

Easter 7, Year B(RCL)
May 16, 2021
New Song Church
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Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
Psalm 1
1 John 5:9-13
John 17:6-19

Moving On

Have you ever suffered a loss of a loved one that was so profound that it left you in a state of shocked bewilderment—the kind of loss that leaves you wondering how in the world you are going to keep putting one foot in front of the other now that they were gone. How you will ever be able to manage [fill in the blank] without them? Perhaps you aren't even sure who you are now that they were gone – because you realize that you can no longer just be the person you were in relation to them. How can life around you keep moving when your world seems to have ended with a final exhale?

Given that our text from Acts today occurs just after the disciples, who had invested so much of their lives and energy in Jesus, had watched Jesus ascend into heaven, I have to believe that they surely felt his absence quite keenly. The believers were left staring up at the empty space where Jesus had been, trying to absorb the reality of his physical absence and what their future might be now that he was no longer among them. Their lives had been utterly transformed by Jesus. They were no longer the people they had been prior to Jesus' invitation to come and follow him—so they couldn't just go back and pretend that his life and teaching hadn't changed them forever. They were his disciples—or they had been—being a disciple was something they knew how to do. But what is a wheel without its hub, or a disciple without their teacher?

As they stood gazing up into the sky, surely they each realized they were at a crossroads—both in their personal lives and in their life together. When a couple of angels showed up, asking them why they were looking up toward

heaven, effectively telling them to stop lollygagging and get back to work, a new church was born.

Their reverie disrupted, they stopped looking up, and looked instead at one another. They determined that they would return to Jerusalem to figure out their "next steps." The first, and really the only thing on their agenda, was to pray. As verse 14, just before today's text reads, "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer . . ."

From the depths of their prayer, an action plan began to form. Jesus had promised to send them the Holy Spirit to guide and empower them. They would not abandon Jesus' mission. Rather, with the help of the Spirit, they would continue it. With the solid foundation Jesus had given them and with the promised power of the Spirit, they felt encouraged that they could carry on in the work Jesus had given them to do.

But first, they had a vacancy to fill. They had been twelve, but without Judas, they were now only eleven, which felt incomplete. So Peter gathered the 120 or so people around him to discern which of them might fill out their number. Two names were put forward by those gathered, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. "Then they prayed, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.' And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles."

Like that early band of Jesus's disciples, New Song is also at a kind of crossroads and is embarking on a discernment process that will help in forming a new Ministry Development Team. You should have received an email about that a couple of weeks ago.

A Ministry Development Team is a small group of people who have discerned

a calling to serve the congregation in lay or ordained ministry roles and who commit to a period of learning and growing together in preparation for a more intentional ministry role in the congregation. Roles can be quite varied and may be either lay or ordained ministries. Roles emerge as part of the discernment process as a match between the ministry gifts of the individual and the needs of the congregation.

But while New Song establishing a new Ministry Development Team is an eventual goal, we don't want to jump to it too quickly. Our first step is to embark on a period of prayerful discernment, both as individuals and as a congregation. In our baptism, God has given each one of us gifts for ministry. In 1 Cor. 7:17, Paul instructs the church, ". . . let each of you lead the life . . . to which God called you." Our life's work for all of us as Christians is to discern what our God-given gifts are and how we believe God is calling us to offer both our gifts and ourselves to God's service.

Do you know what your particular gifts are? If not, it can be helpful to have a small group of thoughtful, caring people help you to discover them.

Are there gifts you know you have that you'd like to use more fully? Have you felt an urging of the Spirit to grow deeper in your faith? Has a sense of some particular calling been tugging at your heart? Would you like for your life to have greater meaning? If the answer to any of these questions is "Yes" then a discernment group may be just the thing for you! Discernment may or may not lead you to a commitment to participate in a Ministry Development Team. That's OK, because an intentional discernment process, is an enriching and rewarding experience all by itself.

If you think you might be interested, contact either me or Jennifer and we'll help you gather a group and get started. Timelines will vary based on individual needs, but plan on monthly meetings for between 9-12 months. The meetings will involve Bible study, storytelling, conversation, reflection,

and prayer – lots of prayer as the group seeks the Spirit’s guidance for the individual in discernment.

Why do we need a group? As the little book, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* explains, “Something happens to us when we consult one another in Christian community. In sharing our thoughts with others, surprising insights often emerge—opening our eyes to what we have not seen and our ears to what we have not heard. This can transform and liberate us beyond our own narrow expectations. . . . Although God calls each of us personally, as individuals we see only partially. Individual perception, reasoning, and understanding are always limited. [p. 46]

In closing, I have three “asks” of you:

1. Beginning today and for the rest of the month of May, pray each day for the Spirit to guide this new chapter of discernment in New Song’s life together. Pray for anyone, known or unknown, who might be considering participating in a discernment group.
2. Search your own heart to discern whether a discernment group is something you’d like to participate in, either as one doing discernment, or as a listener who aids someone else in their discernment, or perhaps even both. And then let Jennifer or me know that by the end of May.
3. Prayerfully consider others in the congregation whose gifts for ministry you recognize and appreciate, and either encourage them to contact us, or suggest their names to me or Jennifer.

Let’s start now. Let us pray:

“O God, give us an experience of your heart.

Draw us deep into your very being,

into the core of your love for us, for others, and for the world.

Give us a glimpse of others the way you see others:

loving them, forgiving them,

and delighting in the way they give glory to God

through their very existence.

Help us to discern out of that open place of deep affection

so that we too might be useful vessels of your love in the world.”ⁱ

Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us who among us you have chosen to take this first next step of embarking on a more formal process of discernment. Show us if we are the ones you have chosen to take this next first step in our lives of faith. For in you, O God, we live and move and have our being. Amen.

ⁱ From internet. Author unknown.