Forward Together

A few years ago, they repaved the asphalt walkway at my home, the walkway that leads me back to my car and beyond that to the dumpster where I throw my trash. Sadly, they did a less than perfect job. There are places on the walkway now where there are bumps and hollows. You feel a bit like a giant walking across a landscape with hills and valleys. Most of the time this is fine, say in daytime, or even at night when the moon's bright. But on nights that are totally dark, it's a bit treacherous. I've never fallen but I have stumbled a few times. So anymore, at night, when I must go out to the car, I carry a flashlight to light the way. What a difference it makes. I can see clearly what lies ahead. I can make sure I step over the bumps and avoid the hollows.

We all need a light at times so we can figure out how to reach our destination and how to get there in one piece. This is true not just for the mundane affairs of life, like taking out the trash in the dark, but in the much deeper and more serious matters, the bumps and hollows in our walkway of life. They are the hills and valleys in the landscape through which we move every day. Sometimes they're even mountains and chasms.

We Christians turn to passages like Isaiah 9 verse 2 that tell us about the people who have lived in darkness being given a light. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. " And that light of course comes to the world with Jesus. The gospels tell us the story of Jesus and his disciples, ending in a series of terrible events - betrayal by one of their own, arrest, trial and crucifixion. Then the most joyful and unexpected event - the resurrection, His appearance again before them, and His ascension.

Our scripture for this day comes from Acts 1:12-28.

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 a hundred and twenty) 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 guide for those who arrested Jesus. 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 Akeldama, 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 Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. 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.” Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Prayer

Lord, We have come to You today to hear Your word, to take Your counsel, to find and follow Your will. We seek all this not just as lone humans but as members of Your flock. Guide us to hear Your voice as the eleven did when they chose a new apostle. Help us, when we must come together to choose a path forward to put aside our grievances and complaints, our minor resentments against our brothers and sisters in Christ. Help us to find Your will as we seek to serve You in all things.

Amen

Like the eleven, reflecting, seeking God’s will, praying for His guidance, Christians in community often gather to make decisions, and though some of these choices are bigger and more momentous than others, all are important. What are some of the decisions we make here at First Presbyterian as a community? Can anyone think of one or two? We have members of our community who meet, like the deacons, or session and its various committees, and of course there are others. Sometimes we gather as a church and vote on large issues – should be build the bridge connecting the sanctuary with fellowship hall?

In all of these decisions, we follow the example of the eleven as they chose Matthias. We listen for God’s voice through prayer, seeking to know His will. Then we act.

Pastor Dan opened our series on the Book of Acts last Sunday and told us that in the coming months we are going to see how the early church becomes like Jesus. You recall we’ve spent the last half year working through the book by John Mark Comer called *Practicing the Way*. We’ve learned how to spend time with Jesus through prayer and reflection, how to become like Jesus and how to do what Jesus did. As Dan has suggested several times during the last six months the question we should ask is WWJDIHWM – I’d like to have a Tshirt with those letters emblazoned. They mean “What would Jesus do if He were me”.

But we are not alone, we are not just individuals. We are a community of followers of Jesus, organized into the church. And as we step into the Book of Acts, we see the early church struggling to become like Jesus. Today, for us, the question is WWJDIHWU - “What would Jesus do if He were us.” How does an organization decide what to do? How does it pick a path through the landscape in which it finds itself.

Paul offers us this from his letter to the Colossians chapter 1 verses 9 to 10.

“We ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord.”

This is a question that Christians explore through the spiritual practice called discernment. Many of us already know this term. The late Henri Nouwen wrote much on this topic and in his book called *Discernment*, he advises us how to practice this discipline, how to find our path forward as Christians. Actually, discernment follows two other stages. First, finding our spiritual direction, probing into questions like "Who am I?" and "What am I called to do?" Then, spiritual formation, growing as a follower of Jesus."

But finding our direction and formation in Christ are not enough. Nouwen tells us we also must listen for God, listening to God's voice within and among us. How many of us hear God? How many of us listen for God? Looking back on my life, I realize that I lived in a spiritual desert for many, many years because I wasn't listening for God. I had shut the door.

Yet even when we come to faith and believe that God is present with us, we often forget to listen, to pay attention. We must move from deafness to a fuller engagement, hearing what God has to tell us. Like musicians, we must develop an ear. Any musician knows about tuning forks, those metal objects that vibrate to certain frequencies. It's all part of the wonder of sound, what I like to call the music of creation. Each of these tuning forks is "tuned" to vibrate to a different pitch of sound. They are sensitive to the music of creation. But with care, we can find how the creator God speaks to us. What pitch, what frequency are you tuned to? How often and for how long are you tuned to hear the voice of God?

The purpose of all this discernment is to know God's will? Why? So we can live by that will.

So the eleven remaining apostles are left, shattered by the betrayal of Judas, broken by the death of Jesus, overjoyed by His resurrection. They have one critical task that must be finished right first. They must find a twelth to replace Judas. They pray. Then they seek God's will. In their time, and with their faith, casting lots is considered a way to determine the will of God, of course only after prayer. This is their means of spiritual discernment.

Casting lots is not our modern means of spiritual discernment. Counselors who advise us in this matter point us in several directions. We can sometimes find the signs of God's will in books, especially of course the Bible. The story of St Augustine in the 4th century helps us here. He had struggled spiritually for many years and was finally led to total conversion when he heard a child's voice on the other side of a garden wall say, "Take up and read." Augustine did what the child said, opening his Bible at random. His finger led him to a passage in Romans 13. In verses 13-14 Paul writes,"Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh." Augustine surrendered to God on the spot. Our own reading may not have such dramatic results, but it may still help to point us in the right direction.

Our visits to nature, our hikes in the mountains, our Sunday drives on mountain roads may lead us to sights that awaken us to God's presence and perhaps even a sign that we need to change our path in life.

But back again to the eleven gathered to make a momentous decision about who should step into the shoes left empty by Judas. They are not making a choice, finding a path for themselves, for their own

spiritual well-being. They are choosing together, in community. They are the heart of the early church. Around them are the 120 followers, all waiting for the outcome. They didn't vote, but they prayed and then cast lots, leaving the decision to God.

Today we live in a democratic world. We decide by so much by committee and we often complain about these decision. They take so long, are they fair, are they coherent? We all know what is perhaps the best-known verse in the New Testament, John 3:16.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." But I recently heard a variation on this inspiring verse, perhaps a bit irreverent but also very true. "God so loved the world that He did not send a committee."

Oh, how much easier it is to make a decision, to choose a path forward, by ourselves. Of course, when we as an individual must make a decision in spiritual matters we are not alone. God is with us every step, if we pay attention to what He says. But when all of us are praying together, deciding what the group, the community of Christ should do, this is a different matter, more involved and sometimes fraught. What should this church do? In the newsletter today, Dan referred to the decision by the eleven as "prayerful community discernment." This is what we engage in when we, together, decide, with God's help.

We have seen in recent decades, churches and denominations that have long held together break apart over controversial subjects. Yet we are one body, the body of Christ. A couple summers ago we heard sermons and discussed a book called A House United: How the Church Can Save the World by Allen Hilton. Hilton argues that the church, if it can stand united, can help heal a broken and divided society. But to do that, the church must remain united itself, in spite of differences within. We can look back to the eleven when they chose Matthias for a great example from the very beginnings of the church. What did they do? They no doubt deliberated, discussed and discerned a path, then they prayed and cast lots, looking to the Lord to decide. I think for us here at First Pres, the most recent example of a church-wide choice was the bridge between the sanctuary and fellowship hall. We deliberated, discussed, and discerned a path. We prayed for guidance from God. And we voted. We decided with the guidance of God.

We always value prayer as we approach a decision, as we seek out God's will. But I think prayer can serve us even after a decision has been made. We can pray to God that we as a body will hold fast, not just to the decision He has led us to, but more importantly that we will hold together as a community, unified, gathered around Christ and His message so that we can help to save the world.

Amen