

Next One Up

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Preacher: Kent Dixon

[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, May 12th. My name is Kent Dixon, and it's my joy to be the pastor here. So, for many people, Mother's Day is a time to celebrate mom, right?

If you are a mom, maybe you've already been celebrated today. Maybe you've been sent all the way across the city to retrieve something for your husband, just in case you weren't paying attention.

Maybe you had breakfast in bed. I did not have breakfast in bed. It is not my day. And moms are often presented with flowers or gifts on Mother's Day or even breakfast in bed.

And this is also the time on Mother's Day when I look to see all the males who look panicked and suddenly run for the door or try to sneak out to go and get flowers.

There's nothing but grace. So, for many of us, Mother's Day is a time of celebration. But for others, Mother's Day can be hard. It can be a complicated time.

[0 : 57] And I want to take a moment to acknowledge that. It can be a reminder of a broken relationship that may still be broken. It may seem to have no hope of being repaired.

For others, it may be a reminder of loss. The loss of a spouse. The loss of a parent or a sibling. But this morning, I'd like to take a moment to put some of those things aside.

As much as possible, anyway. This morning, we reflect on the mothers who supported and encouraged and shaped and made sacrifices for us in so many ways.

We are who we are. Good and sometimes bad. Because of the mothers that we have. And for all the moms who are here this morning in person or who are listening on the podcast or on the phone line or other channels in the days ahead, thank you sincerely for all you have done.

You are loved and you are valued. May God bless each of you. Happy Mother's Day. Happy Mother's Day.

[2 : 34] Happy Mother's Day. Happy Mother's Day. Happy Mother's Day. Happy Mother's Day. Happy Mother's Day. Go. Oilers. All right. Let's get on with it.

So, we're continuing in our sermon series, Acts to All the World. And through this series, we're exploring the New Testament book of Acts. And so, just as a reminder, you can always listen to, and I would encourage you to share, past sermons in this series, or any of the past series that we've had over time.

Because it's now been five, five and a half years almost. So, last week, we took a closer look at Acts 1, verses 7 to 10, and the ascension of Jesus. And so, my hope in that is that we have come to a deeper appreciation of the event and a better understanding of its importance and its significance. So, this morning, there's an expression that seems to have originated in professional sports. I did some research, next man up. Maybe you've heard it.

Maybe it's familiar to you. Maybe it's not. The expression is meant to convey a wide range of meaning and concepts. And it also applies, believe it or not, to our sermon this morning.

[3 : 49] And I've modified it slightly to make it more inclusive, which I think is appropriate. Next one up. So, this morning, we're going to focus on Acts 1, verses 12 to 26.

So, you can go ahead and turn there, if you have your Bibles, or grab one from the pew in front of you. And I will also read it for you. So, Acts 1, verses 12 to 26.

Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying.

Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James, son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas, son of James.

They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. In those days, Peter stood up among the believers, a group numbering about

120, and said, Brothers and sisters, the scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as a guide for those who arrested Jesus. [5 : 04] He was one of our number and shared in our ministry. With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field. There he fell headlong, his body burst open, and all his intestines spilled out.

Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language, Echeldama, that is, field of blood. For, said Peter, it is written in the book of Psalms, May his place be deserted, let there be no one to dwell in it, and may another take his place of leadership.

Therefore, it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us.

For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection. So they nominated two men, Joseph, called Barabbas, also known as Justice, and Matthias.

And then they prayed, Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.

[6 : 21] Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias. So he was added to the eleven apostles. Now, he's not here this morning, but someone, who shall remain nameless, asked me a few weeks ago, they said, So you talked about apostles and disciples.

And I said, and? And he said, I don't. And I said, know the difference? And he said, yeah. And I said, I didn't really either, so I'll clarify it for you.

So I did. And I said, helpful? And he said, yes, very. And I said, okay. And so I promised him I would do that for you. So before we go further this morning, I want to clear this up.

So you've heard me use it before. You read it in scripture before. So both disciples and apostles appear in scripture. Do we know the distinction?

Maybe you do. Maybe you don't. So the apostles were the twelve men that Jesus chose specifically as his inner circle. They're the ones who would ultimately spread the gospel message and ignite the early church.

[7 : 34] So we refer to them a lot. I think sometimes people think apostles and disciples are interchangeable terms. They're not. And I'll show you. And here's where we'll see the difference.

So this is where I may lose you. So try and stay with me. All the apostles were also disciples. Hold that thought. But not all disciples were apostles either then or now.

Still with me? So you and I are disciples. Are we apostles? No. So there's the difference. So the other thing too is that a disciple of Jesus Christ is anyone who follows him.

Who seeks to learn from his example and obey his teaching. Disciples of Jesus are essentially students of Jesus. Was that helpful? Does that make sense?

The disciple-apostle distinction. So we read that Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, if you've got your fingers going, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the zealot, and Judas, not that Judas, son of James, were there.

[8 : 45] As well as the women who followed Jesus and his mother and brothers. That's what we heard in Acts this morning. So the passage that we've heard picks right up after Christ's ascension.

So the apostles have just witnessed Jesus ascend to be with the Father. So we pick up that passage and they've come back to Jerusalem.

And they waste no time, as we read there, in getting back to the task that Jesus gave them. They don't spend a lot of time navel-gazing and thinking about, oh, what do we do now?

What's next? So what's the first thing they do? They have a prayer meeting. So they have a prayer meeting. That's important. I think it's very important for us to recognize that. The very first thing they did was gather together in prayer.

So Luke doesn't give us any detail about the prayer, what they were praying about, what they were praying for. So they may have been thanking God for everything they just experienced.

[9 : 44] I think that's a good guess. They may have been asking God to prepare them for the exponential growth of the church that was to come. They may have been praying for protection and provision.

They may have also been praying that the Father's will, I hope they were praying this, that the Father's will would be done from that moment forward. But no matter what they were praying about or praying for, they were praying.

It was a priority. And they were praying together as a group. Next one up. So they were unified and focused.

They were equal members of the team. They all had roles to fill. Next one up. No one person was more important or more significant or more valuable than anyone else.

That early church playing field was level. What did they do next? They had a business meeting. How fun, right? We recognize that first church business meeting happened.

[10:53] Peter and the other apostles are all there. And it seems they had a one-item agenda. Peter stands up and addresses the group of 120 who had gathered.

So why did Jesus select 12 apostles? So there's no question that there's a symmetry and intentional connection between the 12 tribes of Israel that are identified in the Old Testament and the 12 apostles.

You've heard me say over and over and over again, the numbers that we see in the Bible are not coincidental. They're intentional. So if we paid attention during the gospel narratives surrounding Jesus' arrest, we'll remember that it was Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' apostles and his trusted inner circle of 12, who betrayed Jesus to the Romans.

And it was this betrayal that led to Jesus' arrest and ultimately his crucifixion. And we also know that to some extent, Judas met an untimely end.

Overcome by guilt over what he had done, it seems, Judas took his own life and he created an apostolic vacancy. So I'm going to be honest with you, I have always found Judas' story to be both tragic and in some ways deeply puzzling.

[12:19] I don't know if that's true for you. How could someone who had been with Jesus every day betray him? Judas received the same calling, the same teaching, the same love, the same attention as everyone else.

But he chose to both reject Jesus' warnings and his offers of mercy. Judas hardened his heart. He joined in the plot with Jesus' enemies to have him killed.

And as far as we can tell from Scripture, Judas remained unrepentant to the very end. And he ultimately took his own life. So it's important for us to recognize that although Jesus predicted that this would happen, the final decision was Judas to make.

Jesus did not make him choose what he chose. So it's an important lesson, I believe, for all of us in Judas' choice there, or his many choices likely. Being close to the truth is not the same thing as being committed to the truth.

Being close to the truth is not the same as being committed to it. So back to the first church business meeting. As Peter addresses the group, he goes into some fairly gory, as you heard, some fairly gory R-rated details about Judas' death.

[13:44] The Gospel of Matthew also gives an account of Judas' betrayal and his death. And they're certainly not something we want to dwell on in detail, especially not on Mother's Day.

So the apostles clearly recognized the significance that 12 apostles had. They recognized the need to restore that balance.

So they would have recognized the prophetic writing of David about the one who would betray the Messiah and how he would have to come to be replaced.

As Acts 1 verse 20 says, For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his dwelling place be desolate and let no one live in it, and let another take his office.

Next one up. Each of us need to seek God's guidance and his will, in prayer and through his word, before any decision we make in our lives, or as a body of believers, as a church.

[14:51] We need to seek God's will to shape our plans. Not, as you've heard me say this before, not make our plans, and then somehow seek to have him endorse them after the fact.

Our lives, my friends, are not our own. We need to watch and listen for how God is calling us to serve both him and others, and be ready to step up when that time comes.

Next one up. Choosing a new apostle. In our sermon two weeks ago, we considered the idea of the witness of the apostles. And part of that involved, we considered some of the qualifications of being an apostle.

So I'm just going to run through them quickly. First, we recognize an apostle needed to be a disciple of Jesus from the very beginning, from the days of his baptism by John the Baptist, and for three years of Jesus' public ministry.

Second, an apostle needed to be an eyewitness to the resurrection of Jesus. So that explains why no one living today can be an apostle. We don't fit that criteria.

[16:03] But then most importantly, the third qualification is the direct and immediate commissioning to the position by Christ himself.

Jesus called and appointed the apostles personally. So, when it came to filling that 12th apostolic vacancy, how could Jesus choose a new apostle if he was gone?

Pretty simple, right? Well, according to our passage from Acts this morning, they began with a nomination process. And they came to the conclusion of two candidates.

Joseph, called Barsabbas, also known as... Sorry, I've got that typo there. Also known as Justice, Jesus and Matthias. So, from there, we read that they prayed again, right?

The prayer was their constant filter. They brought this important decision before the Lord to seek his will in choosing the next one up. Then, to narrow it down from there, we read that they cast lots to choose between the two.

[17:14] So, I don't know about you, but for me, the idea of casting lots raises a few flags in my mind that I needed to clear up for myself.

And as I thought about it, I wondered, isn't that like gambling? There's the very old traditional church background in me, right? I wasn't even allowed to go to movies as a kid.

This is gambling. How could they be gambling? So, as I thought about it, isn't that leaving the final choice up to chance? Doesn't that seem weird? We're submitting this to God.

We're seeking God's will in prayer and then, and roll the dice and here's, see, snake eyes. So, and the other thing too, is as I thought about that, I was reminded very strongly of the fact, what did the Roman soldiers do to decide on who got Jesus close?

Pastors, kid. They cast lots, right? So, that left a kind of a bitter taste in my mouth, to be honest. So, let's think about it a little bit more closely.

[18:17] This was essentially rolling the dice. It was essentially drawing straws for the answer. And many people have questioned that, questioned that method for choosing between these two men.

They spent all this time in prayer, narrowed it down, probably looked at the equivalent of first century church resumes and said, these guys are good. So, let's just figure it out from here.

So, they rolled dice to pick the winner, is essentially what we're talking about. So, it's fair to ask, right? And I have kind of. Is that any way to choose an apostle?

So, despite how it may seem to us now, there's still a notable reliance on God here. Though they weren't yet filled with the Holy Spirit, as they would soon be, they still, we see in this passage, that they still wanted to choose a method that would make them rely on God.

So, maybe they remembered Proverbs 16, verse 33, which says, the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

[19:27] Godly gambling. No. No. But that's essentially, right? Putting something up to chance and yet still submitting it to the Lord. I'm not saying go and buy a lottery ticket and say, dear Jesus, let me win.

It's not the same. So, the casting of lots may be an imperfect way to discern God's will, if we look at it in some ways that we've seen. But it still seems to be, stay with me on this, better than many of the methods that contemporary Christians use.

Relying on feelings or emotions. Making a decision based on current circumstances. Making decisions on our own selfish motives or desires.

Or other less desirable factors as ways to potentially justify our own will for ourselves versus God's will for us.

See the difference there? In choosing lots to make that decision, the apostles were also actually following an ancient Old Testament tradition. Let me give you some peace and comfort through this.

[20:38] When the Old Testament priests were unable to discern the will of God, they prayerfully cast lots. The outcome of which would be determined by God.

So, this is what they did to make this important apostolic selection. So, it's interesting that Matthias, we have friends who have a little boy whose name is spelled this way and they say Matthias, but I think it's Matthias.

Anyway. Who am I? Not my kid. So, the candidate who was chosen, Matthias, is never mentioned again. You ever thought about that? Probably not.

But in the New Testament, all of this time and effort and intentionality is made to choose this successor and he's never mentioned again. So, we have a record of his appointment and how that process worked and how important it was and how they submitted it to the Lord, but nothing more. It's also interesting that when James is martyred, not too long after the events here, he was not replaced. So, they did not go through the same process.

[21 : 47] Why is that? You can ask Jesus when you see him. Next one up. So, while it may seem that we've covered some trivial early church business this morning, right?

We talked about a prayer meeting and a business meeting. But friends, we've actually set the stage for Pentecost. We've set the stage for the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

Tune in next week. We've seen this next one up perspective and the behavior of the early church and how that can apply to our own lives as we seek to intentionally follow Jesus.

So, let's strive to be people who seek God's will for our lives and for the life of our church. The apostles in the early church set such an amazing example for us.

They obeyed. They were unified and focused. They were always going to God in prayer and through his word. They wanted to do God's will over their own, over and above anything else.

[22 : 56] And they used sanctified common sense, submitting to God before taking logical action. They strived to follow the example of Christ in everything.

And they did what they could do to rely on God. What an amazing and God-honoring example they have given us. Let's continue to seek God and always be willing to be the next one up.

No matter the call, no matter the cost. Amen.