“Replacement Parts”

Acts 1:15-26

1 Corinthians 12:12-20

Sarah Wolf

May 16, 2021

A watched pot never boils. A watched cell phone never receives a text. Or in one comic panel of the great Gary Larson, “A watched head never gets eaten by ants.”

We know these proverbial sayings well, and yet we all fall victim to them at some point or another. Amateur cooks wait for the pasta water to boil. Expectant parents wait for the labor to begin. We all wait for the news — good or bad — which will undoubtedly change us.

We’ve all found ourselves waiting for something, watching it, and then thinking, “If I just *do* something else, it will make the thing happen faster,” so we find little tasks to distract us and hopefully make the thing for which we’ve been waiting happen.

Our feature characters in today’s Scripture passage are also susceptible to the struggle of waiting and the temptation to help move things along.

The apostles and the believers in today’s story are in a holding pattern. Earlier in chapter 1 of Acts, we are told that for 40 days, the resurrected Christ had walked among them, continuing to teach them and providing instructions for the next phase of the movement. Then, before he was taken up into heaven, Jesus gave the apostles some instructions. He told them to wait in Jerusalem for a baptism by the Holy Spirit which would commission them for mission.

After Jesus ascends to heaven, the apostles and other believers hide themselves away in yet another upper room, spending time in prayer, wondering when they would receive the gift of the Spirit so that they could fulfill their mission of spreading the Gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and eventually to the ends of the earth.

We Christians, 2000+ years later, have the benefit of knowing that they would only have to wait ten days in between the ascension and Pentecost and with Pentecost, the arrival of the Holy Spirit. The apostles and believers, however, are very much in the dark. Yes, they do have the benefit of being on the other side of resurrection — of witnessing firsthand how what Jesus says, Jesus does, but they are still left with a feeling of uncertainty.

And so while they wait, Peter, the man upon whom Christ would build his church, stands up to try to get the ball rolling, to try to *do* something.

He points out that they are one apostle short now that Judas has left the picture. Peter proposes that they find a replacement for Judas that their number might again equal twelve. This may seem like an odd time killer, as they wait for the Holy Spirit, but Peter is actually acting on something *else* that Jesus had told them. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells Peter and the disciples, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

It’s interesting to note that Jesus makes this statement only *after* Peter has said to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” So perhaps his decision to replace Judas isn’t so much out of a need to have a complete amount of apostles, but only to insure Peter’s position at the end of days…

Either way, Peter feels a need to replace Judas among the rest of the apostles. So he lays out the prerequisites for the new apostle: someone who has been with them since the beginning from Jesus’s baptism by John and who has continued to follow them through the turmoil of Good Friday through to the resurrection and beyond.

There are two men who meet these qualifications: Matthias and a man who is known by three names: Justus/Joseph/Barsabbas who I will name from now on for clarity’s sake - Joseph. These men have both been present along the journey from day one. They’ve heard all the teachings; they’ve seen all the miracles. They’re the ones.

The process by which the new apostles are chosen is pretty interesting in that it is both democratic and God-centered. First, the apostles and all the believers — and we’re told that the number of believers is over 120 persons — they all get together and propose the two men - Matthias and Joseph. The two are democratically selected.

Then, after saying a prayer, we are told that they cast lots to select the new apostle. This might seem odd to us. It would seem that they are just letting chance decide — that casting lots means to flip a coin or drawing names from a hat and letting that sort of fate decide. But this tradition is actually really, really old and Biblical in nature. It comes from the practice of using the Urim and Thummim to answer a question. The Urim and Thummim were objects that priests used in pre-prophetic times to determine a positive answer (yes), a negative answer (no), or no answer at all (reply hazy, try again later). The priests would ask God for guidance and then consult the Urim and Thummim for God’s answer.

The apostles and the early believers would have been used to this procedure and so they fully trusted that which ever person prevailed in the casting of lots - either Matthias or Joseph — would be the one God chose.

And so, after casting lots, Matthias is chosen by God to be the newest apostle and Joseph isn’t. And so the apostles are complete again with their 12 chosen members They are ready now for the Holy Spirit to come down at Pentecost to baptize them with fire and send them on their way to go off and change the world.

Which is exactly what happens. Whether or not the choosing of Matthias helped speed up the Holy Spirit is known only to God. But either way, Matthias is included among the apostles and we presume that he goes off on his own journey and has his own adventures along the way.

I say presume because...we never hear about Matthias again. We never hear about Joseph again, for that matter. We can guess that Matthias accepted his call from God to join the apostles and maybe he went east to Asia Minor and beyond. Maybe he went west across the Mediterranean and spread the good news there. Maybe he was martyred for his faith. Maybe he died of old age far from home.

And what about Joseph/Justus/Barsabbas? What happened to him? Was he bitter or offended that God didn’t call him to join the apostles? Did he give up on the movement and resume the life he had pre-Jesus?

I don’t think so. I don’t think it would have been possible for Joseph to do that. We don’t know a lot about him, but the one thing we *do* know is that he was committed to the movement. He’d been there from day one and he wasn’t one to quit. I think after Matthias was chosen and after the fires of Pentecost were just burning embers in their memory, Joseph was still there, quietly doing his own part.

Maybe he was the one who secured the locations for their house churches. Maybe he was the one who taught the catechumens — those converts of the faith who hadn’t been baptized yet, who commit to studying Jesus’s teachings and the teachings of the early church before they could be baptized on Easter. Maybe Joseph’s wife baked the bread for communion. Maybe his children composed hymns.

We don’t know the rest of Joseph’s story, but we can assume that he was fully committed to Christ and so as the early Christians tried to establish Christ’s church in the world, Joseph was right there with them, working quietly along in the background.

When I was a sophomore in high school, I took Anatomy and Physiology as my science course. I was trying to discern whether or not I was feeling a pull toward medicine in my future...however once it came time for in-class dissection, my discernment quickly ended. It was not for me.

But one of the things I did love about that class was learning how the body worked. I loved learning the names of the bones and muscles and organ systems. I would regularly marvel about how the body has so many systems and they all manage to function together to keep the body...well...alive.

I remember specifically when we were studying the kidneys and I learned about the Loop of henle. It’s a little tiny thing, but according to Wikipedia, it “creates a concentration gradient in the medulla of the kidney.” I know it’s totally random to remember this tiny, miniscule part of the kidney, but I remember studying it and its purpose and thinking, “Wow. When God created humanity all those years ago, God knew that we needed a loop of Henle, too”

Sure, the heart and the lungs and the brain and the other major organs get all the glory, but it’s the tiny things like loops of Henle which work silently in the background, making sure all systems are go.

People like Joseph/Justus/Barsabbas are like the loops of Henle in God’s church. And God’s church is full of them throughout history, continuing on until today. Sure, John and I do a lot of the church’s work as we prepare and preach sermons, lead worship, teach Bible study, check in with congregants, etc.

But Covenant wouldn’t be Covenant without the Josephs and Josephines working alongside us.

Covenant wouldn’t be Covenant without Martha Ware keeping our skeleton crew supplied with communion shortbread throughout this year.

Covenant wouldn’t be Covenant without our dedicated teams of newsletter folders who gather twice a month in the Fellowship Hall to fold all of the newsletters before they can be sent out to our congregation.

Covenant wouldn’t have been Covenant during this pandemic without Mike Riddell coming in just about every Sunday, making sure that the folks in their homes can see *and* hear us.

Covenant wouldn’t be Covenant without all of the folks who serve on our various committees who have had to be imaginative and resilient in the midst of a global pandemic.

And Covenant wouldn’t be Covenant without *you*, and all of the *you-*ness you bring to our church — whether you’re a founding member, a chronic attender, or friends who have been joining us online from Pittsburgh, Durham, or even Taiwan — whether you are one day old or 100 years old, Covenant wouldn’t be Covenant without you.

I am so grateful to the Holy Spirit who baptized those apostles with fire and sent them out into the world, who has inspired great leaders like Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, but who has also seen fit to inspire a whole host of good church folk to use their many gifts to do all matters of things — to keep the lights on, the books balanced, the bells polished, the children taught, the praises sung — all of which are needed and done for the glory of God.

Thanks be to God for the Holy Spirit and thanks be to God for all y’all.

All praise be to God.

Amen.