

“From the Crowd”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
The Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 24, 2009
Scripture: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Commissioning God, you call us and we come. You bless and anoint us to our task of proclaiming the good news. Just as the people of the early church did, enable us to rise to the tasks you set before us. Amen.*

When a friend saw the title of my sermon on the sign out front this week, her mind first went to the fact that Wednesday night was the last night for this season’s “American Idol”. As those of you who watch that show and others like it know, the contestants presented are just normal, every-day people whose talents and gifts go unnoticed and then suddenly from the crowd, they are introduced into the limelight. Even though, I too, occasionally watch those shows, unfortunately – or fortunately – depending on your views – my sermon has nothing to do with any of those shows. Even though, my sermon is not based on any of those “contest” shows, though, the story we heard from Luke’s words from the book of Acts does have some similarities to those shows.

As you remember from our reading, the eleven disciples left Mount Olivet and returned to Jerusalem as Jesus had commanded them. Naturally, they sought out the Upper Room, a place filled with memories which had now become sacred. Other faithful people joined them until they numbered about a hundred and twenty. Included in that crowd, there were Jesus’ brothers and mother and a number of other women. We might think of that gathering as being much like the congregational meeting we held last Sunday, with Peter acting as the moderator.

The agenda of their meeting was to find a way to fulfill the commandment Jesus gave them before his Ascension: “Go – and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the

Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

What an assignment that was! And what a challenge! Think about it – there were only eleven disciples, and of those eleven only four or five could be counted on to spearhead Jesus’ idea of a world mission!

With our historical hindsight we know now that the period of waiting which Jesus commanded was followed by that great Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon this group and created of them an empowered group which launched the first evangelical movement of the early church.

You all know the story. Two names were put forward - Barsabas and Matthias whose qualifications were well known and acceptable to all. Then a season of prayer was decided upon, followed by the vote. Matthias was chosen, and now the original band of chosen disciples again numbered twelve.

What is interesting to me in all of this is that we never heard of Mathias, either before or after his election to this office. Little is known about him, his life or his ministry. His name occurs only this one time in Scripture and then he disappears from the holy writings and records of the early Christian church. The only thing we really know – but then it is perhaps the only thing we need to know – is that Matthias knew Jesus and had had been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry until his ascension.

It is important that those in leadership positions in the church – pastors, elders, teachers – have a vital faith in Christ. Being the church of Jesus Christ is important business. In fact, it is the most important business in the world. Leaders who do not have a vital faith in Christ will not have the motivation or the staying power to lead the church where it needs to go. When leaders are not who they say they are, it saps the energy of the organization.

Author Mark Twain was a man who was a life-long critic of the Christian faith. Though he

married a woman of deep faith, Twain himself was a cynic. You see, as he was growing up, he knew church elders and deacons who owned slaves and abused them. He heard men in leadership positions in the church used foul language and saw them practice dishonesty during the week after speaking so piously in church on Sunday. He listened to ministers use the Bible to justify slavery. He was so disturbed by the bad teaching and poor example of church leaders as a whole that he became bitter toward the things of God.

That happens sometimes. People judge us more by what we do and say during the week than they do by what we do and say on Sunday. The early church seems to have been aware of that and so their main goal was that the message always rang true. So, the only requirement in its selection of a new disciple, was that he be someone who knew Christ first-hand and whose life had been thoroughly changed by him. How careful they must have been in choosing Judas’ successor. They, along with Jesus, had been betrayed once, and they didn’t want to be hurt again. The fact that they chose Matthias from the crowd meant that they trusted him. And that alone makes him worthy of remembrance and of thanksgiving.

A few years ago the Seattle Times printed a story about two little boys named Francisco and Fernando Soto. They were playing by a swimming pool at their apartment complex, when Francisco, who was eight at the time, fell into nine feet of water. His brother, who was four, jumped in to rescue Francisco. The problem was that neither of the boys could swim. Their mother, who also could not swim, began to scream as she watched her two children struggle beneath the surface of the water.

It so happened that 49-year-old Jorge Pagan, a maintenance man from Puerto Rico, had just returned from a run and was relaxing on a second story balcony when he heard the cries. Knowing that seconds would make the difference, Pagan jumped to the ground, raced to the pool and was confronted by a high wood fence. Heedless

of injury, he slammed into the fence with such force as to knock a hole in it big enough for him to get through. He leaped into the water and dragged the two gasping little boys to safety.

Jorge Pagan suffered injuries which required medical treatment. But he saved two little boys. Pagan had once been a boxer, winning no titles, and was studying and teaching martial arts, also having won no titles. Perhaps the world had taken little notice of Pagan through the years. But though he may have won little in the way of worldly honors, we would all agree, I'm sure, like, Matthias he stood out in the crowd as a disciple of Christ. Credibility is everything. People today are cynical and suspicious. If we are not who we say we are, they will not listen to what we have to say.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. We celebrate the lives of men and women who have given their lives in service to this country. We won't be asking about their race, or gender, or educational background. We will remember only one thing about them – that they were true to their calling. And that, my friends, is all that God requires of any of us who serve Christ. Credibility is all about living what we believe. The world won't be impressed by how much we know, but whether Christ truly lives in us.

A young man once played in a high school tennis tournament. He was the school's star player and a title was a stake. In a hard-fought match, he was a point from victory. It was the boy's opponent' turn to serve, and he served with the goal of winning the match. His first serve hit the net. The opponent drew a deep breath, lofted the ball, and hit it again as hard as he dared. "Fault," called the referee. Double fault – end of match." As important as it was to the school's star player to win, there was something more important.

He went over to the referee and explained that he, being closer to the ball than anyone else, saw clearly that it was safe. The serve, he said, had been a winner and the match should continue. The referee, knowing true sportsmanship when he saw it, declared that the point would be replayed.

I don't know who won that tennis match. But I don't think it really matters. It seems to me that the victory in the story has less to do with tennis and much more to do with character. Here's the measure when Christ is in our hearts and our lives – what kind of man or woman have I become? Not how many honors, not how many plaques or trophies – what kind of person?

I am reminded of words from 1 Peter, words to which we will refer next week when we ordain and install our new elders. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, a people claimed by God for his own, to proclaim the triumphs of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

In this wonderful community called the church, there are to be no distinctions between laity and clergy – between men and women. Because of our new life in Christ, we are organized as a community which lives to make God central in our lives by the way we use our gifts to help others. We know that we will not always be the bold, unselfish servants we would like to be. But we know, too, that we are chosen from the crowd and claimed as God's own, and blessed with the opportunity to be revealed to the whole world as a follower of Christ's way.

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

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The First Presbyterian Church
of Dunedin
455 Scotland Street
Dunedin, Florida 34698
(727) 733-2318 fax (727) 738-4297
WEBSITE: fpcdunedin.org
E-mail: office@fpcdunedin.org
Victoria ByRode, Pastor