

Pastor Jon's May 16th Sermon
Text: Acts 1 and John 17:6-19

“Taking Care of Business”

Do you have any unfinished business you need to take care of? Do you have anything keeping you from fully moving forward in life? We all have things left undone, right? Whether it is simply those projects around the house that you have been putting off, school or work things hanging over your head, or something weightier like reconciling with a person you struggle with or making friends with your past hurts or disappointments.

I often ask this question to people who are nearing end of life... “Do you have any unfinished business?” I have heard some amazing death bed confessions and hopes for reconciliation. I have seen reconciliation happen in hospital rooms and around hospice beds. But the lesson for me, however, is not to wait. Take care of unfinished business now. Life is so short and unpredictable. Covid has been a mirror that has shown us that recently.

In our first lesson for today and our Gospel, the apostles and Jesus have some unfinished business they need to take care of. The Apostle's needed to replace Judas. And in the Gospel Jesus prayed for his disciples before he went to the cross... for their protection from the evil one, for holiness, and that the church may be one as Jesus and the Father are one.

In our First Lesson from the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus had just ascended to the right hand of the Father. He promised to send the Holy Spirit to the Apostles... which will be our lesson next week at Pentecost. They were to wait in Jerusalem to be clothed with the Holy Spirit. In the meantime, they devoted themselves to prayer.

By the way, this came up in our Wednesday Bible Study... What's the difference between a disciple and an apostle? A disciple is a student. An apostle is a person who is sent out. This time of year, I like to think of apostle's as graduates from the Jesus' school who are sent out to be witnesses to the Good News of Jesus life, death, and resurrection.

But there was a problem. The one they followed and gave their life to, Jesus, was now physically gone. He ascended to heaven. Second, they were sitting with 11 instead of 12 apostles. They were incomplete. Not only that, the Apostles were trying to make sense of Judas' betrayal of Jesus and his subsequent death by suicide. I can only imagine the grief and questions they must have had in dealing with these profound losses.

I have preached a few funeral sermons of people who have died by suicide. This is the hardest work I have ever had to do as a pastor. On behalf of all those families I met with in their shock and grief, who would do anything to have their loved one back, there is a better way. There is help for those considering suicide. Don't keep your thoughts to yourself.

When thinking of those who are hurting in this way, I always land on Psalm 139... that God is acquainted with all our ways. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. There is nowhere we can go to escape God's presence or God's Spirit. Like our Bishop shared in our Synod Assembly this weekend. "There are no God forsaken places... there are no God forsaken people." This should be our mission in the church.

So, if Jesus appointed 12 disciples/apostles, they needed to add another. 12 was a sacred number in the Bible. It meant completeness, referring back to the 12 tribes of Israel.

The need for completeness reminds me of one of my parishoners in my first call in Lankin, North Dakota... Don Dvorak. Don and his wife Avis were members of a 12 person church I served. Don owned a gravel company and trucks. He was out delivering gravel one day when Avis was sweeping their steps after a light snow. Sadly, Avis fell down and died of a heart attack. She and Don had future plans. Plans for retirement, travel, grandkids. Don visited me often sharing his grief, spending much time after Avis' death trying to complete the plans they talked about... like going out and buying a new car they looked at days before her death. He felt incomplete without her.

To solve the problem, the apostles proposed two men, who had accompanied the apostles the whole time, to fill the 12th spot; Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.

²⁴Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” ²⁶And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

They had two equal candidates and essentially flipped a coin. It landed on Matthias. I feel bad for Justus.

The church today is incomplete without you and your gifts. In order to be a church, we need everyone’s gifts. As we come out of this pandemic, I think of Romans 12:4 “for as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given us.”

In this extraordinary year, I am thankful for all the gifts people have shared for us to continue to be church. We have needed people to teach us technology. We have had doctors, nurses, business people, teachers help us discern when it is safe to return to worship in our Rise Again Team. To make the church richer in the joy Jesus desires for us we need you and your gifts. They aren’t meant to be hidden.

May God guide us out of this pandemic to be witnesses of the Good News of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

Amen