



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 7 (B)

Waiting

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

This morning, we hear that peculiar little story from Acts. It's generally overlooked, but since it's about anxiety, and these are anxious times all around, it can be a bit comforting.

Here's what's going on: The time is somewhere during the ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost. Luke's Gospel—and remember, Luke wrote Acts, where this story is recorded—says, and Acts repeats, that Jesus' very last words to the Apostles before his Ascension were that they were to remain in Jerusalem and wait for something special to happen—for them to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Well, the disciples didn't know it then, but they had just over a week to wait—Pentecost was just around the corner. But, again, they didn't know that. They just knew that Jesus had told them to stay in Jerusalem and to wait.

Don't you just hate it when that happens? There they were, stuck in an in-between time, a time right after something important—the Resurrection *and* the Ascension—had happened, but before anything else had happened. And they didn't have anything to *do*; they were just stuck there, waiting.

I suspect we can all relate to that. It's no fun.

Well, as Luke tells this story, Peter, bless his heart, Peter just *couldn't* stand it; Peter got anxious. This waiting stuff wasn't for him, and besides, he probably hadn't read Acts. So, Peter did what so many folks do when they have no idea what to do but feel like they have to do *something*: He called a meeting. In fact, he got the whole church together, every Christian in the world, all 120 or so of them. Then he did the next two things folks in his situation so often do. He gave a speech, and he formed a committee.

In his speech, Peter, who seemed to go from fisherman to management consultant in one fell swoop, sets out an action plan—a plan to fix his anxiety by making things the way they were before—when everybody knew what to do, when there was no anxiety, no waiting, just normal life.

Peter started out with the fact that there had always been twelve main apostles. However, Judas and the Crucifixion and Resurrection had messed that up; now there were only eleven. So, Peter proposed that they make everything just like it was in the good old days—like last week—and get themselves another apostle—

right away, at this very meeting.

It's important to notice that Jesus never said anything about twelve being a magic number for apostles after the Resurrection. In fact, Jesus never said a word about this sort of administrative tinkering or anything like it. But none of that bothered Peter, and they had to do *something*, didn't they?

Of course, the rest of the folks went along. Why not? After all, Peter at least had an idea and a plan, and the same couldn't be said about anyone else. Waiting, the way Jesus had asked, didn't seem to count as an idea. So, they doubtless formed a nominating committee, and the nominating committee did its research and had its preliminary interviews and dutifully reported back to the committee of the whole with an approved slate of candidates. Next thing you know, they flipped a coin or drew straws or rolled dice or *something* and Matthias won—or lost, depending on which of the later legends about Matthias you want to believe—and he was added to the eleven apostles. The organizational chart was complete!

So, there they were, happy as a fish with a new bicycle, back up to full strength in the apostle department—with Peter no doubt looking around for another organizational change he could make to keep everybody busy and give the appearance that real progress was being made.

Well, as to what happened to poor Matthias—who had the dubious honor of filling Judas' seat on the board—we have no idea. He was penciled into the tradition, but as far as the life, structure, governance, and operation of the Early Church were concerned, he played no role at all.

But something did happen, and it happened within just a couple of days of Peter's big meeting. Pentecost happened—just like Jesus had promised. The spirit of God moved its quiet thunder over the Church, and everything was different; everything was new.

With Pentecost, God's plan for the future of the Church—rather than Peter's—began to unfold—and it was like nothing anyone could have predicted; it was like nothing that had ever happened before; it was far different and far bigger than anything even Peter could have ever imagined. The Spirit moved the Church with new power and new direction and new insight into completely new directions. The twelve, as a group, a body—including poor Matthias, who was only just learning the ropes—the twelve vanish from the records.

To be sure, a few of them remained important for the Church for a few years, and later legend—mostly without biblical or historical support—has them, and lots of other evangelists, going all over the ancient world founding churches and dying horrible deaths. Of the 12 apostles, it seems 14 are reputed to be buried in Spain. We don't know much about this part.

But we do know that the early Church in Jerusalem was organized and operated for the next generations without the twelve and pretty much without Peter. All of Peter's anxiety and all of his planning were

swallowed up in the rush of the Spirit.

It was the Spirit of God—and human affection, relationships, and devotion to the Lord—not administration, structure, or how many folks were in what department—that would ultimately shape the Church and make it a living witness to the Word of God in Jesus Christ.

One hopes that, through all of this, good old Peter learned, at least for a little while, that, sometimes, anxiety notwithstanding, when it's time to wait and see what God's going to be up to, then the best thing to do is, well, wait and see what God's going to be up to.

So, perhaps our lesson today is that an in-between time is not a bad thing at all. It just is what it is—it's a time to wait, a time to love one another, and a time to trust. It's a time to expect that God will be faithful and loving, and to look forward in confidence to whatever wonderful things God has in store for us.

So many of our times are in-between times, where we seem stuck in situations that just can't last, that must lead to something, and we just want that *something* to happen so we can *get on with it*. So, we get anxious, quite regardless of what Jesus says about anxiety, and we want to do something, anything to move things along. We might even have some pretty good ideas about the best thing there is to do.

At this point, things become a bit nuanced. To be sure, there are times when we do need to act, to change the situation—especially when it's something about ourselves. But other times, we just need to wait—especially when it's something we want or expect God to do. It's tricky, and a matter for discernment. Nonetheless, we need to listen to the wealth of spiritual masters from the Psalms through the Early Church through C. S. Lewis, who, in *Mere Christianity* summed it up nicely and continues to say to us, perhaps optimistically, perhaps reproachfully, “I'm sure that God keeps no one waiting unless he sees that it is good for him to wait.”

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