bring good to our neighbor and glory to God. So a takeaway for us this morning could be this : prayer matters.

Intentional and spontaneous prayer is one of those ways we align ourselves with God's Spirit in this world. Amen.