

Getting Ahead of God

Acts 1:15-17, 20-26

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With Judas' demise, the Twelve had suddenly become the Eleven, and "the Eleven" just doesn't have as good a ring to it.

No one goes into the Krispy Kreme and orders eleven doughnuts. They order twelve. Twelve is a good biblical number, too. It has *significance*. There is a symbolic heft to it, like the Twelve tribes of Israel. Apparently, it seemed good and proper to Peter to get that number back up to twelve.

So... they polled everyone to see what they thought their strengths and weaknesses were as a congregation, and to see what they hoped for in a leader. They compiled those thoughts into a beautifully bound, glossy profile, and mailed it out to people who they believed could fit the bill. They asked for resumes and essay answers to six theological questions. They did a series of phone interviews prior to going out and traveling all over Judea, making visits to the prospective candidates in their pulpits. They graded them on their preaching style, their administrative acumen, and their pastoral presence to those in need.

Having done all of that, they compiled a final slate of just two candidates, and brought it before the congregation to cast a deciding vote. It took two years, but finally they had restored their number to twelve (adapted from a blog post by Rick Morley, entitled "Matthias and his slick resume").

That's not what they did. *That* would have made sense, but it's not even close to what they did. What they did was come up with a short list of criteria. And then they cast lots to decide.

Casting lots is a game of chance. It's like drawing straws or flipping a coin or playing "paper, rock, scissors" to determine who would get the job. Casting lots is making decisions based on the roll of a die. "Evens, we go with Justus. Odds, it's Matthias."

Casting lots has a long history in the Bible. How was it decided who should be thrown overboard in the story of Jonah? They cast lots (Jonah 1:7). How did Joshua apportion land among the tribes of Israel? He cast lots (Joshua 18:10).

It has a long history in the Bible because it was believed that casting lots revealed divinely made decisions. It was thought to be a deity's chance to participate in the decision-making process of mortals. Only a god's invisible hand could determine the outcome of the toss of a die.

Now this might surprise you, but I've been giving it some real thought, and I think I like this idea. I think casting lots could be very practical for us. I want to recommend that we try it out.

Just think: no more cumbersome conversations about decisions that need to be made, no more ministry team meetings where we deliberate on how to move forward on this or that project, and no more business meetings. We'll just flip a coin and trust that God was behind the outcome.

Should we print the bulletin in black-and-white or in color? Heads, it's in black-and-white. Tails, it's in color.

Should we sing *all* the verses of every hymn? Hmmm. Let's consult the coin. Heads, yes. Tails, no.

Should the senior pastor give up the suit and tie and start preaching in skinny jeans and a T-shirt? Heads, yes. Tails, no.

Should we do away with the organ, install strobe lights and smoke machines, and sing only contemporary praise music? Heads, yes. Tails, no.

Remember, the outcome of the coin-toss reveals God's divine will in the matter. No arguing. No getting upset with leadership. No leaving the church because you don't like the decision.

Should this church choose its next pastor by the toss of a coin? Forget profiles and personality types. Forget critical thinking and time for reflection. Forget conversation and discernment and reaching consensus as a family of faith. Forget prayer. Forget waiting on God. Just flip a coin, and let it tell you what to do.

I mean, Proverbs 16:33 does say, "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the LORD's alone." If it is what God wants, then the lot will fall that way. That's what it says, so why are we still debating it. From now on FBC is a lot-casting church. Forget the American Baptists. We're starting a new denomination – the BLCA – the Baptist Lot-Casters of America. It will be our legacy. I bet we can even get Cripple to endorse us.

There's only one problem: I'm not so sure that God is "pro" casting lots.

In fact, casting lots is not unique to the Jewish or Christian faiths. It's not even distinct to monotheism. *Most* ancient peoples believed that casting lots revealed the divine will of their deities.

Ezekiel tells us that the king of Babylon paused at a crossroads to practice divination by casting lots (21:26). In the *Iliad*, Hector shakes lots in a helmet, while a prayer of invocation is directed to Zeus (*Il.* 3.315-25). And in contrast to those, Moses, in the book of Deuteronomy, commands that "no one shall be found among you... who practices divination..." (18:10).

Perhaps, the most compelling evidence that casting lots isn't something we Christians ought to be practicing is simply this: never once does Jesus cast lots or endorse it. In fact, the only time casting lots shows up in entirety of the New Testament is when those crucifying Jesus cast lots to divide his clothing (Matt. 27:35, Mark 15:24, Luke 23:34, John 19:24).

Well, there... aannnd here, in our passage this morning, when Peter and the other apostles cast lots in order to replace Judas.

But was it what they should have been doing? Or were they getting ahead of God?

A few verses before our passage this morning, just before Jesus' ascension, he instructed the apostles to *wait* on the Father to pour out the Holy Spirit (1:4). "For John baptized with water," he said, "but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (1:5).

The instructions were simple: wait on God. But waiting is hard, particularly waiting on God.

We get lots of practice at waiting — waiting in line at the store or movies, at the airport, at a traffic light, in the waiting room at the doctor's office — but for some reason, none of that practice seems to help us get any better at waiting. Why is that?

Craig Barnes tells this story:

"Ernest Hemingway was injured in World War I while working as an ambulance driver. Doctors pulled 237 pieces of shrapnel out of his body, and he spent six months in a hospital ward recovering. He was surrounded by other patients recovering from their wounds and became fascinated by how differently they waited through the seemingly endless days of recovery. Some distracted themselves with small entertainments, others cried out in lament, and still others pondered the depths of their lives.

It may have been during this time that [Hemingway] figured out plot lines that depicted a lead character *waiting* for combat to begin, or *waiting* for a bull to start charging, or *waiting* for rescue at sea.

Hemingway's thesis is that the waiting does not break us; it *reveals* us" ("What waiting reveals about our true selves," *The Christian Century*, Nov. 8, 2016).

This same insight is found in the Bible over and over again. Abraham and Sarah spent 25 years *waiting* for the child God promised. Moses spent 40 years in the desert *waiting* for a call from God, and another 40 years in the same desert wandering around until God brought the people to the Promised Land. David had to *wait* a long time as a fugitive before he could become king. Israel *waited* for a Messiah. Mary *waited* to see if Joseph would marry her. And after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the apostles were told to *wait* for the Holy Spirit before they did anything.

But they didn't wait. Instead, they cast lots. They decided to use dice to try and read God's mind.

The end result was that they replaced Judas with a man named, Matthias. Matthias was probably a fine Christian, but he never shows up in scripture again. In fact, he never showed up in scripture *before*. This is the only place in all of scripture that either he or Joseph Barsabbas (aka, Justus) ever appear in all of the Bible.

But do you know who we do hear about later?

We hear about Stephen, one of the first deacons of the Christian faith *and* its first martyr.

We hear about Philip, who was not one of the twelve, but whom God used to expand the boundaries of the church to include even an Ethiopian eunuch.

We hear about Lydia and Ananias and Cornelius and Barnabas and John-Mark.

We hear about Paul, who was, perhaps, the one whom God had in mind to replace Judas, but the others got *ahead of* God instead of *waiting* on God.

Waiting on God is hard, even for those who had walked with Jesus.

Waiting can make us anxious, and anxiety makes us come up with plans of our own for salvation that are typically not so great. That is when we get ahead of God, and our plans at salvation fall short and leave us embittered.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

The American Baptist Pastor, Rodney Romney suggests that waiting — especially what we might call *holy waiting* — is a spiritual discipline. He points out that there are eight different words translated *wait* in the Old Testament, each of which is used in connection with prayer. And the most common of which is a word that at its heart means "to twist, stretch or put under tension" (*Wilderness Spirituality*, 178).

Waiting isn't just passive. It isn't just anxiously twiddling our thumbs. It is occasionally being tightened like a guitar string, twisted into unfamiliar positions. It is like being stretched by a physical therapist, only the therapist is God's seeming absence.

What do we do when it seems like God is nowhere to be found? Do we engineer our own way forward? Do we cast the die? Or do we wait?

The poet, Hermann Hagedorn, says: "Keep open — oh, keep open... my eyes, my mind, my heart."

That is how we are to wait — with our eyes, our minds, our hearts open with anticipation of what God might do next, because so often the wait is the very thing that shapes us and prepares for God’s purposes.

John Ortberg says it like this, “Waiting is not just something we have to do until we get what we want. Waiting is part of the process of becoming what God wants us to be” (quoted in *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, 138).

How different might it have looked if those apostles would have *waited* on God?

Father Gregory Boyle an inner city ministry in L.A., and he tells the story of sitting at his desk one day when he suddenly felt two eyeballs staring at him. He says:

“I look up and it’s Danny. He’s a short, chubby ten-year-old who lives in the projects and is one of the fixtures around the office. A goofy, likable kid who does not do well in school.

He seems to have purloined this oversized sketch pad, nearly as large as he is. He has it resting on his arched knee, and in his right hand is a pencil. He’s sketching me. He works furiously on this drawing and then positions his pencil, held up at me, as if to size up the subject of his portrait. This is a technique he has retrieved, no doubt, from cartoons. He works on the portrait and then stops and holds his thumb and pencil at me to, again, capture my essence. This cracks me up. It is completely charming and funny. So I laugh.

Danny gets quite annoyed, “Don’t move,” he says, with not a little bit of menace.

Well, this makes me laugh all the more to think it makes any dad-gum difference if I move. I’m howling a lot now. Danny turns steely on me, not the least big amused. He becomes a clenched-toothed Clint Eastwood. ‘I said, “Don’t move.”’

I freeze. I stop laughing, and he finishes the portrait.

Danny rips the sheet and lays the thing on my desk, revealing his work of art. And there in the middle of this huge piece of paper, about the size of a grapefruit, is me, I guess. Apparently, I’ve been beat down with the proverbial ugly stick. It is Picasso on his worst day. My glasses are crooked, my eyes not at all where they should be. My face is generally woppy-jawed, and it is an unrecognizable mess. I’m kind of speechless. ‘Uh, wow, Danny, um...this is me?’

‘Yep,’ he says, standing proudly in front of my desk, awaiting a fuller verdict.

‘Wow, I hardly know what to say... I mean... it’s... uh...very interesting.’

Danny looks a little miffed. ‘Well, whaddya spect? YA MOVED’” (*Tattoos on the Heart*, 95-96).

The truth is that far too often, we squirm and fidget and move, when what we most need is to wait — because God just might be at work in the waiting, shaping us for what is next.

Waiting on God is hard work, but thank God for Matthias, because through his story we are told, “Don’t move!” — lest we come out looking like a work of Picasso on his worst day.

Amen.