

# Honored to Serve as a “Replacement Disciple”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
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- Psalm 128 (Common English Bible)

<sup>1</sup> Everyone who honors the LORD, who walks in God’s ways, is truly happy!

<sup>2</sup> You will definitely enjoy what you’ve worked hard for – you’ll be happy; and things will go well for you.

<sup>3</sup> In your house, your wife will be like a vine full of fruit.

All around your table, your children will be like olive trees, freshly planted.

<sup>4</sup> That’s how it goes for anyone who honors the LORD: they will be blessed!

<sup>5</sup> May the LORD bless you from Zion. May you experience Jerusalem’s goodness your whole life long.

<sup>6</sup> And may you see your grandchildren. Peace be on Israel!

- Acts of the Apostles 1:15-26 (Common English Bible)

<sup>15</sup> During this time, the family of believers was a company of about one hundred twenty persons. Peter stood among them and said, <sup>16</sup> “Brothers and sisters, the scripture that the Holy Spirit announced beforehand through David had to be fulfilled. This was the scripture concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus.

<sup>17</sup> This happened even though he was one of us and received a share of this ministry.” (<sup>18</sup> In fact, he bought a field with the payment he received for his injustice. Falling headfirst, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines spilled out. <sup>19</sup> This became known to everyone living in Jerusalem, so they called that field in their own language *Hakeldama*, or “Field of Blood.”)

<sup>20</sup> “It is written in the Psalms scroll,

*Let his home become deserted and let there be no one living in it; [Ps. 69:25] and*

*Give his position of leadership to another. [Ps. 109:8]*

<sup>21</sup> “Therefore, we must select one of those who have accompanied us during the whole time the Lord Jesus lived among us, <sup>22</sup> beginning from the baptism of John until the day when Jesus was taken from us. This person must become along with us a witness to his resurrection.”

<sup>23</sup> So they nominated two: Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.

<sup>24</sup> They prayed, “Lord, you know everyone’s deepest thoughts and desires. Show us clearly which one you have chosen from among these two <sup>25</sup> to take the place of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas turned away to go to his own place.”

<sup>26</sup> When they cast lots, the lot fell on Matthias. He was added to the eleven apostles.

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Today’s reading from the opening chapter of the Acts of the Apostles contains a subtle turning point in the New Testament’s story that is easy to overlook. The setting was Jerusalem. The apostles had returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives that rises just to the east of the city walls. Forty days had passed since Christ’s resurrection on that first Easter. Luke the evangelist reports that there on the Mount of Olives the apostles witnessed Jesus ascending to heaven.

Right after that, the followers of Jesus gathered in an upper room. It must have been a big hall because the Bible says that there were about 120 persons including the apostles. The apostle Peter addressed the “elephant in the room” which was the fact

that Judas was no longer among them, so “the Twelve” was at this point only “the Eleven.” And that unbalanced, incomplete number just wouldn’t do.

Peter quoted some verses from the Psalms that, among other things, strongly suggested that the vacancy of the twelfth apostle needed to be filled. Twelve was a powerful number in Jewish culture; they needed a full complement of twelve, Peter told the group, in order to be effective in their task of spreading the good news about their resurrected Lord.

So Peter laid out the qualifications for the “replacement apostle”:

- Despite the fact that a number of women—including the mother of Jesus—were among the 120 believers, Peter decided that the new apostle needed to be a man.
- Since the twelve apostles had usually been surrounded by other disciples or followers when they were with Jesus, Peter said that the candidate had to have accompanied the twelve apostles throughout their three years traveling with Jesus and living with Jesus and praying with Jesus and learning from Jesus.

Two possible replacement candidates were identified among the 120 believers. One was a fellow with three names, “Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.”<sup>1</sup>

So how to choose between Brother Justus and Brother Matthias? They prayed. Peter asked, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup> to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”<sup>2</sup>

Good prayer, don’t you think? Simple. Sincere. To the point.

So what happened next might puzzle you: the Bible says that after Peter prayed, the eleven apostles “cast lots.” That’s right: in effect, they tossed the dice. They might as well have flipped a coin or spun the needle on a game board spinner.

That may seem to negate the purpose of the prayer that Peter had so beautifully offered. But actually, it didn’t. In that time people believed that God’s response to a prayer for guidance was revealed by an act like flipping a coin or tossing dice. However it was that they “cast lots,” it came up “Matthias.” God had chosen Matthias as the “thirteenth apostle” to take the place of Judas and once again make the Twelve complete.

So with that explanation of the “origin story” of Matthias, would you like to know what we hear about him later in the Bible? Nothing.

Nothing. That’s right. Matthias is never mentioned again.

We don’t hear his name again, but we can be certain that Matthias became an effective ambassador for his Risen Lord Jesus Christ. We can be confident that his ministry, his words, his friendship, his example helped to spread the good news of God’s love given to us in Jesus Christ.

Now friends, you and I follow in the footsteps of Matthias. Like Matthias we have been blessed to know the good news of God’s love. Like Matthias we are inspired

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:23 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Acts 1:24-25 NRSV

by faith. Like Matthias we are entrusted with the responsibility of presenting God's love in word and deed.

Our eyes are opened to the countless opportunities we have to share Christ's love, planting seeds by what we say and how we say it, and by what we do—how we live our lives.

This story of the “replacement disciple” comes to us in Luke's sequel to his gospel. That sequel the Christian community began calling “The Acts of the Apostles.” The gospels presented us with the words and the actions of Jesus, the faithfully obedient Son of God. The gospels show us who Jesus was and what he did.

Now the Acts of the Apostles tells us more about who his followers were. We hear what they did. In a nutshell, the twelve apostles and the ever-larger group of disciples and followers told others that they had come to have faith in God—faith made strong and deep and joy-filled because of the words and example of Jesus the Son of God.

Those followers embodied God's unconditional love and acceptance. They demonstrated that faith in God through trust in Jesus Christ changes your life—providing peace in the midst of turbulent times, offering hope to face the unknown. And the book of Acts tells us that the impact of their speech and their example spread throughout Jerusalem and Judea and Asia Minor and Europe....

And to you and me here today. We're here in part because an ordinary person named Matthias accepted the call to witness to Jesus Christ. An ordinary person resolved to share his joy, to spread the gospel, to invite others to see God at work in their lives, too.

Matthias may fade into the pages of history, but through the intervening centuries the ministry he carried out has come down now to us.

We have a choice: we could allow the joy of knowing God through Jesus Christ to stop with us because of our busyness, our complacency, our “let-someone-else-do-it” indifference. But I think that God's Holy Spirit is stirring within you the desire to spread the good news of the gospel. You are an evangelist, an apostle, a witness to God's love in Jesus Christ through your acts of compassion and generosity, your attitudes of respect and appreciation, your words of peace and encouragement.

Far from being a footnote in the pages of biblical history, Matthias represents every one of us: a believer who accepts the call to present Jesus Christ to the world. Jesus revealed to us the very nature of God: loving us unconditionally, providing for our world with immeasurable generosity, offering forgiveness and mercy beyond our deserving. That is good news the world needs to hear, good news that we are called to share. In the power of the name of Jesus, let's share that good news! Amen!

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