

Chosen

Acts 1:15-17; 21-26
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First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

Tom Brokaw began his career at a small TV station in Omaha. He rose to become the co-host of the Today Show and then editor and anchor of NBC Nightly News, a post he held for 22 years.

After he made it big at the New York headquarters, Brokaw was walking through Bloomingdale's one day when a man stopped him and said, "You're Tom Brokaw, aren't you?"

"Right," said Brokaw.

"You used to do the morning news on KMTV in Omaha, didn't you?"

"That's right," he said, impressed by the guy's knowledge of his career.

The man paused, looked him over again, and said, "Well, whatever happened to you?"¹

Whatever happened to you? That's a question we all face as we look back on our lives. The more time you spend here on earth, the more you have to account for when someone someday asks, "What ever happened to you?" What did you make of your life?

In today's New Testament lesson, we have two disciples to consider as we ask, "What did they make of their lives?" One is Judas, and the other is Matthias.

Judas, we know was selected to be the purse-keeper of the Apostles, entrusted with all their money. From there, he went on to criticize Mary for using expensive perfume to anoint the feet of Jesus. Later, he took money from the Chief Priest and betrayed Jesus with a kiss. And in the end, he died a terrible death. But before all this, Judas was one of the 12 chosen by Jesus, living his life among the most faithful of followers. That's what we know about Judas.

And what do we know about Matthias? We know he was chosen to replace Judas. That's it. That's all we know about him. He's never again mentioned in all of scripture or any written history.

And yet, being a disciple, a follower of Jesus speaks volumes. It means you've been chosen for ministry on behalf of the Lord. It means you have a role to play in God's plans and purpose, as we all do.

¹ As told by James A. Harnish, "Are You Humble Enough to be Wise?" Tampa, Fla., September 21, 1997.

For Matthias to be chosen to replace Judas as an Apostle, it was important that he was active in ministry alongside other followers of Jesus. It had to be someone who has, says Peter, “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....”

Being baptized by John marked the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry. While his resurrection and ascension into heaven was the culmination of his power and purpose. These two points in any Christian’s life – our baptism into the faith and our entrance into the heavenly reward – these are the bookends between which our life’s story is told.

And as we’ve seen with Judas and Matthias, it’s not how much is said about you that counts, but rather how you spend your time between the bookends of life.

As you live out your baptism, ask yourself, am I like Matthias who quietly lived a life of faith, ready to follow wherever the Lord would lead, do whatever the Lord would ask? Or can you see a little Judas in yourself – someone who, as Acts says, “turned aside to go” his own way?

Even the most faithful soul is in danger of turning aside and going their own way. It’s like the pastor who one day gathered all the kids up front for a short children’s message. The lesson was on the 23rd Psalm, the Lord is my shepherd.

The pastor explained to the children that sheep aren’t smart and need lots of guidance. He said the shepherd’s job was to stay close to the sheep, protect them from wild animals, and keep them from wandering off. He pointed to the little children and said that they were like sheep who needed lots of guidance.

Then the pastor put his hands out to the side, palms up in a dramatic gesture, and, with raised eyebrows, said to the children, “If you are the sheep, then who is the shepherd?” He was obviously indicating himself.

After a few seconds of silence, one little boy said, “Jesus. Jesus is the shepherd.”

The pastor was caught by surprise and said, “Well then, who am I?” The child frowned thoughtfully, and then said with a shrug, “I guess you must be the sheepdog.”²

Even the most faithful soul is in danger of turning aside and heading in the wrong direction. And still God’s plan and purpose goes on.

When Judas turned away from the Lord, this left an opening for someone else to step in. As Peter says looking out at the followers of Jesus, “one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” Who will it be? Will it be you, or your, or you?

The ministry of the Lord won’t be thwarted because someone turns away from it. No, God will bring forth another to step in and carry things forward.

The sad thing for any of us is to think of those times when we’ve turned away from the Lord, from the family of faith, leaving someone else to step in on our behalf, to do what we could do, go where we could go.

It’s amazing what we accomplish – and gain – as followers of Christ when we just show up. And often we never know the impact we’ve had on the lives of others.

It’s sad to think that Judas started out with so much promise, and then bit-by-bit he became someone who would betray Jesus. I mean, I guess it had to be someone, right? But did it have to be Judas, did it have to be one of Jesus’ own. God only knows.

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And even so, we all have a share in the ministry of the Lord, in ways little and large. Before replacing Judas, Peter and all the believers prayed for God to send them a faithful soul, saying, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one ... you have chosen....”

And the Lord pointed them to Matthias for that particular ministry, just like the Lord turns to you for your particular ministry, whatever it is you’re called to do.

² Mark D. Hostetter, “From the sheep’s point of view,” First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, May 15, 2012, fpcnyc.org.

As a follower of Christ, you have been chosen for ministry on behalf of the Lord. There are people longing for your ministry, just like the disciples longed for the ministry of Matthias.

So know that you are instrumental in God's plan and purpose. Don't turn away from that. Step forward and serve where you can, participate where you can. And then looking back on your life, if someone ever asks, "Whatever happened to you," you can turn to them and say, "I spent my life alongside the Lord in ministry and faith." Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, in your eternal and divine wisdom you made us for relationship, and we celebrate the people you have brought into our lives, especially the mothers of this world and those gathered with us for worship.

For all those who teach us to love, we praise you. For those who inspire us to be generous, just and kind, we thank you. For those who nurture our relationship with you, we rejoice.

And also, for those who disappoint us, we ask for grace to be compassionate and forgiving.

In all our relationships may we live the truth of your love for us which knows no bounds.

We pray, O Lord, for those who need to feel your love, be inspired by your guiding Spirit, and embraced by your divine arms of acceptance and welcome. We pray for those who need your healing touch.

We pray in the name of the one who taught us what a life of love looks like, Jesus the Christ, who gave us the Lord's Prayer that we might pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.