

“Casting Our Lot”
Acts 1:15–17, 21–26
Wake Forest Baptist Church
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Good morning, and welcome especially to our visitors this morning from both near and far. It is a tremendous honor to be here with you, and I thank you for hearing me as I humbly offer a word to you this morning.

The summer season is upon us, a time where we often slow down, take vacations, maybe lounge beside a pool, or perhaps just rest and relax in any building with air conditioning. Speaking as someone who is still in the midst of graduate school, summer looms large as an oasis of rest and sleep and a break from writing research papers and taking exams. Yet, our text for today reminds us that at this time of the year, for the followers of Jesus, things were just heating up. These followers had witnessed his teachings and his miracles, then during the Passover they had witnessed his arrest and brutal crucifixion, followed by his resurrection appearances, and finally his ascension to heaven. Following this last amazing event, they returned to Jerusalem, gathering together and “devoting themselves to prayer” according to verse 14.

Here is where we pick up their story this morning. In a gathering of about 120 people, men and women, probably about the number of people here this morning, Peter - one of Jesus’ closest and most *outspoken* followers - stands up and announces that they need to pick a replacement for Judas, who betrayed Jesus by becoming a guide for those who arrested him. So, they nominate two men, Joseph and Matthias, and then they pray for God to reveal the one whom God wants as they cast lots. From our context, their decision-making process might seem...a little reckless. Essentially, they select two candidates, and then they roll the dice to see who gets the open spot. There’s no search committee, no open call for resumes, no transition team...at least as far as we know. They’re certainly not wasting any time. On the other hand, their method for making this fairly important decision seems surprisingly humble and faithful. Peter briefly describes the necessary qualifications, and after they propose two men, they cast lots. Normally, we wouldn’t think that drawing straws or flipping a coin were very responsible ways to make important decisions, unless we’re picking teams on the playground or determining who’s going to wash the dishes. However, casting lots was actually widely used in the ancient world as a way to make these important religious and social decisions. It was a means that was believed to reveal God’s will, God’s decision. Their prayer also reveals the earnestness with which they want this important decision to be guided by God, and not their own imperfect wisdom. “God, knower-of-hearts,” they pray, “Show us which one of these two you have chosen.” The lot falls on Matthias, and so they trust that God has communicated God’s choice, and Matthias is added to the group of eleven apostles.

We could read this text and find a nice story about the early group of Christians faithfully choosing a replacement for Judas, and let it remind us of the importance of seeking God's will for the big decisions in our lives, but I think that if we dig a little deeper, we will find that there is much more to this story.

Standing before the gathering of people, about 120 men and women, according to the text, Peter addresses them by saying "Men, brothers...." Many of our English translations, including the one I read earlier in the service, choose to soften the language to make it more inclusive, substituting 'friends' or 'brethren' as Peter's opening word. But the Greek is unequivocal... *andres adelphoi*, Men, brothers.... From the beginning of the life of the church, we encounter blatant sexism in the willful disregard for the presence of the women who had followed Jesus all along. And this is no isolated incident... think about the authors of the gospels and letters and epistles that made it into the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and others writing in Paul's name. Where is the gospel according to Mary, or Martha? Where is the letter from Prisca and Aquila to the churches in Rome? Think back even to the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. Mark, in his gospel, concludes this miracle story by noting that "those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men." Biblical scholars are quick to point out that the number of people fed is actually much larger if we include the thousands of women and even children who were undoubtedly present, but the gospel writers don't count them. They ate of the loaves and were filled, but as far as the gospel writers are concerned, they didn't exist.

And in our text for today, this deliberate disregard for the faithful women in their midst continues unabated. As Peter goes on to describe the necessary qualifications of the one who would replace Judas, he declares that "one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that 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." One of the men who have accompanied us....

Women need not apply. These women, who followed Jesus from their first opportunity, who supported his ministry, who lingered at the foot of his cross while the all of the male disciples had fled, and who arrived early at the tomb to anoint his body, these women were not even considered. They were present yet invisible, faithful yet unworthy. They had walked the dusty roads from Galilee to Jerusalem; they had left their homes and their families that they might follow and learn from this prophet of God; yet solely by virtue of their gender, they are not qualified to be apostles.

Admittedly, it would have been a monumental challenge to their religious, social, and historical traditions to select a woman to become the 12th apostle. Jesus chose the original twelve, all men, as a representation of the twelve tribes of Israel, emphasizing the unbreakable ties between this radical movement and its origins centered in Judaism. Twelve was a sacred number. And so it was important to fill in the gap and restore the circle of twelve, which the Old Testament demanded must be men. Thus, we can point to this event, this decision, as another instance of the earliest Christians being in continuity

with the traditions of the Israelites, as well as the social customs of their predominantly Roman context.

Nonetheless, I am tempted here to dismiss this text, and others like it, as demonstrating the profound and undeniably androcentric character of the Bible, and of Christianity, and to question now as on so many other occasions how I can give myself to a movement that historically denied my full humanity, and for so long denied women a voice and a place of leadership as members of equal standing in the church. Yet, if I walk away, if we walked away from our undeniably flawed tradition, change would never come. So we must walk on, just as those women walked among the crowds and along the dusty roads, always looking inward to ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past, and always looking outward that we may be agents of change.

We may be tempted to think that in *this* church, which has always been remarkably progressive in the areas of women's leadership and in being welcoming and affirming of people who are gay and lesbian, that we have no prejudices ourselves, and that a text like this only reminds us of how far *other people* have yet to come, how much *other* churches need to change. It is easy to point out the speck in our neighbor's eye without even noticing the plank that we have in our own.

So, as we continue our transition process as a church and begin our formal search for a new pastor, we need to be deeply reflective and consider where our own blind spots may be. Who are we excluding from consideration? What hidden biases might we have that may powerfully influence the choices we make? Will we do what has always been done, following a tradition that may no longer meet the needs of our community, or will be willing to go against the grain of history and tradition, and take a risk? Will our list of qualifications for a new pastor include unspoken expectations...of gender, age, sexual orientation, or ethnicity? Where do we need to challenge ourselves, in order to truly grow and change?

There is a connection that we need to make in our own minds and hearts, and it touches on the heart of this passage as well as our life of faith here and now. Whether we consciously intend it or not, the person or people whom we choose to lead us represent God to us. We cannot see God with our physical eyes or touch God in the way that we can touch one another; we hope and have faith in what we cannot see or touch. And so, we find symbols, and images, and metaphors to help us grasp something of this Spirit, this presence. Because our pastors function as spiritual leaders for us and hopefully mediate God's presence to us, we often begin to believe that somehow they *represent* God more fully, more closely than other people do, even if we are reluctant to admit it. And so, the resistance to women as pastors indicates the extent to which we believe that women can't really represent God. Similarly, the resistance to people of other races or ethnicities as pastors, or gay and lesbian people as pastors, or people with disabilities as pastors, indicates the extent to which we believe that people of other races or gay and lesbian people or people with disabilities can't really represent God for us.

This resistance that we feel somewhere deep down inside of us is admittedly very difficult to overcome. But if we say that we believe in a God who is love, in a God who is not male, or female, who is universal and personal, who knows no prejudice, and who transcends any image or description we could render, then we must overcome it. We will be taking a risk, for sure, but it is a risk worth taking. As we look for a new pastor, putting together a search committee, looking at resumes, and continuing in the work of the transition team, I hope that we take this risk. I hope that we cast our lot with someone who challenges our expectations and stretches us to re-imagine what God looks like. Amen.