

Sermon for FPC Gardena – Sunday May 24, 2009
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

In just one week, the liturgical season of Eastertide will culminate with the celebration of Pentecost! Pentecost is often described as the ‘birthday of the Church’—for that is when the Holy Spirit came upon the gathered believers and the earliest form of the church began to take shape.

History tells us that the Apostle Peter was the leader of the first church, known to us today as the Roman Catholic Church. We also know the historical truth that later on, beginning in the year 1517, the events of the Reformation brought about a separation from the Catholic Church, beginning a group of ‘Reformed’ Christian churches—which would include the Presbyterian denomination.

The Reformed tradition differs from Catholicism in many ways—including doctrine, styles of worship, and forms of government—while we share a belief in the mystery of the Triune God and the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. And there are many other streams of Christianity practiced in the world, which share common beliefs and practices, and which also differ in some very basic traditions and understandings.

Today's passage from the book of Acts can give us, as Presbyterians, some insight into the origins of our form of church government and some understanding of practices which are imbedded in the language, the traditions, the worship, and the work of our congregation and others who are a part of the PC(USA).

For some of you, this may be information that has been ingrained in you from the beginning of your lives. For others, however, the Reformed tradition may be fairly new to you—you may have been raised in another denomination, or you may be a relatively new Christian or Presbyterian. For all of us, though, it is important that we return, from time to time, to the foundations of our faith—and the form of government that guides it—so that we may have a stronger understanding of what we do within the church, and why we do it. And that has its roots in the Gospels and here in Acts...

Presbyterian comes from the Greek word *presbuteros* which means 'ruled by elders'. Thus, in the Presbyterian Church, the decisions are not made by a pope, a bishop, or even by the pastor alone. Our form of government is based on a group of elders—who are chosen by the people—and the pastor (or pastors)—known as the Session. Page 2

Throughout his ministry, Jesus modeled ministry as a team effort. He didn't go out on his own, but selected, called, taught, equipped, and guided twelve disciples to go with him and to engage in the preaching, teaching, healing, praying, and encouraging in God's name. As time went by, more and more people came to believe, followed Jesus and the twelve, and became a part of the group of people who would come to be known as Christians.

Just as Jesus did not minister alone, neither did the twelve. The Gospels and Acts talk about communities, families, friends, all taking part in the sharing of the Good News of God's grace and love. After Judas betrayed Jesus, he took his own life. Following Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the remaining eleven disciples recognized the importance of finding another person qualified to serve as one of the twelve.

The criteria that they set for this person was that it be someone who had been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry at the baptism of John, all the way through to witnessing Christ's resurrection and his ascension. Two such men were put forward—Barsabbas, who was called Justus, and Matthias. Their process of discernment involved much prayer, as well as the then-accepted practice of casting lots. P. 3

Just as those early Apostles carried on Jesus' method of doing ministry in teams, so do we. Every Presbyterian Church is run by one or more pastors and a group of elders. The number of elders on a church's session reflects the size of church membership. Sessions include women and men, adults of all ages, and include a racial-ethnic balance which reflects that of the congregation. Elders are elected for terms designated as one, two, or three years, and can be re-elected for service which can continue for, but not exceed, six consecutive years. Usually, elders are elected in 'classes' or groups with staggered terms so that as new elders begin their ministry, more experienced ones are there to guide and encourage them....just as the eleven original disciples must have done with Matthias once he was chosen.

On this very morning, our congregation's Nominations Team will convene to begin the prayerful process of calling church members to serve as elders, deacons, and as members of next year's Nominations Team. There will be much to consider—the number of vacancies left by outgoing officers, the specific gifts and talents needed on each team, and the abilities and availability of church members who might be called to serve. The process, like that in the book of Acts, relies on God's guidance in discerning who is called to lead and serve at this time.Page 4

You may recall that just a bit further on in the book of Acts, the first Deacons were called. That role was established for the purpose of having a group of people who would extend hospitality and caregiving to people within the congregation as it was needed. Its purpose was also to lighten the load of the disciples in their primary functions of prayer and preaching the word.

So, right there, in the very earliest days of the Christian church, we can see the foundations for our denomination's having elders, deacons, nominations teams, all of which draw upon Jesus' ministry as described in the gospels!

Just as a large group of believers was gathered for prayer to discern whether it was Matthias or Justus that was called to serve as an Apostle, all of our congregation is invited to pray about the call process as we select our own elders and deacons. And all of our members have input, voice and vote in the election process. There is no secrecy about such matters in the Presbyterian Church—our processes are outlined and described in our denominational Book of Order, and they are open to scrutiny by the higher governing bodies such as presbytery, synod, and General Assembly.

We see in Acts how the believers set a standard for who would be qualified to serve in the place vacated by Judas. The Book of Order is one of the first places our Nominations Team will turn, as it describes the qualities required for service as elder or deacon.

Elders, it says, “should be persons of faith, dedication, and good judgment. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel, both within the church and in the world.” According to the Book of Order, “It is the duty of elders, individually and jointly, to strengthen and nurture the faith and life of the congregation committed to their charge. Together with the pastor, they should encourage the people in the worship and service of God, equip and renew them for tasks within the church and for their mission in the world, visit and comfort and care for the people, with special attention to the poor, the sick, the lonely, and those who are oppressed. They should inform the pastor and session of those persons and structures which may need special attention. They should assist in worship. They should cultivate their ability to teach the Bible.” It goes on to say that, “Those duties which all Christians are bound to perform by the law of love are especially incumbent upon elders because of their calling to office and are to be fulfilled by them as official responsibilities.” P. 6

There is a similar set of responsibilities described for Deacons. These qualifications and responsibilities will be important to consider as our Nominations Team meets this morning and in the weeks ahead, and as our congregation meets to vote on the nominees. Even more important, though, will be the consideration of the foundation for these calls, as put forth in the book of Acts.

Think about the setting of today's passage. Jesus' earthly ministry had culminated with his death, resurrection, commissioning of the disciples and, finally, with his ascension. He had not left his followers unprepared. Jesus had taught, trained and equipped the twelve for leadership of the budding church. Jesus had given them a strong foundation of faith which gave them meaning and purpose. And, Jesus would be sending them the Holy Spirit to dwell within each believer, giving them the power, the love, and the strength to live and minister with God's grace.

We can sum up Jesus' ministry with the twelve disciples—and many other believers—in three phases—he reached out to them, calling them to follow him---he helped them to grow in faith and understanding—and then he sent them out to carry on his ministry.

In the Acts 16:5 Initiative, a three-year process of prayer, discernment and growth in which our congregation is participating through our presbytery, one of the first considerations is creating and implementing a church mission statement. They suggest a simple, memorable message that everyone in the congregation can recall and utilize. The one they recommend is ‘Reach, Grow, Send’. Which pretty much sums up what Jesus did with and through his disciples, and it describes the way the early church came to be. The disciples and other believers were to reach out to people; and then—for those who were open to it—to teach and equip them, so that they would grow in their faith; and then they would send these newly ‘grown’ believers out to share the Good News!

Whatever the words we choose to describe our church’s mission, the purpose and the impact will be the same—to ‘Reach, Grow, and Send’. As we pray and consider the various positions—ordained and lay—to be filled within our congregation, this concept—modeled by the servants in the early Christian church—will be at the core of our thinking. For our purpose as a church of Jesus Christ is truly to reach out to people beyond our doors; to invite them in for worship, learning, and community; and then to send them out, equipped to share the gospel invitation with others.

In the coming week, as we ready ourselves for the celebration of Pentecost, waiting and listening for the coming of the Holy Spirit, may we also be listening, looking, and waiting for the Spirit's call to us.

There are many needs in a church—even, or perhaps especially, in a small church like ours. Some are called to serve as elders or deacons, others to serve as ushers, counters, liturgists, or office volunteers. Each and every one of us is called to give of our time, our talents, and our treasures for the life of the church and the glory of God.

Listen.....listen.....for the breath of the Holy Spirit, as God calls out to you.....

Amen.

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus--for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us--one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, "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." And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.