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Trying to Get It Right
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; 1 John 5:9-13

“More than anything else, Christianity is a love song,” so writes one of today’s leading church historians.¹ The statement is intriguing. In my extended years of pastoral ministry, having read scores of theology books, taught numerous Bible studies, and written hundreds of sermons, I’m drawn to its truthful simplicity. Maybe it’s too trite to be convincing to the masses; maybe too shallow; maybe too much of a branding-wanna-be to be taken seriously. “More than anything else, Christianity is a love song.”

In a recent survey, more than three-quarters of young churchgoers (those inside the church) identified Christianity as judgmental, hypocritical, out of touch, insensitive, boring, and exclusive—the antithesis of love. Only 16 percent of young adults outside the faith said that Christianity “consistently shows love for other people.”² Yet, love is what Jesus taught. Three chapters in the Gospel of John focus on Jesus’ last gathering with his small circle of twelve disciples. John’s version of that last gathering was to remind his close followers (and us, his readers) that we are to serve others. He used the ritual of washing feet to symbolize the theme of this last sermon which concludes with the words, “more than anything else, you will be known as my followers by the way you love each other.”

Throughout my ministry, I have heard people say, “We need to get back to the old time religion.” “Which old time,” I’ve wondered? The first century kind when followers of the Way met in synagogues on the Sabbath and then gathered on the first day of the week, Sunday? The “old time religion” of the second and third centuries when Christians were persecuted under the Roman Empire, used as gladiators for entertainment in coliseums? Or the fourth century

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *A People’s History of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 31.

² Bass, quoting David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons in *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007, 21-40).

kind when Constantine demanded his army be baptized en mass, swords drawn and held above the water so that their weapons of mass destruction could avert any ethic associated with Jesus? I felt, that those “old time religion” comments had more to do with the religion of the early and mid-1900s when churches were flourishing with worshippers and revivalism was a part of the day. Forget that that period in history found support for slavery in scripture and kept the role of females out of most professional vocations, and certainly out from behind any pulpit.

The book of Acts is virtually the Gospel of Luke, Volume 2. Same author. Same time. Just a continuation of the story. Volume 1 concludes with Jesus execution by the Romans, followed by several experiences of the resurrected Jesus with his followers. Volume 2 (The Acts of the Apostles) begins with the risen Christ telling the followers to wait in Jerusalem until they received the power of God’s Spirit, which the church knows and celebrates as Pentecost.

In the meantime and with much angst and fear, what are they to do? They pray, they re-live the events of the last three years, they do the “what ifs,” and they try to carry on. Peter gets up before a group of 120 and suggests that Judas position among the twelve disciples be replaced with another worthy follower. Two people seem to be the most likely to fill that twelfth slot—Joseph Barsabbas, sometimes called Justus, and Matthias. The method they used for selection was well known—casting lots. That’s how Jonah’s guilt for running away from God was discovered among the sailors—casting lots. It landed him overboard and in the belly of a great fish.

So, the two of them—Justus and Matthias drew straws to see which would be selected as the new “twelfth disciple.” Matthias drew the long straw. The early followers were trying to get it right. They weren’t even known as a church yet...or even Christians. That would happen later in Antioch where the followers of Jesus would grow to accept integration of Jews and Greeks in one spiritual gathering. Right now they were all Jews, their leader had been executed, and they were trying to keep this movement of Jesus alive—a love song that had defied all the odds in calling people to be fully alive.

Most of us go through life trying to “get it right”—our lives, that is. We go through life trying to discover who we are, why we do the things we do, and

why we don't do those things we should. While some of us are working hard at trying to kick habits that utterly have the power to destroy us or destroy every relationship we've had, others of us are working hard to find our place in this world. Where is my passion? Where is the place that I can best use my brains, my talents, my body? Is there only one such place of vocation? Or, are the places numerous, just waiting for the gifts of God to take root in it and accomplish a larger purpose in the world...and in our lives?

To those of you nearing the end of school (and to the many others in mid-life looking for meaning), have patience with yourself, and have patience with the world around you. Charging off in many directions at the same time will give you something to do, but it won't draw you any closer to a deeper purpose in life. You've heard the way seasoned business executives describe the way immature executives make decisions: "Ready. Fire. Aim!"

A second word of advice is to live without fear. Anxiety's only purpose is to sharpen our discernment. Worry, fretting, and creating busy work are only another form of addiction, like alcohol, nail-biting, chain-smoking, or over-eating. You have to be quiet long enough to discover what your concerns are. You have to be quiet long enough to learn your real strengths and the strength of God that is eager to reside inside you in the form of the Living Spirit.

My third word of advice is to look for the Holy in everything around you. Only after you've opened yourself to the presence of God that is in every person you meet and in every moment you live, you will recognize the opportunities that are calling your name.

A first-century Jew named Saul was one such person who heard his name called. He was a Jew of the Diaspora, not living in Palestine, but in what we know today as Turkey. His education came under the most noted Jewish teacher of his day, Gamaliel. He was intelligent, passionate about his work as a lawyer and member of the Sanhedrin. Saul was most attentive to splinter groups that could be destructive to his people and his religion. He was active in carrying out the law that condemned such religious and social activists.

However, on his way to such a hearing and possible condemnation, he became very confused about what he was doing. Luke records several brief accounts of this experience in which as he travelled by foot, the sun became

blinding, he became dizzy, and he thought he heard voices with the voice being that of the executed Jesus asking Saul why he was persecuting him. The experience was so disturbing and disrupting to his life's vocation that he escaped his normal life for the next years to try to sort out the pieces. His patient years of wilderness, his becoming open to a radical change in vocation and spiritual commitment led to a name change and the real second volume of the early church's history.

In the opening chapter of Acts, the disciples struggled with the power they experience in the earthly presence of Jesus and the void left by Jesus' execution. Waiting on the Spirit became more than a discipline for them; it became their nemesis. They cast lots to fill the void left by Judas Iscariot, and Matthias drew the "lucky straw."

What else do we know about Matthias? Nothing. His name is never again mentioned in the New Testament. The book of Acts marches on for twenty-eight chapters and never again do we hear the name of Matthias. The name that dominates Acts is the Apostle Paul. If there needed to be a replacement or addition to the disciples, this one was obviously God's choice. He became the bridge from the growing band of followers in Jerusalem to Asia and Europe. Saul of Tarsus became Paul the Apostle.

Ireneaus, a second-century bishop of Lyon, once said: "The glory of God is the human person fully alive." Thomas Merton, a twentieth-century American Trappist monk, wrote: "A life is either all spiritual or not spiritual at all. No [person] can serve two masters. Your life is shaped by the end you live for. You are made in the image of what you desire."

So in our attempts to "get it right," remember that we, too, must honor the presence of God's Spirit in all our decisions—living fully, living patiently, and discovering the holy in everything. Maybe, more than anything else, Christianity really is a love song.

Prayer

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.

John 17:6-19

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.