

The REAL Apostolic Succession!

Sermon by Christopher Epting

Easter 7B New Song

When I was elected bishop here in 1988, the electing Convention was on a Saturday. I was the rector of St. Mark's Church in Cocoa, Florida at the time and, of course, had to preach a sermon the next morning. Preach a sermon to a congregation who by this time knew that I was a candidate for bishop here in Iowa, that the election would have taken place, and would be anxiously awaiting my announcement of how things had gone.

This was way before the days of the internet where now such elections are tracked, ballot by ballot, in real time as they happen...for those who are interested. Well, as luck or fate would have it, the First Lesson for that Sunday was the very one we have today about the selection of Matthias to join the Eleven remaining disciples (after Judas had left them!) to round out the magic number of Twelve which Jesus had thought important somehow (likely because of the symbolism of the Twelve Tribes of Israel).

And, believe it or not, I actually prepared two sermons for that Sunday – one to be delivered should I be elected as Bishop of Iowa focusing on how honored and yet humbled Matthias must have been to have been selected to join the Twelve. And the other, in the **likely** case that I lost the election, speculating on how his rival Justus would have felt, **not** being selected -- disappointed no doubt but perhaps rededicating himself to whatever role and ministry he had which had brought his name to the apostles' attention!

I had just finished mowing my lawn on that Saturday, and was actually watching a Cubs game on TV when the phone rang. I heard the voice of Bishop Righter calling from the Convention, telling me that I had been elected and asking – as a formality, one last time – if I was willing to accept that election. I said Yes, and from that moment had the sense of joining in a long line of bishops who have sought, through time and space, to be faithful to the apostolic message which so burned in the hearts of Peter and Justus and Matthias and that earliest generation of Christ-followers.

“Those who,” in the words of our Second Lesson today, “believe in the Son of God (and) have the testimony in their hearts.” (1 John 5)

Those for whom Jesus was praying in today's Gospel, “They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word...Now they know that everything you have given me is from you...and they have believed that you sent me...As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” (John 17 passim)

Episcopalians, and other catholic Christians, make a pretty big deal out of something we have called “Apostolic Succession,” that long line of bishops, stretching back into the early days of the church's life which speaks to continuity even in the midst of changing times and a changing church. But one of the great breakthroughs in 20th century Christian theology, due in large part to the ecumenical movement, was to separate this historic succession (of bishops) from what is really a much more important understanding of apostolic succession.

Because faithfulness to the apostles' teaching has been carried down the ages, not only by ordained clergy, but through the scriptures, the creeds, the sacraments, preaching, and the faithful witness of Christian people in all denominations and from all walks of life. That's the *real* apostolic succession!

When you were baptized or confirmed you were asked, among other things, “Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and the prayers?” Those four things, we are told by Luke in the

Acts of the Apostles marked the common life of the first Christians. They listened to what the apostles taught...they lived in community (the Greek word is *koinonia* and it's a lot stronger word than our word "fellowship")... they broke bread together (both in sharing common meals and in commemoration of the Last Supper)... and they prayed together.

You and I do the same thing every Sunday we come together here at New Song – in the Eucharist, we listen to (and wrestle with) apostolic teaching in our Lessons from Scripture. And we are blessed in this congregation with a dozen or so preachers who help us with this, bringing different perspectives as females and males, clergy and lay.

We share a common life – symbolized by our enthusiastic exchange of the Peace, in our announcements about outreach activities and educational opportunities, in Community Hour, and in Spirit School. We break and share in the Bread of the Eucharist. And we pray – often using contemporary Collects and Intercessions, and Eucharistic Prayers which try to translate ancient Truth into the language of today.

Every Sunday we continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. Every Sunday you embody apostolic succession! Every Sunday, like Matthias and Justus you "become a witness...to (the) resurrection" by simply being here! You join with all those John describes as "believing in the Son of God and having that testimony in your hearts."

Most of all, you actively join the communion of those of whom Jesus said, "As you have sent me into world, so I have sent them into the world." And that's why perhaps the most important thing we hear each Sunday are the last lines of the service – the deacon's dismissal: "Let us go forth in the name of Christ." "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord." "Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit!"

And that brings us to another, complementary vow we took at our baptism or confirmation: "Will you strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being?" Today is Mothers' Day but it also happens to be the first day of a six-week campaign of non-violent action in the nation's capital and in statehouses around the country which has been called a new "Poor People's Campaign."

This movement, spearheaded by the incredible Disciples of Christ minister, William Barber, hearkens back to the original poor people's campaign in 1968 when Dr. Martin Luther King's vision led some 3,000 people to hunker down in the rain and mud of Resurrection City, outside Washington DC, to broaden the campaign for civil rights into one for human rights addressing the triple evils of poverty, racism, and militarism. A flyer for that campaign said this:

"We will be young and old, jobless fathers and welfare mothers, farmers, and laborers...We are Negroes, American Indians, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, poor white people." You didn't have to be poor to participate, but the emphasis was on **leadership** by the poor, by those most deeply affected by systemic injustice.

Fifty years later that will be the spirit of this new Poor People's Campaign organized by Barber's "Repairers of the Breach," which is a social justice organization, partnering with the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary in New York. To the three evils identified in 1968 – poverty, racism, and militarism – a fourth has been added: environmental degradation. For, as we all know, these things remain deeply intertwined.

We are not the leaders of this movement. Poor people are. But, here in Iowa we will have a number of opportunities to join in. Some of us will be in Des Moines tomorrow from 2 until 3 p.m. for a rally at the Statehouse

and you're invited to participate as you are able. I'll share a little bit in Spirit School this morning about what to expect if you go. In any case, we'll keep you apprised of other events happening over these next six weeks.

Continuing in the apostles teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer. Striving for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being. These are the twin movements – gathering together and looking within...going forth to make a difference in the world.

Gathering as the Body of Christ....to be fed by the Body of Christ...in order to back into the world and BE the Body of Christ.

The real apostolic succession!