

Exodus 18:13-27  
Acts 1:12-26

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
July 25, 2021

## **Decently and In Order**

### *Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson*

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning we hear father-in-law Jethro give Moses some wise advice about sharing the burden of leadership. Listen to these words from Exodus 18:13-27...

### *Introduction to the Epistle Lesson*

Our Epistle Lesson tells us about the first order of business for the Jerusalem congregation following the Ascension of Jesus, that being the replacement of Judas among the twelve apostles. Listen to these words from Acts 1:12-26...

### *Sermon*

Do you remember back in elementary school during recess, how everyone was lined up, facing the two captains who were about to choose teams for a game of kickball. In successive turns each captain chose the best, then the next best, players to be on their team. Finally, there were only two potential players waiting, but only one position left to fill. Who would be chosen? Who not? Choosing a team could be an agonizing experience, especially for those who had to wait.

Whether it is schoolyard kickball teams, national elections, or electing leaders in the church, making choices is something we have to do. Though it's not always easy, we use our best judgment to field the strongest team.

At our Congregational Meeting last Sunday, Midway elected three members to complete the Officer Nominating Committee, adding to the two who had already been chosen by the

Session. Thus has one choosing ended, and another begun, of identifying, nominating, electing, training, examining, and finally, ordaining and/or installing new officers for the church. This process is in accord with the rules of the *Book of Order*, such as

...a ruling elder or deacon who has served six consecutive years shall be ineligible for election to the same board for at least one year. (G-2.0403)

Through it all, we seek to lift up those who can best lead and serve the church. We take prayerful discernment seriously, and work to ensure that not only does the candidate have a sense of call, but that the wider community can also affirm that call. “Prayerfully considered” and “democratically elected” are hallmarks of the Presbyterian church in choosing leaders.

The word *Presbyterian* is from the Greek *presbuteros*, and basically means government by Elders. Baptist churches have a Congregational form of government. Methodist, Episcopal, and Catholic churches have an Episcopal form of government, led by bishops. We recognize the validity of each form, but certainly believe that our is biblically based.

To be sure there is legitimate concern that the church can become so preoccupied with administrative matters that it neglects its mission. Someone said, “Organization can be a strait jacket in which the spirit of Christ is paralyzed, but the spirit without any framework whatsoever can be like the wind with no sails to catch it.” Good organization alone will never make a happy home or a prosperous business or an effective church; however, it is also true that hardly any family will be happy, nor business prosperous, nor church effective, unless it is well-ordered. In 1 Corinthians Paul gives this instruction to the church, “but all things should be done decently and in order.”

I remember that when I was called as Interim Pastor of the Belton Church more than eleven years ago, one of the things the Session asked me to do was to evaluate the systems, policies, and leadership of the church, the Session, and the committees, and then offer guidance

and suggestions in ways improvement could be made. For they believed that good organization could enhance the mission and ministry of the church.

That said, a challenge facing the church today is to be careful not to place issues of structure above the mission of the church. As we engage in the process of electing new officers, let us not seek people who can just continue what we have always done before. Let us seek members who can enhance the mission of the church in an ever-changing world. Members who can support the stated mission of the church.

Recently I received a birthday card from Bill and Randi Rexroad. On the front was a drawing of Jesus before a crowd of people. Jesus was holding up a loaf of bread in one hand and a fish in the other. And these comments and questions were coming from the gathered group: “I can’t eat that. I’m a vegan.” “Has that fish been tested for mercury?” “Is that bread gluten-free?” Yes, leaders of the church surely face different challenges today.

Our lesson from Acts relates what might be called a low point between two spiritual highs in the life of the Apostles. The passage comes immediately after an account of the Ascension of Jesus. And shortly, the Apostles will be set aflame by the Holy Spirit’s coming at Pentecost. But now they are having a congregational meeting to take care of some church business.

After a short journey from the mount called Olivet, the disciples gathered together in the Upper Room, probably the same large apartment of Mary’s house in Jerusalem which had been the scene of the Last Supper. There they met for prayer—the Eleven apostles, the ministering women, and our Lord’s own family. And in our lesson from Acts we read that in those days, Peter, who was clearly the chief apostle, takes the initiative, and citing texts from the Psalms, calls for a process to be set in motion by which a new apostle will be chosen. And so a meeting

was convened to restore the unity of the Twelve. The place of Judas, “the betrayer,” had to be filled in order to mark both continuity with the past, and a new beginning in the present and for the future.

In acting at once on this organizational matter, Peter was following the example of Jesus. For after Jesus was baptized by John and tested in the wilderness, he set right out to call apostles. And as soon as the Twelve had spent enough time with him to gain a sense of his mission, Jesus expanded his organization by selecting seventy others, whom he sent ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go. (Luke 10:1-4)

And we can assume that Jesus derived his method of organizing for mission, and for delegating responsibilities, not only from common sense, but also from his knowledge of Israel’s past leaders—such as Moses. Following the escape by the people of Israel from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, Moses had to spend most of his time resolving the people’s problems. His father-in-law Jethro was concerned about the long-term effects of this arrangement, and one day said to Moses:

“What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. (Exodus 18:17-18)

He then advised Moses to set a group of men over the people as rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. From then on these rulers dealt with the problems of the people; difficult cases they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves.

So, when we Presbyterians give attention to the most effective ways to organize ourselves, we are not going off on a wild-goose chase, but following biblical models. When we divide our denomination into synods and presbyteries, when we elect a session and appoint

committees, we are adding to a structure, the foundation of which was under construction many years ago.

As you think about who might lead and serve the church well, it is important to bear in mind the person's relationship with Jesus. The English writer and humorist, Jerome K. Jerome tells of an old cobbler who, on the coldest winter day, left the door of his shop open. On being asked why, he replied, "So that Jesus can come in if He is passing by." Sometimes people speak of what would happen if Jesus were here now and how differently people would live if he were in our homes and at our work.

A mother told how once her little daughter had a temper tantrum. After the tantrum, they were sitting on the stairs making things up when the little girl said, "I wish Jesus would come and stay in our house all the time." Of course, we believe that Jesus should be our welcome guest, and that a leader in the church should be a person who lives day by day with the door of his shop always open.

The Apostles viewed the election of Matthias as a choosing by the church *and* a choosing by God: "They put forward two," *and* "Thou hast chosen." They established the qualifications: that the person must have been a follower of Jesus from the beginning, from Jesus' baptism by John, and that he must have continued in faithfulness. They reviewed those who met the qualifications, and narrowed the field to two persons: Joseph and Matthias. Then they prayed for God's direction in making the final selection. They didn't simply rely on their own wisdom; they sought wisdom from above.

... "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." (Acts 1:24)

It may seem strange to us today that the method was that of casting lots. Like tossing the dice. But it was a natural thing for Jews to do, because all the offices and duties in the temple were arrived at in this way. Each person present wrote the name of a candidate on a stone; the stones were put into a vessel and the vessel was shaken until one stone fell out. He whose name was on that stone was taken as God's choice. "And the lot fell upon Matthias." We still use the same figure of speech to express the sense of being called to do something: "It is my lot to do it." No doubt, it will be the lot of some of you to bear the burdens and share the joys of servant leadership in the Christian community at Midway Presbyterian Church.

Organization—a necessity for us to get on with our business, or better, Christ's business. Selecting leaders—not the spiritual highlight of the church's year, not Christmas or Easter, but surely a necessary part of being an effective church of Jesus Christ.

Our lesson stands at an important moment for the first disciples. Jesus has ascended, and they are waiting to receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In the midst of their waiting and in the uncertainty in those days, the disciples remained faithful in prayer and in seeking the will of God. May we have that same focus in the uncertainty of these days.

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