

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 17, 2015

"FILLING THE GAP"

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 ~ John 17:6-19

There have always been great rivalries ... Coke vs. Pepsi ... Star Wars vs. Star Trek ... Beatles vs. Stones ... Microsoft vs. Apple. They're powerful enough to launch fiery debates out of seemingly mundane subjects ... but nothing seems to compare to the old rivalries in sports ... Dodgers vs. Giants ... Lakers vs. Celtics ... Packers vs. Vikings ... Packers vs. Bears ... Packers vs. any other team in the NFL. In Texas, college football is king and adult Sunday School classes have come to blows over the penultimate rivalry ... The University of Texas vs. Texas A&M. John and I are diehard Longhorn fans, but there is one Aggie tradition that I admire, and I want to lift it up to you today ... the tradition of "The Twelfth Man."

The Twelfth Man refers to E. King Gill, who was called down from the stands by A&M football coach D.X. Bible at half time of the Dixie Classic bowl game in 1922. The Aggies had so many injuries that Bible thought he might need this basketball player to go into the game. At the invitation of the Bible (I couldn't

resist that line!) Gill immediately ran under the stands and traded his clothes for the uniform of an injured player. It turned out that he was not needed in the game, but his spirit and loyalty were so inspiring to the Aggies, that they began the tradition of standing throughout the entirety of their games as a sign of their readiness to fill the gap of the injured fallen. Thus the Aggie twelfth man is the man (or woman, nowadays!) who stands in solidarity with those who are on the line. The Twelfth Man doesn't have the training or experience of the regular players, but has the heart and will to serve if needed.

Our story from Acts today is about the Christian Twelfth Man tradition, which actually antedates the Aggies by 19 centuries. After the risen Jesus ascends into heaven ... disappearing from sight ... but before the apostles can be ready for Pentecost ... they must pause to take care of some business. Their twelfth man is missing. Judas, the traitor, is dead. New Testament scholars give various reasons why Judas did what he did. Some say it was simple greed. Others imply he was well intentioned but misguided ... that he was trying to force Jesus to start his messianic campaign. Still others decide he was just a necessary though unwitting pawn in the cosmic drama. Whatever the reason, Judas gave up too soon because no doubt the risen Jesus would have restored Judas even though he had betrayed him ... the same way Jesus restored Peter even though he had denied him.

Whatever the reason, the church always has gaps that open up in the front lines of our ministry. Sometimes it is simply the end of the term allotted in the regular cycle of calling out people to serve in various roles of church life. And sometimes illness or death ... unforeseen difficulties or hurt feelings ... even misguided betrayals or strong differences of opinion ... leave vacancies in our human resources. Whatever the reason, when this happens we often feel betrayed and disappointed ... even angry with a person who has let us down. But we shouldn't judge. We never know the whole load a person is carrying, and our call is to lift up the fallen and support the struggling. Whatever the reason, we still have to fill those gaps to keep our ministries going. What I want to celebrate today is how God supplies the people we need, when we need them.

The eleven apostles set smart criteria for Judas' replacement ... someone who had been with them, a veteran ... someone who had experienced the cross and resurrection. It needed to be a witness to the risen Christ, one of the Easter people. They chose two, Joseph, a.k.a. Barsabbas, a.k.a. Justus ... and Matthias. They prayed, and cast lots (an ancient way of discerning God's will which was kind of a sacred coin toss). And God chose Matthias. The twelfth man took his place. Now they were ready for Pentecost. The Spirit came, great numbers were added, and soon thereafter, twelve were not enough to get all the work done. This caused

friction, so the church sets aside seven more ... the first deacons ... to make peace in the church and to see that everyone's needs were met.

Sounds like a great plan ... but wait. Just imagine this. What if Joseph/Barsabbas/Justus/whatever and Matthias heard the call to serve. "We need somebody to take Judas' place." But what if they said to themselves, "well, that's a hard job. I've got to take care of my family ... I've got a busy schedule ... it's likely to be controversial ... there will be a lot of meetings, and I like to be free to go to the lake on Sundays." What if they decided: "I don't want to do this. I *won't* do this. Let somebody else do this." But what if nobody would do this. So, no Pentecost. No church. No gospel. What I'm saying is this ... that while Acts makes it clear that by prayer and sacred coin toss it was God who supplied the person to fill the gap, it still required Matthias' willingness for the gap to be filled. Matthias truly is "the twelfth man" of the New Testament. So today, while we celebrate how God supplies the people we need to accomplish the ministry of the church ... let us also celebrate the spirit and loyalty and readiness of those people who answered God's call when it came.

I am speaking, of course, about the servant leaders of our church ... our Moderator Team, and our Board and Committee members. When the place in the line comes open and the church says "We need you," they are standing and ready and show

their heart to serve. And I say, thank you for your service. Thank you for your heart.

But I am also speaking about all of you ... because we are all called into the front lines of ministry in the church. Whatever the role, you are called to serve and the church is less if you aren't willing to do your part. More often than not God's call comes ... not as a formal invitation to assume a role ... but as the opportunity in a moment to be an agent of blessing ... to be a helping friend ... to embody the love of God in Christ for someone you encounter beyond the walls of the church.

Again and again I have seen you act as God's twelfth men and women ... for that person who has no other church in that moment but you ... and no other connection with God but you ... and no other hope for help but you. Pentecost happens among us ... God's Spirit is poured out in our midst because you are standing at the ready ... willing to be God's agents in the world.

Today we were privileged to witness the Confirmation of eight amazing young people. Confirmation is a sacred moment wherein the church celebrates the spiritual growth and conscious choice of the confirmand. In infant baptism, God and the Christian community said, "You are my beloved child of God. You belong to this family, you are loved." In essence, this morning our confrimands said,

“You are my God. I love you, and I want to live my life in relationship with you and this family of faith.”

Our confirmands journeyed through a year of study and learned about God’s love and God’s church ... not from me, but from their mentors ... a wonderful group of men and women who cared enough about them to walk alongside them through this process ... to teach them ... to listen to them ... to share their life stories with them. And their mentors have felt that they were blessed to be a blessing. I say to each of our Confirmands this morning, you may feel that you don’t have the training or experience of our older members, but I know that you have the heart to serve. You are called ... you are invited ... every one of you ... to be disciples of Jesus ... to carry his love in your heart ... to be his hands and feet in the world ... to love one another and lift up the fallen. And if you will answer that call ... if you will lose yourself by serving Christ ... you will find yourself ... and gain a life that is rich and free and eternal ... a life that matters.

Confirmands, I can imagine that you might very well feel like one of the disciples that Jesus was praying for in our Gospel reading today. Jesus knew that they were seeing a roughly-formed expression of God’s new life emerging. He knew that they would approach it with apprehension. He knew that they would compare this

new thing with what they had come to know as their "sacred." He knew that they would necessarily move into a space of chaos and uncertainty.

But he also knew that with all the appropriate befuddledness, that they would see the pieces of evidence that convinced them, once again, that the Spirit had bent the rules to surprise them in new ways. He knew that they might try wiggling out of the bind, but he also knew that eventually they would have to admit that it was the Spirit's work they were witnessing and that they would learn to embrace it.

Embracing it, they would have their hearts enlarged to welcome this new expression of God's presence. And then, as they embraced these new birthings, they would be transformed themselves. This transformation would allow them to see what Jesus had been up to, from the very beginning, and to see what they must continue to do in the future.

I invite you to hear again the prayer Jesus that offered on their behalf ... and hear it in this way: "I have made your name ... Amy, Emily, Noah, Brett, Lochlan, Lily, Tucker, Sam ... known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I

am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.”

Along with this prayer Jesus extends to each of you a simple invitation to life ... to a certain way of life ... and all it requires is your willingness to be God's twelfth man or woman in service to the human spirit. My prayer is that each of you will respond with a resounding “YES!”

May we pray?

Lord, here we are. Send us. Let us be your mouth, your feet, your hands, your heart in the world. We are not able, but we are willing. We are not worthy, but we are grateful. Bless this group of young people and their mentors. Show them and show us ... how and where and when to serve in Jesus' name. Amen.