

Seventh Sunday of Easter, 5.16.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-21

“Sanctified in the Truth”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

When you hear the word “apostle” what do you think of? Do you think of the twelve apostles? Do you think about Jesus commissioning his disciples into apostleship, sending them to all nations to make disciples and to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? *Do you think about yourself as an apostle?* If so, you are on the right track. Apostles aren’t just historical figures in the Bible; they are anyone sent into the world as a witness to Christ alive. All of us with our many different gifts and voices have been chosen, set apart and sent by Christ as apostles into mission so that the world might believe.

In today’s reading from Acts, we hear again the story about how Matthias was chosen to replace Judas, becoming an apostle, a witness to the resurrection of Jesus. The reading from Acts describes the two qualifications needed to become an apostle, and both Matthias and Joseph called Barsabbas, had these qualities. They had accompanied Jesus and the disciples on their travels; they had been present with Jesus from his baptism until his ascension. Both Matthias and Joseph called Barsabbas also knew the living voice of Jesus and could witness to his resurrection.

The Acts story tells us that Matthias was chosen by casting lots. Casting lots is mentioned a number of times in the Bible, and was used when an unambiguous decision was needed, a decision in which there could be no argument about the outcome, no charge of favoritism, nepotism, financial favor, or politics. In the ancient world casting lots was made by using cards, dice, sticks, or coins. We could say it was like “pulling a name out of a hat” or “flipping a coin.” When a lot was cast, the decision was considered final. So in modern language we might say, “Matthias won the toss.”

However, notice that both Matthias and Joseph called Barsabbas were both equally qualified. They had both accompanied Jesus and could both witness to Jesus’ resurrection. Either person would have been fine, yet in the mystery of God, Matthias was chosen.

However, I am sure that Joseph called Barsabbas continued to witness to Christ in his life. In fact, today’s reading from Acts suggests that there were probably more than just the twelve disciples present with Jesus throughout his ministry. There were probably others on that mountaintop where Jesus commissioned his followers and were they experienced the Ascension.

An apostle is one who is sent out in mission by Christ Jesus. Today's readings are meant to prepare us for Pentecost next week, when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit who gathers the church, equipping it for mission, and sending it as a witness to God's love for this world.

Therefore, to be called an apostle is a description of the Christian life. There were only twelve apostles in the New Testament, but after Pentecost, all Christians are called into apostleship. So in answer to that question: "*Do you think about yourself as an apostle?*" We should answer, "Yes!" We are each called and sent to be active witnesses to Christ in the world.

Yet imagine if the only criteria for apostleship was to have read a book about Jesus, or to have passed an exam about Jesus. If this were the case, the church would be more like a school than a place of worship, fellowship and service for God and neighbor. The church doesn't simply tell stories about Jesus *as history*, we are witnesses to the living mystery of Jesus Christ alive today. Christ is alive in Word and Sacrament, a mystery that must be lived and experienced, to be understood.

"*Do you think about yourself as an apostle?*" You have been chosen by Jesus, called a beloved child and friend in Holy Baptism and sent by Jesus into the world. Like Matthias, each of us have been chosen by God. It's good to be reminded that each of us has a gift to share in the church's mission toward the world.

So as we think about ourselves as apostles, today's reading from 1 John encourages us: "*Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts...Whoever has the Son has life.*" Each of you joining worship, in person or online, is here because you have heard the testimony of Jesus in your hearts. In Jesus, eternal life exists already in our hearts through faith. Unity with Christ Jesus is the center of the Christian life.

In today's gospel, Jesus addresses unity, in what is known as his "high priestly prayer." In this prayer, Jesus prayed to the Father that his disciples would be one, as Jesus and the Father are one. Unity is crucial to our apostleship and the mission of the church. Christians are not lone rangers; Christians do not work against one another, nor are they to be in competition with one another; rather, Christians are to be united in mission, centered in witness to their Lord, Jesus Christ, so that the world might believe.

Jesus' words, "*that they may be one,*" form the basis of the modern ecumenical movement. To be a Christian means to desire unity with the grace of Jesus Christ, his church, and with other Christians of all nations and languages. Christian unity depends not upon human power, but upon

the living presence of Christ Jesus raised and alive. The church is nothing without the power of Christ at its center.

The church can never be satisfied with simple denominational unity. Like Jesus, we are to pray and work for the unity of Christian witness across all denominations so that the world might believe. A number of years ago, I took part in a worship service commemorating Christian unity and the fiftieth anniversary of the *Decree on Ecumenism* published in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council. At this worship service, Lutherans, Anglicans and Roman Catholics gathered at St. Mary's Cathedral, the seat of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese in Tokyo, Japan. Lutherans, Anglicans and Roman Catholics, gave thanks for their unity in Christ through Holy Baptism. Though we have different histories and traditions, at the same time, we remember that we share one Lord, Jesus Christ, and one baptism, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Baptism welcomes us into Christ's church, which is greater than any one denomination.

Shortly after I arrived at St. Mark's, I also attended an ecumenical service in which Lutherans and Roman Catholics gathered at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Salisbury, where Bishop Zarama of the Diocese of Raleigh, Bishop Jugis of the Diocese of Charlotte, and Bishop Smith of the North Carolina Synod renewed the Lutheran-Catholic Covenant. That Covenant states that Christian "unity comes from the unity of the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – [and] we are called to make that given unity more visible among us."

Too often we let our human divisions and worldly agendas pull us apart as the church. Christians need to be vigilant in the task of seeking unity with one another, centered in Christ Jesus who is the head of the body, the church. In his prayer, Jesus prayed for unity so that we might know "*joy complete*" in unity with Christ in the mystery of God. A church in unity with Jesus and with one another is a joyful church, joyfully doing all things for Christ in the world.

Jesus continued to pray, "*Sanctify them in the truth, your word is truth.*" To "sanctify" means to be made holy, but that's a bit abstract and misleading. To be holy doesn't mean we become stereotypical "holy rollers," or naive "do-gooders," rather, to be sanctified really means "to be set apart." Things which are "set apart" by God are holy. They are holy because God has a purpose for them.

For example, this year on Palm Sunday, we dedicated and set apart, in prayer, a new set of timpani for the purpose of glorifying God in worship and music. To sanctify something means to set it apart with a purpose in God's mission toward the world. Next week we will confirm three young

people, Brady, Riley and Palmer. Through their affirmation of faith, God will bless them and set them apart as witnesses of Christ Jesus in their lives. God has a purpose for the lives of Brady, Riley and Palmer; God has a purpose for each of us, setting us apart in mission as the church.

When Jesus prayed that his church would be one and sanctified in the truth, Jesus was praying that the church's mission, and our participation in it, would be set apart and equipped to do this mission. To be sanctified means living with the unity and joy that is the good news. All of us are earthen vessels carrying the good news of Jesus.

Jesus continued to pray, *"As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."* The church is a public ministry. We are not a reclusive mountaintop retreat; rather, we are an open community, welcoming all people and their gifts for the glory of God in the world. Jesus says, *"You did not choose me, but I chose you."* What Jesus chooses is set apart as holy and sent into the world where Jesus leads his church in mission, so that the world may believe.

Jesus' prayer for unity has a purpose. Jesus prayed that his church would be one *"so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* This is why the church exists. We are different than a community center or a social welfare agency. Such organizations do great things in the world, and the church cooperates with many of these agencies; however, the church has been set apart and sanctified with one very specific task: to witness to the love and forgiveness of Jesus so that the world may believe in God's love. This means that all of our ministries as a church exist as expressions of the joy of knowing Jesus. Our purpose as the church is to make Christ known so that the world may believe.

*"Do you think about yourself as an apostle?"* Like Matthias, we have been set apart as apostles to share the joy of knowing Jesus and the hope of eternal life in him. The church is a unity of apostles, of people set apart to use their diverse gifts, personalities and differences for the holy work of God's mission of love for this world.

*"Do you think of yourselves as apostles?"* As Jesus prayed for unity, for joy, for protection from the evil one, so too, may we work for unity, share our joy, protect others from evil, and witness to God's love so that the world might believe.

You are witnesses and apostles of Christ Jesus alive in this world. Amen.