

Maybe if Judas Had Hung-in There....

[Text - Acts 1:15-26]

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Today is an *odd* day in the Church Year. And It' not just because the date, 5-17-15, is made-up of odd numbers. This past Thursday, forty days after Easter, marked the day of Jesus' ascension into heaven. And next Sunday, *Pentecost* [*fifty* days after the Passover/Easter event], marks the day when the Holy Spirit descends upon the earth with new Life and Power. So today *is* an odd day in the Church's History. Jesus is gone, the Holy Spirit is on the way, and Jesus' followers sit and wait. They know they have a crucial message to proclaim and ministry to perform. They're just not sure how to get things started.

In the life of any community or organization, the time between two significant events, such as the departure of one leader and the arrival of the next, can be a bit odd and unsettling. That time of waiting - whether it be ten days or ten months - can raise feelings of anxiety and impatience. People say, "We need to get things moving, so we can figure out what we're doing and where we're headed. We need to get-on with our work, so that things can get back to normal." [Whatever "normal" might be!] *Normally*, we feel most comfortable when we have a set routine, when things are running smoothly, and when there are no unresolved issues to face; however, that's not how Life usually works. *Normally*, we like to feel that we are in control of things - that we've got a handle on what's happening. But that's not always possible, particularly when we're dealing with issues of Faith. *Faith* is about *trusting*. And for those who would put their faith in the Life and Way of Jesus Christ, it means trusting that the Creator of the Cosmos is big enough, wise enough, and compassionate enough to provide what we need for our entire Life's journey.

Now, this doesn't mean that you and I shouldn't plan, or pray, or work for those things that we believe to be important. But it does mean that we don't have to know all the answers, or try to micro-manage our lives and the lives of those around us. As this morning's New Testament reading reminds us, not knowing all the details and not trying to control all of the variables, can actually be a pretty healthy thing! In our reading from the Book of Acts, we hear Luke's gruesome account of what happens to Judas - how he takes the money he got for betraying Jesus, buys a field with it, and while admiring his new property, trips and falls headlong, bursting-open his bowels like a bloody pinata. And as everybody knows, this is why that field is called the Field of Blood. Everybody, that is, except Matthew.

In Matthew's Gospel account, Judas doesn't keep the money - he *repents*, throws the money back at the chief priest and elders, and then with deep guilt and remorse, goes-out and hangs himself. Those religious leaders can't put that money back into the Temple treasury, because it's "*blood money*"; so they use it to buy a field to bury poor people. And as everybody knows, *that's* why it's called the Field of Blood. Apparently, the early followers of Jesus - even those whose Divinely inspired writings made it into the Bible - didn't know all the details! And they were perfectly O.K. with that, unlike those people today who insist on the literal inerrancy of the Scriptures!

My favorite question to ask an annoying, Bible-banging fundamentalist is, "How did Judas die?" That's a tough one - even for the smartest Scriptural literalists. If they say that Judas hanged himself, then I refer them to the story in Acts. If they then say that Judas hanged himself, the rope broke, and his innards were spewed across the field, I point-out that this means that neither account is completely credible. Now, if they were to say that Judas tripped and spilled his guts, but then somehow managed to

find the strength to climb a tree and hang himself, I would commend them for having an incredible ability to spin a story!

“How *did* Judas die?” I don’t know, and personally, I don’t need to know. That’s Judas’ story. Apparently the early Christian community didn’t know either; and for them, it really didn’t matter. The important thing is that they deal with their disappointment and loss, and then move forward, which is precisely what they do. They do what is necessary to fill the gap created by Judas’ death. And how they do it, gives us a wonderful insight about what it means to be a compassionate community of faith which trusts that the Holy One is in charge.

I think it’s remarkable, to read that “In those days *Peter* stood-up among the believers...” to lay-out a plan to replace Judas. Judas had betrayed Jesus; but Peter hadn’t done much better. When Jesus is arrested and taken away, Peter follows from what he hopes is a safe distance; yet he is recognized three separate times as one of Jesus’ disciples. And each time, he vehemently denies that he even knows who Jesus is. Talk about having a reason to feel tremendous guilt and remorse! But fortunately, even though he weeps bitterly over his betrayal and cowardice, Peter doesn’t throw-away his life.

Peter doesn’t hang himself - instead he hangs-in there, through that dreadful valley of shame, self-judgment and despair, until he makes it to the dawn of Easter morning. This is an important example for you and me to follow, when we feel defeated and dejected, lost and alone. By staying connected as a Family of Faith, Peter and those other devastated disciples are able to endure that terrible time of fear, anguish, and doubt; and to discover an inner strength and a redeeming resiliency. The words and example, the life and love that Jesus has shared with them, gives them the confidence to move beyond their fear and shame, toward a renewed sense of mission and ministry.

The first thing they do, is select a replacement for Judas, to fill the leadership gap. They may have been severely shaken, but they still have this innate, churchly ability to form a committee and schedule a meeting! Even though they don't have a constitution or by-laws, they feel a strong need to maintain a leadership team of twelve. Jesus had an inner-circle of twelve disciples, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. So those early followers decide to honor that traditional number and select a replacement for Judas.

I'll admit that the method they use to make their selection, sounds somewhat fatalistic. They propose two candidates, pray, and then "they cast lots for them." Some Biblical translators try to "dignify" this procedure, by saying, "they cast their votes for them," but that's not an accurate rendering. Casting lots is like throwing dice, drawing straws, or flipping a coin. Those who do it have no control over the outcome [kind of like when I try to guide a conversation during the Children's Sermon]. Nonetheless, those early Christians are completely content with this procedure. They know that both of their candidates are excellent choices, and that either one could serve the community faithfully and well. So they toss the dice, and they trust that The Holy One will take care of the details.

With Jesus no longer there to lead them, these believers recognize the need to develop their own leadership style and skills, to create their own organizational structure, and to try some new and different things. And there's certainly nothing wrong with that! Actually, that's a pretty good use of those odd "in-between" times, when we feel like our lives are on hold. These are excellent opportunities to reflect on the past, to evaluate the present, and to anticipate the marvelous things yet to come.

Just like those early believers, you and I await the coming of Pentecost - a day when the Holy Spirit pours-out new life and

renewed energy upon the Church. On that Pentecost long ago, the Spirit's Presence signals a new day of openness, inclusion and growth, as the barriers of language, culture, and perceived human differences are blown-away by the refreshing breath of the Holy Spirit. Today, that same Holy Spirit is still breathing New Life into the Church - calling you and me to be open and affirming; leading us to new learning and leadership opportunities; and helping us grow as individuals and as a community of faith. The important thing, is that we continue to hang-tight together....Not like Judas, but like Peter and the others!