

“‘The Elected’ At a Given Time”

Acts 1:21 -- 2:1

First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

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Ted V. Foote, Jr.

On a Sunday morning in May of 1979, at the University Presbyterian Church in Austin, Pastor Roland Perdue preached from the verses we have read this morning. I remember nothing about the sermon itself, except for the opening sentence. When Roland read the second part of verse 1, “they were all together in one place,” he paused and said, “But they were not ALL together.” It’s been impossible for me to hear this verse read anytime since then, without remembering what he was suggesting. He was saying that Judas Iscariot had taken his own life out of guilt after betraying Jesus. This morning, from the last few verses in chapter 1, we’ve also read how a successor to Judas was chosen, under the guidance of God’s Spirit. Between Matthias and Barsabbas, after a roll of the dice, Matthias was the one chosen. That’s the conclusion of Acts, chapter 1.

Then the scene changes. A few days pass. At the beginning of chapter 2, the narrator tells us, “They were all together in one place.” This narrator means that the eleven disciples plus Judas’ successor and others were present. In a manner of speaking, of course, not everyone was there. Judas was not there. The narrator, though, is ready to put the sad developments of Judas’ betrayal behind, exclusively looking forward to a new chapter.

That’s a natural inclination. We sometimes imply that the future can begin fresh, without any effect from the actions or failures which messed things up before today. We may not consciously be in denial about the mistakes or sins of the recent or distant past, but we may naturally want to leave off considering what only would interfere with our hope for an improved performance in the new chapter. It’s understandable to think and/or say: “Let’s put that whole ‘Judas thing’ behind us. Everyone whom we can count on today is here.”

In a manner of speaking, not everyone was there, because Judas, who had been part of their company from the beginning, was not there. The eleven who were there, however, determine that Judas’ successor should be someone who had followed Jesus from the very beginning of his teaching and healing ministry. That consideration (and perhaps others) narrowed the list to Matthias and Barsabbas.

Ten days later, on Pentecost, with Judas’ successor having been chosen, the narrator tell us, “Everyone was there.” And, in another manner of speaking, everyone was there! Even if no longer mentioned, Judas was there as part of each person’s past experience. He had died, but he was there, unseen and, yes, unmentioned. It was not necessary or appropriate to mention him continually. So, in a manner of speaking, we can say that Judas was there.

As we celebrate with the Class of 2009 graduates today, evaluating these verses from Acts can be helpful. Those disciples, with Judas’ successor being chosen, found themselves on the threshold of a new chapter in the evolving ministry of the Gospel’s post-Jesus era. Each new day placed each of them and places each of us on such a threshold.

We have heard it said so many times that it seems trite: “Today is the first day of the rest of your life.” Yet we know that’s the truth. Further, it’s accurate to say that as we find ourselves on the threshold of every new day or chapter, each one of us is a composite of hopes for the future and memories from the past (memories positive and negative). We are a composite of dreams for what is yet to be and of experiences (both joyous and painful) of what has already been.

While the experiences and relationships of the past (positive or negative) are not continually at the surface of our thoughts or mentioned in the stories we tell or the conversations in which we are engaged, those experiences and relationships influence who we are and how we are relating to others in life. Those who have died or who have been part of some alteration in life so that they are no longer right here with you or me, nevertheless, are continually part of who we are.

In the same Scripture story of Acts, however, it is suggested to us that the present rolls in as the past recedes. How are Matthias and Barsabbas important for us?

The Bible, in many places, includes a word, “elect,” or “chosen.” Elect, in this definition, does not mean chosen by receiving the highest number of votes. It means being chosen by receiving a single vote from the highest office – which would be God’s. While we can say that Matthias is chosen or is decided as the successor to Judas, and Barsabbas happens not to be chosen as Judas successor, both Matthias and Barsabbas are chosen by God / elected by God in love for serving Jesus Christ, that day and every day.

Among Presbyterians and certain others, there’s a saying: “We are not elected or chosen for salvation without being elected and chosen for service.” Said differently: “Religious experience is never, never, never authentic without a person being engaged with others in serving discipleship.” Each person is chosen/elected by God to serve all the years of one’s life: yes, through and engaged with a community of faith, but also “out in the world” through the utilization and employment of one’s gifts and talents: academic, artistic, mechanical, relational, scientific, serving the Lord of heaven and earth whom we recognize in Jesus Christ.

In 1972, the Statler Brothers¹ recorded a song that describes relationships and talents across the years. It’s titled, “The Class of ’57.”

Tommy's selling used cars, Nancy's fixing hair, Harvey runs a grocery store, And Margaret doesn't care.

Jerry drives a truck for Sears, And Charlotte's on the make, And Paul sells life insurance, And part time real estate.

Helen is a hostess, Frank works at the mill, Janet teaches grade school, And prob'ly always will.

Bob works for the city, And Jack's in lab research, And Peggy plays the organ At the Presbyterian Church.

And the Class of '57 had its dreams. We all thought we'd change the world With our great works and deeds, Or maybe we just thought the world Would change to fit our needs. The Class of '57 had its dreams.

Betty runs a trailer park. Jan sells Tupperware. Randy's on an insane ward, And Mary's on welfare.

Charlie took a job with Ford, And Joe took Freddie's wife. Charlotte took a millionaire, And Freddie took his life.

John is big in cattle. Ray is deep in debt. Where Marvis finally wound up Is anybody's bet.

Linda married Sonny, And Brenda married me; And the class of all of us Is just a part of history.

And the Class of '57 had dreams, But living life day to day Is never like it seems. Things get complicated when You get past eighteen, But the Class of '57 had its dreams.

Different gifts. Different roles, responsibilities, and relationships. Some for joy. Some for sadness. Sometimes we think the world will change to fit our own needs; and it often is complicated to a large degree.

Thirty years ago in Austin, Texas, my pastor may have been stretching what the narrator of Acts was intending to say, but I've been influenced by his interpretation ever since. In a manner of speaking they were not ALL there, yet, although human eyes could not see, in another manner of speaking they were all there! And, as different as they and we are from one another, in every given time period, the Lord of heaven and earth has chosen and elected each one by grace for a life of service, as difficult and as blessed as life is. God has chosen and elected us for a life of service always in the way and spirit of Jesus Christ. -- All honor and praise be to God!

¹ The Statler Brothers: originally Harold Reid, Don Reid, Phil Balsley, and Lew DeWitt; then, after Mr. DeWitt's death, Jimmy Fortune.