

By the Flip of a Coin

Hespeler, May 12, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Christian Family Sunday

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26, Psalm 1, 1 John 5:9-13, John 17:6-19

The Book of Acts opens with a very dramatic scene as Jesus ascends into heaven forty days after his resurrection. And in the second chapter of Acts the story is told of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church that happens fifty days after the resurrection.

And in between those two awesome events, the apostles were left for about ten days on their own. Jesus had left, the Holy Spirit had not yet come, and they had some time to kill. So, what did they do with it? Well, we are told that they spent their time constantly in prayer, but apart from the prayer, they only actually accomplished one thing.

Seems Important!

It was something that seemed important in the moment. You see, Jesus had chosen twelve disciples. And the number obviously seemed significant. Just as there were twelve sons of Jacob and twelve tribes of the nation of Israel, it seemed fitting that there should continue to be twelve key apostles. But there was a problem. One of the disciples, Judas Iscariot, turned out to be a bit of a washout. And so, the remaining eleven decided that the one thing they could do while they waited for further instructions was replace Judas.

With this setup, you might think that the rest of this book is going to be all about what these twelve men are going to do. I mean, after all, isn't it called The Acts of the Apostles? But remember that the author didn't put that title on this book, and it really doesn't turn out that way.

What is this Really About?

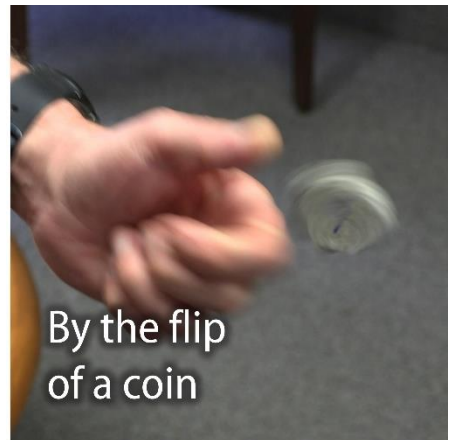
You might expect, based on this passage, that Matthias, the man chosen to replace Judas, was about to go on to do great things. Maybe he did, but if he did, this book isn't at all interested in them. Nor is it really interested in the acts of the other eleven either. Apart from Peter and a few quick mentions of John and James, the twelve mostly drop out of the story which quickly shifts focus to the acts of Peter, the seven deacons, James the brother of Jesus and, in particular, a man named Paul and his companions.

So, why is this little incident even recorded? Well, I've got a theory. I think there's a message hidden in this episode for us. And it's hidden in the identity of the person you would think of the least. No, not Matthias. The other guy; the guy who didn't get chosen. He's a guy that has more names than just about anyone in the New Testament, **“Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus,”** but I think he may have also had another name. I think there's more of his story to be told in this book.

Anticipating the Cast

Joseph stared; he could not look away as Peter took the flat, smooth stone in his hand. It was about the size of a drachma. In fact, if they'd had a drachma, that was what they probably would have used. But amongst them all, all they could scrape together was this flat stone. Peter had taken a knife and roughly scraped letters onto it – a *yodh* for Joseph on one side and a *mem* for Matthias on the other. Peter prepared to cast it.

Ever since this meeting of the followers of Jesus had begun,



Joseph had had an earworm – a strange melody running through his head. *“Look at all my trials and tribulations Sinking in a gentle pool of wine...”* He felt troubled that the outcome of this one toss seemed to mean so much to him.

Joseph’s Qualifications

He had spent the last few years following Jesus all over the place. He had observed him at work healing and preaching. He had been one of the seventy sent out by Jesus to the towns and villages of Galilee. Most significantly, he had been there at the end and then experienced for himself the reality that Jesus continued to be with his friends even after his death.

All these experiences certainly qualified him to be in a select group – to be counted as on the same level as the twelve apostles. And now that one of the twelve – that traitor Judas – was dead, there was an opening. The thing he had always dreamed of was finally in his grasp. *“Always hoped that I’d be an apostle. Knew that I would make it if I tried.”*

There was just one problem, and the problem was named Matthias. He also had been there for everything – was just as qualified to be one of the twelve as Joseph was. And Peter had been unwilling to choose between the two of them – proposing instead that they should cast lots.

A Well-Known Method

Such a thing had long been an acceptable way of consulting God when faced with a dilemma. As a Levite, Joseph was certainly aware of the ancient Israelite practice of consulting God using the Urim and the Thummim – two stones that were cast and the Levitical priest would then interpret some answer from Yahweh in how they landed on the ground. This was essentially the same kind of process and there was no reason to doubt that God would indeed make his will known through this casting of lots in the same way.

And yet, Joseph could not help himself. He had this nagging feeling in the back of his mind that his entire future was being left to a completely random flip of a coin. As he watched the stone fly up in the air, the earworm continued to play out in his mind. *“Then when we retire we can write the gospels So they’ll still talk about us when we’ve died.”*

Mem, it landed on *Mem* for Matthias. And just like that, Joseph was left with only one question. What was he supposed to do with his life now?

Disappointment

Have you ever had a goal or expectation that you’ve built your whole life around? Maybe it was a career, a prize, a championship, a relationship. You plan for it. You study and train. You spend hours imagining what your whole life will be like once you get it. We have all had things like that in our lives. And you are a rare person indeed if you have never had any of those hopes or dreams squashed. Failure and disappointment are unavoidable in life. And the test is always how are you going to respond when that happens.

Response

There is always a temptation, isn’t there, to let yourself wallow in your bitterness and disappointment? And that bitterness can manifest itself in various ways. For some, they might retreat into apathy and passiveness. They have a hard time finding meaning or purpose in anything. And then there are those, of course, for whom the bitterness comes out in more active ways. They might set out to sabotage the success of the people they perceive as having stolen the thing they desired from them.

And I know that none of you would ever deal with your disappointment in such unconstructive ways

any more than I would. But who among us can honestly say that we've never felt the temptation to react so unhelpfully to the experience of disappointment? That's how I know that Joseph must have felt at least a moment of temptation to become bitter or take his disappointment out on his apostolic rival, Matthias. Of course he did! But the question is what did he do with that temptation. Did he let that temptation control him, or did he choose to channel it into something not only constructive, but powerfully encouraging?

A Better Response

Maybe Joseph would not have the attention and prominence that he had dreamed of. But he decided to make something of his seemingly diminished role. He determined that, from now on, he would live out his faith in Christ Jesus in a way that maybe would not seek out the limelight, but that would seek to constantly build others up, and maybe especially those who needed that support the most.

So that is what he did. When somebody new came into the church and they struggled to fit in because they were different or because people had a hard time getting past things they had done in the past, Joseph Barsabbas was always the one who went out of his way to welcome them and make introductions while he encouraged others to see them as new people in Christ. When somebody failed or washed out in some project that they had taken on, it was Joseph who went and let them know that it was okay and that everyone could have a second chance.

Selling the Field

And when the whole church in Jerusalem was struggling to meet the needs of the poorest among them, it was Joseph who led the way by selling a field that he had inherited in Cyprus and bringing the proceeds to lay them at the feet of the twelve (including Matthias!). Let them be the ones who got the credit, who used it to provide for each according to their need.

He insisted that nobody needed to know that the money came from him but, somehow, the word got out and others were encouraged to follow his example. That ultimately led to a whole new phase in the life of the church as they expanded their ability to care for one another in the name of Jesus.

Nickname

No one was quite sure who first suggested the nickname. In fact, maybe the first time it was just something that happened by accident. Somebody referred to him not as Joseph Barsabbas, that is the son of Sabbas, but just changed one letter and called him Barnabas instead. And as soon as people heard it, it just seemed right to them because Barnabas means the son of encouragement. It didn't take long until everyone was calling him that. Joseph and his Latin name, Justus, were all but forgotten and everyone just called him Barnabas – including and perhaps especially the apostles and not one of them smiled more broadly when he did so than Matthias.

You Can't Always Get What You Want

Some wise man once wrote, *"You can't always get what you want. But if you try, sometimes Well, you might find You get what you need."* I guess you might say that that is what happened for Barnabas. He wanted to have an impact on the world. He wanted to realize something of the vision of the kingdom of God that Jesus had placed before his disciples. And he thought he had it all worked out how he could do that. He wanted to be an apostle and to act with the authority that came with that to make it happen.

But he didn't get that; it was denied him on the flip of a coin. And he never did quite work out whether he thought that was just random chance or the voice of God. But did it really matter? What mattered was that he chose to take it as an opportunity to accept what he received as a gift from God and to make the most of it.

Impact

As I said, Matthias may well have gone on to do great things as one of the twelve. But if he did, we'll never know because the author of this book never bothered to tell us. But I suspect that he did not want us to miss the impact that was had by Joseph the Son of Encouragement.

Think of his legacy. Not only is he credited with kick-starting the extraordinary economic system of mutual care in the church in Jerusalem, but he is also apparently responsible for the careers of at least two other people who had an extraordinary impact.

Saul of Tarsus

When, for example, a man named Saul showed up at the church in Jerusalem, nobody wanted to have anything to do with him. He had persecuted the Jerusalem church, after all, and gone off to persecute it in Damascus too. And sure, he said that he had changed – that he had met the risen Jesus and now saw things differently. But would you have believed that?

So maybe Saul would have never met the apostles if not for the actions of one man. Any guesses who? **“Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him.”** (Acts 9:27) And then later, when leadership was needed for the church in Antioch, it was Barnabas who went and found Saul (who came to be known as Paul) to recruit him for the job. He set him on his way and then became his first companion in Ministry. (Acts 11:22-30)

John Mark

And later, when Paul rejected a potential companion because he had disappointed him before, Barnabas did it again. He went to the washout, a young man named John Mark, and personally took him on as a companion – he gave him the second chance that Paul didn't want to give him. That was just the kind of person that the Son of Encouragement was. (Acts 15:37-39)

And if you just take those two people – the Apostle Paul and John Mark who, Christian tradition has it, was the author of the Gospel of Mark, you might say that Barnabas had a greater influence on the future shape of Christianity than did most of the twelve – certainly more than Matthias.

Sacrifices

Every one of us has experienced disappointment in our lives. We all know what it is like to have your heart set on one thing and to end up with something else.

Many of us have also made the calculation at some point that, in order to pursue one goal we had to give up on another one. On this Family Sunday, for example, we certainly recognize the huge sacrifices that both mothers and fathers, often make to prioritize the raising of children.

It's What You Do with it

Such circumstances are a part of life. But the life of Barnabas reminds us that it will always remain up to us what we do with them. I hope he can remind us all of the potential that each one of us has to choose to take our situation as a gift of God and make the most of it. I am sure that all of your lives have been affected by a Barnabas – by someone who resolved to be that encourager and who worked tirelessly in the background. I certainly know a lot of people on this day who would point to their mother as that person.

Thank God for the children of encouragement. And thank God for the great potential that God gives to each of us to respond well to the circumstances of our lives – even those that are created by something as random as the flip of a coin.