

Psalm 1

*Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.*

*They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.*

*The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.*

According to the writer of Luke and Acts it has been a long and varied month and a half for the believers and followers of Jesus. They scatter in fear from the foot of the cross and somehow find one another to lament how wrong they had been and how scared they are when the women interrupt them with astounding news about the empty tomb. Peter sprints to go see for himself and is amazed... then returns home.

Unthwarted Jesus joins other believers as they trudge to Emmaus filled with sorrow, anger and confusion. They are so blinded by earthly kingdom facts that they fail to realize who is with them until they arrive at their destination and in a moment of Biblical déjà vu, he takes the bread, blesses it and he breaks it. They recognize him just in time for him to vanish from their sight and they run back to Jerusalem to tell the others.

One can imagine a room where everyone is talking at once...

"Did you hear..."

"Peter said that when he got there..."

"Well if Cleopas ran all the way from Emmaus, he must have seen something!"

Suddenly, Jesus is amongst them and he passes the peace of Christ... literally. *Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost (Lk. 24:36b-37).*

They remain startled and disbelieving and so he offers them his flesh to touch. And when they are done poking and prodding and have moved to joy and wonder he indeed becomes the heavenly *host*, offering them broiled fish and eating with them. This, of course, only increases their wonder and astonishment because ghosts don't eat.

They remain in Jerusalem for forty astounding and beautiful days of bliss, joy and I can only imagine righteousness.

"See I told you..."

"Peter sure seems to be a new man..."

"I have never eaten so much bread and broiled fish in my life and yet I haven't gained a pound!"

Jesus continues to teach them right up until the very last moment before he ascends into heaven with his very last words of instruction being words of assurance that they will know when it is time for them to start the early church: ***You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witness in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight (Acts 1:8-9).***

This was their month and half leading up to our second scripture for today.

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said, '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— for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.'

So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 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.' So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.' And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

The Word of the Lord...

How appropriate that the church as we know it – and in most cases love it - stumbled out of the blocks by concerning itself less with the ascension of Jesus than with the task of filling Judas' spot on the board.

And so in honor of this Scripture and its alignment with the Nominating Committee's current task of discernment, in your bulletins you will find that we have casted lots... (jk).

It would be so easy for me to take this Scripture and especially in light of next week's flames of the Pentecost, use them both to rail against the structure of the system and challenge us all to drop our inhibitions and follow wherever the Holy Spirit might lead us!

Problem is... I like the structure.

The truth is that many of us are here because of the structure. We are here because ordinary people told other ordinary people about Jesus and because of the structure that is in place, we heard it too. I like the structure. I'm a product of the structure. My diploma and my vows of ordination say that I support the structure. So... now what?

My friend and colleague Pen Peery writes, "God calls us to be the church in a world with seven billion people. We can't just do whatever we want and call it the work of the Spirit¹." That's good. We need the structure.

Then he also writes, "But there is no doubt the role of the church in this world is changing. And we are called to be leaders within this small and affluent and precious structure we know as the Presbyterian Church (USA)²." Generation after generation is passing right by our doors without hearing the good news. That's bad. We need the spirit.

So which is it... structure or spirit?

By denominational definition we, like Peter, tend to err on the side of structure. At times structure is appropriate and healthy, but it is also seductive. "Order and structure and boundaries can help us manage other people's anxiety and incessant demands, and they can provide us with space in which we are insulated from the need to *do* anything. They can shelter us from the raw and beautiful nature of relationships that are full of risk and vulnerability. They can isolate us from reality so much that we gain an inflated sense of importance because of our (perceived) ability to control our environment; which is really nothing more than an idolatrous world of our own making³."

As a died-in-the-wool member of the frozen chosen it was hard when writing this sermon to put myself in the shoes of someone who errs on the side of the spirit. I know the church began and continues to bear witness because of the Holy Spirit. But I also know those who have been hurt by practices that were excused because they were supposedly led by the spirit. And to know folks who continue to turn their backs on structure because they are doing their own spiritual thing is to know folks who are stuck in their own trench.

And so there must be a balancing act between the two and not a stagnant one at that, but rather one that pushes and pulls. How about structure *and* spirit with prayer as the tool that allows us to keep our balance.

The church needs structure. But the heart of the church is the spirit and her mission. Effective leadership in the church must be driven and inspired by the Holy Spirit. We must hold ourselves accountable to the Holy Spirit in prayer.

I think we have our reasons for not being more of the spirit. And I don't think it's because we desire to be any less spirit-filled than our brothers and sisters who are more comfortable in their Pentecost red.

I do think a piece of it is a considerable comfort level with rules in a book and things to do on a checklist and the sense of accomplishment that being decent and in order can provide.

But at the very heart of the matter... I think it comes down to confidence.

We're afraid to get it wrong.

We're afraid we aren't worthy.

We're afraid we won't make a difference anyway.

So why try?

Why try?

Because you are the Chosen One.

The truth is despite all of our foibles and missteps, despite our penchant to at times fall into the trench of the decent and orderly familiar – we are chosen! There is good news in this and there is good news in this passage from Acts where we witness the power of the Holy Spirit not just next week on the official Sunday of Pentecost, but on the Sunday before.

Most of us don't identify with tongues of fire coming upon us enabling us to speak and understand a variety of languages. Most of us do identify with a man being looked to as a leader, who prayerfully and faithfully takes a cue from what has been done before, and makes the best decision he can with the facts available.

Peter and the group prayed.

He recalled the history of the church up until that time.

He stepped out in faith by the casting of lots.

He prayed again.

The key is this: whether Peter jumped ahead of the Holy Spirit or not... God used it for good. The early church survived and thrived. It is true that the man who was chosen, Matthias, is never heard from again in Scripture but the church began its life anyway and still exists. And just because he is missing from the canon does not mean he didn't go on to do great things for the church and her message!

And part of that message is this: The Holy Spirit's power to build up is stronger than our penchant to mess up!

Thanks be to God!

That is good news! That is also challenging news...

Because now there is no reason not to try.

We are chosen!

We are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

So when we pray, when we are faithful to our history and our tenets, when we step out in faith and pray some more.
We will not fail.

We are chosen!
We are not dead despite what the latest poll may say.
Don't believe the hype!
We are relevant.

I'm tired of hearing about how the church isn't relevant, aren't you?
As I watch people continue to put all of their hopes for happiness on a capitalistic system that is riddled with greed I think, this is relevance?
As I listen to friends tell me that they don't need church because they are spiritual and a good person and yet no one holds them accountable I think, this is relevance?
As I watch good people forget to feed God's sheep in lieu of judging God's sheep I think, this is relevance?

And I start to fear that we as Church are beginning to buy into the hype.
We are showing signs of bending to the whims of the culture rather than standing for the truth.
We are clinging to the skirts of the structure of the profane in order to hide from the spiritual challenge of the sacred.

We are standing with our fingers pointed out at one another rather than on our knees in prayer with our arms outstretched to the world.

As individuals and as the church we must speak up!
Some call it missional.
Some call it emergent.
I call it being Church.

And the Church shall not and will not disappear.

In the Name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Pen Peery. *Easter 7b*. The Well, 2009 (Austin) p.6.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, p. 5-6.