

No Vacancy That God Can't Fill

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

One of the ways that I fulfill my ordination vows in the setting of the wider Church outside of our Westminster congregation, is by serving on the Central Mass. Association, Committee on Authorized Ministry. Also known as CoAM. The main function of any CoAM of any Association in the United Church of Christ, is to provide support and accountability to women and men who feel they are called to Ordained ministry. And to ultimately discern whether they possess the tools and temperament for Ordained ministry, before turning them loose on churches who are searching for a Pastor. It is a weighty responsibility which CoAM members accept with solemn dedication.

You could very well think of the eleven Apostles commissioned by Jesus after his resurrection and ascension to Heaven as the original Committee on Authorized Ministry. The prototype, as it were. Or, more accurately perhaps, the Beta version. They had themselves been carefully selected and groomed by Jesus, but he was gone now—crucified resurrected and ascended. And for the first time they were being field-tested on their own. The first challenge to confront them was a vacancy among their group that they felt needed to be filled. And it would be up to them to select a replacement. They felt the gravity of the responsibility. They knew all too well what a bad choice for ministry could look like. They had witnessed for themselves the havoc which had already been unleashed by the one named Judas, who had been called just as they were, but who had not been fit for the job, as it turned out. Judas' untimely death was the reason for the vacancy they were now desperate to fill.

There was precious little in the way of resources and reference points like those available to a modern CoAM to guide them through their discernment process. No seminary transcripts, or psych evals, or a Manual on Ministry, to help them separate the wheat from the chaff, the shepherds from the wolves.

Two candidates were proposed, one named Matthias and the other one whose name might've taken up two lines on the ballot. His given name was Joseph, but he was called Barsabbas, and also answered to the name of Justus. So, two candidates and one position to be filled. But no clear process was established yet for deciding between them.

The method the already Apostles finally agreed on to make such a consequential choice was something so seemingly inappropriate to the occasion as to be comical. In some churches nowadays, it might even have gotten them thrown out of the congregation. They cast lots. You heard me right. The criteria for who would or would not qualify to become an apostle to replace one of the original twelve handpicked by Jesus; someone who would be trusted to carry the message of all that Jesus taught and did and died for—came down to the equivalent of a toss of a coin or a roll of the dice.

Except that it was more than that. Or, at least, it became more than that. Because before the lot was cast, they doused it in prayer. On the surface, something like the gambler blowing on the dice for good luck before tossing them on the table. With one important difference. The breath they expended before casting the lots was spent in the form of a prayer addressed to the one true God; not a plea to Lady Luck. Painfully aware of the limits of their own judgment they prayed, "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."

A lot has changed since then. By comparison, Committees on Authorized Ministry today have a lot more information to go on for discerning candidates for ministry. Today, we are equipped with a multitude of methods and metrics to analyze a candidate's fitness for Christian ministry. But one thing that hasn't changed is this. It can still feel like we are gambling on whether or not this or that person is genuinely called. And so, we too must baptize our discernment processes in humble prayer to be led by the One who already knows the depths of every human heart.

The same is true for any of us, when we face important decisions in our lives. There are times when we are all confronted with a space that begs to be filled. The vacancies of our lives can be anything from who we will share our future with, to what career path we will choose, to the place we will call home.

They can be sudden and unexpected. What medical option to choose when confronted by a serious illness; how to move forward after the loss of a loved one has left a hole in your heart; how to put back together the broken pieces when what had felt like a solid foundation suddenly crumbles beneath our feet.

Our lives during the course of the pandemic have been filled with vacancies. Empty hours, days and months where once there was connection and community. Our church communities are even now discerning the wisest and most compassionate ways to fill our vacant sanctuaries and church school classrooms. In all of these circumstances and more, decisions can feel as risky as placing our bets and rolling the dice. There are no crystal balls. But there is faith. And prayer.

Which are the lessons we can take from that original CoAM. The first thing they did was to frame the challenge before them in an awareness that, no matter how confused they were about what they should do, God was working out a divine purpose around them, through them, and perhaps even in spite of them.

Peter addressed the other ten remaining Apostles, saying "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". Now, Jesus had tried to tell them this very thing before it happened. That one of them would betray him, resulting in his death on a cross, but also his resurrection. Right up until the moments before he ascended into Heaven, he kept trying to tell them that all that had happened to him had been foretold long, long ago. But Peter and the stayed stuck in denial until this moment.

Sometimes we have to first be ready to revision things from a new perspective. When at last we do, suddenly it becomes apparent that what had seemed like everything falling apart turned out to be the pieces of God's purpose coming together. With that change of perspective, the Apostles prayed to be shown what next steps to take in order to be part of God's plan. Then they acted in faith by casting lots. Not in the pursuit of blind luck, but on the faith that God's will would be revealed to them in the outcome of their action. The dice rolled across the floor and when they came to rest, Matthias' number had come up. And the rest, as they say, is history.

We'll never know for certain though, what role Matthias played in that history. Because his name is never mentioned again. Of one thing we can be sure. Whatever contribution Matthias made—large or small—God's purpose was fulfilled.

Among Jesus' last words to the disciples before he ascended to Heaven, were these: "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and

forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” From our vantage point, two thousand years later, we know that the purpose Jesus ordained for them did indeed come to pass. They witnessed to what they knew. They fulfilled God’s purpose for them. We know they did. Because, if they didn’t...we’re not having this conversation today.

And, we can remember this pattern of faith that God has a purpose for us, prayerful discernment of what that purpose asks of us, and action to take the next step. Whether ordained or laity—we can remember that when in our lives and in our shared ministry the present feels like it is falling to pieces and the future seems like one big gamble; when separation and uncertainty surrounds us, that there is no vacancy that the God who gave His only Son to reconcile us to Himself, can't fill.

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