



First United Church of Oak Park

Leadership Transitions

Acts 1:12-17, 21-26

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Our morning text is an odd little bit of scripture, and, before I read it, I want to give you some context.

Our story comes to us from the first chapter of Acts, and chronologically it's an in-between sort of text. The story occurs 40+ days after the resurrection. For many of those 40 days, the disciples have experienced the palpable presence of the risen Christ. He walked with them on the road to Emmaus. He cooked and ate breakfast with them on the beach. He allowed them to touch his hands and side. With these appearances, the disciples experienced both Jesus' spiritual and bodily presence. It probably wasn't exactly like it had been when Jesus was alive and had not yet been crucified, but, nonetheless, there was a way in which Jesus was still available to them.

That's over. Just before this story takes place, the disciples watched Jesus ascend into heaven and these resurrection appearances that had been so wonderful are in the past. Jesus is gone, in a new kind of way.

Pentecost, the event about which Lydia preached last week, has not yet occurred; that's a couple of days away but, like so many things that are a couple of days away, the disciples do not know it's coming. So here they are in Jerusalem, in a kind of no man's land. There is a big emptiness that Jesus' ascension creates for them. They are leaderless. I do not know whether it is comforting or not to realize that barely 6 weeks into the life of this new church, the church already has a leadership crisis.

It's a two-dimensional leadership crisis. Not only has Jesus been taken up into heaven without much warning, but the disciples are also still stinging from the loss of Judas. He had once been one of their closest companions. But then, in a short period of time, and possibly without much warning, he betrayed Jesus and then he died. All of that is still pretty fresh.

This is a complicated moment. Jesus is gone, and he left before he had a chance to write a manual of operations so the disciples are not sure what to do next. His sudden departure leaves a big hole. Added to that, the deep trust of their fellowship is broken by Judas' betrayal.

Emptiness and betrayal are familiar territory to many churches, including ours. It is in this context that the early church elects its first new leader:

Acts 1:12-17, 21-26

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴ All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶ “Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— ¹⁷ for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”

²¹ So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” ²³ So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴ Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” ²⁶ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

I selected this text for today because it’s a Sunday on which we not only celebrate Father’s Day, but on which we also ordain and install the individuals who have been elected from our congregation to lead us for the next several years. We are grateful to each of them for their willingness to participate in the privilege, joy, and challenge of church leadership. Thank you to those of you who are stepping up to the plate for the next few years.

Thanks also to those of you who have served as elders and deacons in the past. I’d like to recognize those who are completing their terms of office this month: elders Steve Pederson, Barbara Metric, Marcia Ashton, Cate Readling, and Lily Alter; and deacons Bobbie Kmiec, Pat Hahn, and Brenda Potts. Thank you so much.

Like Matthias, our current and outgoing leaders stepped into leadership positions when our church was in a period of uncertainty. I know I speak for many of us when I say how grateful we are for the people who lead us with such grace, steadiness, and commitment in the difficult transitions we face. Thank you, from the bottom of our hearts.

I would wish you newly elected leaders the success of Matthias’ ministry, but we do not know anything more about Matthias or what he did. In the Bible, at least, we never read or hear his name again. That’s often the way it works in ministry.

About 10-15 years ago, I heard what was, hands down, the finest graduation speech I have ever heard. Otis Moss III, the pastor at Trinity UCC in Chicago, was the speaker and he talked about the work of ministry. The minister he talked about was John the Baptist; if memory serves, he drew heavily from the insights of Howard Thurman. What Dr. Moss emphasized was how John the Baptist had a helping ministry when it came to Jesus. The Baptist paved the way for Jesus, and brought him to the Jordan. In some ways, Dr. Moss suggested, Jesus stood on the shoulders of John. Dr. Moss then talked about how important that kind of ministry can be – a ministry in which people stand on your shoulders, a ministry that is willing to fade into the background and give other people center stage, a ministry that clears a path for the church and its people to do the work they need to do.

It was a wonderful sermon. It reminded us that the best ministry does not necessarily equate with public recognition. We are not all going to have the visibility or impact of Martin Luther King, Jr., though that is the fantasy of many a seminary graduate. Or, even if we do have that level of fame, it will likely be short-lived. But recognition, Dr. Moss implied, is not what good ministry is all about. Good ministry, the best ministry,

often occurs behind the scenes as the people of the church equip one another, build up the body, and live with integrity.

I'd like to think that is the kind of ministry that Matthias had.

I'd also like to think that is the kind of ministry that Justus had, too. Justus, the guy who "lost" the election to take Judas' place. I'd like to think that he had a ministry, too, as do all of us who may never serve as elders or deacons, but who nonetheless are gifted by the Spirit and part of Christ's body.

Many years ago, I read an interview in *Sojourners* with Marion Wright Edelman, the founder and president emerita of the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, D.C. In the interview she talked about her faith. She also talked about all the help she had received along the way from other people, people who had paved her way and on whose shoulders she stood, people who had been John the Baptist for her.¹

We all have those kinds of people in our lives. We are here today, and we are who we are, partly because of all we have received from other people, and not just from our parents.

A woman named Miss Williams taught me to read in first grade. This is one of the most precious gifts I have ever been given. A woman named Betty Hudson taught me to pray. Who were the people who taught you to read or pray?

In high school, after my parents were divorced and my father moved away and my mother was almost dysfunctional with grief, a minister named Warren Rutledge had the door to his office open every day after school. I always knew there was a place for me to go and a person who would listen. Who has been that person for you?

Sid Skirvin was the minister who performed our marriage ceremony. Margaret Bell, Arlene Betts, and Karen Forsythe were the social workers who helped us adopt our children. Mike Dunfee and John McCall were the ministers who helped my sister and me when my mother was dying. Charlie Parker was the friend who visited my father every single day during the last year of my dad's life. Who are the people who have been with you, during the moments of passage in your life?

Who are the people who have been there in your everyday life and on whose shoulders you stand? Take a moment to picture them. Envision your parents' faces, the faces of your best friends and of your closest colleagues.

Not one of us got where we are on our own. Our lives have been full of people who shaped our faith, our hopes, our work, our families. Our lives have been full of people like John the Baptist, who led us to the next stage of our work, or paved the way for us, or stood us on their shoulders.

It is both the Matthias's and the Justus's of the world who have this ministry. It is a ministry we have received from countless numbers of people who have helped us along the way. It is also the ministry to which we are all called as Christians.

¹"The Children We Have in Trust," an interview with Marion Wright Edelman, *Sojourners*, April 1994, p. 18.

Five hundred years ago, when people like Martin Luther and John Calvin began to imagine a church that was different from the Catholicism of their day, one of the most significant dividing lines that emerged between Catholicism and Protestantism was the deep conviction of those early Protestants that the ministry of the church belongs to everyone, and not just to a few. Luther proclaimed the priesthood of all believers, and he, Calvin, and other early reformers forged a theology of ministry that includes us all.

At First United, we stand firmly in those deep convictions that ministry is a calling that we all share, and that it can take shape in any vocation. Patrick Guinan was a minister in our midst as he cleaned our building and watched out for members and friends of this church. Herb Zobel was a minister in our midst as he exercised his skills and shared his love and friendship. Diane Fascione sang and celebrated her ministry in worship, service, work, and family. We are ministers one to another, in our work here, in our everyday work outside these walls, in our work in the world.

Paul reminded the Corinthians (I Corinthians 12:4-7) that
there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord;
and there are varieties of activities,
but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.
To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

I thank God for the manifestations of the Spirit that I witness here at First United. May God bless the work of ministry in this place. May God bless our elders and deacons, our committees and activities. And, may God bless each and every one of you. Amen.