

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – May 16, 2021 – A Transition Plan Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 and John 17:6-19

The future of every endeavor is reliant upon identifying those individuals who have the gifts, skills, and commitment to the purposeful work of carrying out the stated mission. This is the ageless question of leadership. Experience teaches us that individuals are chosen to lead for a variety of reasons. Some of those reasons we may understand and agree with. Others we may not. Yet, as scripture reminds us, there are many gifts of the Spirit.

Specifically, each person is uniquely designed by our Creator, and is gifted with a variety of talents. When those talents are recognized by others, authority is granted. And when authority is granted, it is exercised in a multitude of ways. Some leaders are forceful, while others are more reserved. Some leaders are heavily titled and credentialed, while others have minimal education or training. Some leaders are driven by personal ambition, while others use their talents for the benefit of the whole.

In our first lesson this morning, the stated mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Yet, at the very moment when this nascent movement seems primed for expansion, everything begins to unravel. Tragically, Judas, one of the original

Twelve, betrays Jesus and hands him over to be crucified. This prompts Warren Carter to write, “There were no glorious early days. Failure and frailty existed from the outset.”¹

In the aftermath of Jesus’ shameful execution, a full-blown crisis emerges, and questions of leadership abound. Soon, the disciples huddle together, in search of a fitting replacement for Judas. They rightly consider those who have accompanied Jesus in his ministry. Yet, not all receive equal consideration.

As Wendy Farley reminds us, women traveled alongside Jesus, generously giving to him “from their own means (Luke 8). Martha provided him shelter in her home, respite from harsh travels (Luke 10). A loose-knit group of women stood by Jesus to the very end, keeping vigil during the prolonged agony of the cross.”² And now, “in the opening of Acts, sandwiched between the ascension and Pentecost, we find them again, in an upper room devoting ‘themselves constantly to prayer, with a shared intensity of feeling’ (Acts 1:14).”³

¹ Warren Carter, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 298.

² Wendy Farley, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 298.

³ Farley, 298.

Yet, despite a mountain of evidence regarding the value of female discipleship, “when it comes to replacing Judas, the women become invisible. Sadly, Peter declares that the short list of candidates” can only be filled by “one of the men.” And with this, the women arbitrarily become ineligible for the group of twelve, even though [they] meet the criterion.”⁴

Through our postmodern lens, it is hard for us to understand these gendered distinctions. And we wonder aloud why greater diversity is not represented among the leadership ranks of the earliest Christians. Still, despite the limitations of that moment, God finds a way. Because, as you know, in every age, God always finds a way.

Two finalists are named, and one is selected to serve alongside the remaining eleven.⁵ Matthais accepts the call. In so doing, he reminds us, as one scholar notes, that “Leadership in this new community is based” both “on qualification and on divine choice. It is derived both from ‘the bottom up’ – from the ranks of those persons whom the prayerful community chooses to lead – and from the ‘top down’

⁴ Carter, 298.

⁵ William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 24.

– as a gift of a gracious God who does not leave [the] community bereft of the guidance it needs to fulfill its mission.”⁶

Against all odds, in the midst of betrayal and crucifixion two thousand years ago, God finds a way. And now, in the midst of a global pandemic, God still finds a way. Friends, I encourage you to remember what life was like in February of 2020. At that time, if someone had told you that the church would actively encourage people *not* to attend worship services in-person for over a year, what would you have thought? Could you possibly have envisioned a scenario in which the church might survive?

For fourteen months, we have each become unwitting participants in a sweeping social experiment that has brought us to our knees. And yet, remarkably, the church has survived. Soon, we will reemerge from isolation to seize this moment that God has given to us. Soon, we will embrace new opportunities for growth and renewal. Soon, we will gain a deeper appreciation for what it means to be the church for a new era and in a new way. And, together, we will recognize that we need not fear change, for God is with us!

⁶ Willimon, 24.

Before the disciples were hard at work implementing a transition plan, Jesus was doing the same. In our second lesson this morning, Jesus prays for his disciples, and he “speaks to God on behalf of the faith community.”⁷ Rather than “entrusting the community’s future to the community itself, Jesus entrusts the community to God.”⁸ Specifically, “Jesus places the church’s future in the hands of God and invites the church to listen in on that conversation. The church’s future is thus shown to be God’s, not ours.”⁹ Fittingly, this prayer, which Jesus’ intends for us to overhear, brings us “face to face with the sovereign grace of God.”¹⁰

Next Sunday is Pentecost. And on that occasion, we will await the birth of the church. This year, perhaps more than any other moment of our lives, we now understand that eager longing to which to Spirit calls us. For joyful community. For enriching purpose. And for love divine. Friends, may God be with you in the midst of every transition, in this life and in the life to come. Amen.

⁷ Gail R. O’Day, *John, The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume IX*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1996), 797.

⁸ O’Day, 797.

⁹ O’Day, 797.

¹⁰ O’Day, 797.