

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
"Gospel Powered Leadership"  
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26  
5/17/15

This morning I'm going to be preaching from our 1st Reading in Acts, chapter one. And what we find there, is a passage that comes right between two big events: Jesus' Ascension into heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

We read about Jesus' Ascension in Acts, chapter one, and Pentecost at the beginning of chapter, two.

If you were reading the book of Acts, you might skip right past this event and not even notice it. Do you remember what the disciples did right after Jesus' Ascension? Would you believe they called a congregational meeting?

A little anti-climactic don't you think?  
Or was it?

Jesus ascends to heaven and the disciples have an important decision to make. They need to select a leader to take the place of Judas. Even though this episode took place between, two larger events, I'm convinced that Luke, wrote about this meeting for a reason. Through Luke, God wanted to remind us, that Jesus cares about how the church is organized, how is it led, and what message is preached.

What we have here is testimony that the church needs leadership. God's people called by the Spirit, need Spirit-filled leaders. And if you caught it, there wasn't just one pastor, for that church of 120 people, there were twelve.

Twelve leaders entrusted with ministry.

Today's First Reading also reminds us that leadership, in the church is tied directly to the ministry of Jesus. One of our responsibilities as a church when we are discerning who to call as leaders is to ensure that there is continuity between the gospel preached today and the gospel as it's been proclaimed from the very first apostles.

In order to be chosen as an apostle Matthias needed to be among those who were with Jesus from the beginning, someone who was a "witness to his resurrection."

This new apostle would be able to keep the continuity of the Gospel, because of his connection with Jesus.

And yet while the disciples are definitely looking for continuity being called upon to do something new?

Aren't they also, meeting in order to address an urgent need, a new situation, that has just arisen?

The disciples have come to a crossroads.  
One of the twelve, the inner circle of leader, has betrayed Jesus.  
The Risen Christ, fifty days after Easter, has ascended.

What now?

The good news in today's reading from Acts, is this:  
in answer to the apostle's prayers, God provides them with a new person to share in  
"their ministry and apostleship."

So the promise here, is that whatever new need arises...  
whatever new challenge confronts the church,  
there is no need to panic, no need to worry,  
because God will answer our prayers and provide what we need.

Let me apply this promise to our situation right here at Community Lutheran.

Over the last decade we have seen quite a few changes both in our community and within our own congregation.

We've been hearing a lot about the rising number of the people who claim no church affiliation, the "nones", Especially within the millennial generation.

This week, there was a column in the Washington Post in which blogger Rachel Held Evans writes:

Church attendance has plummeted among young adults.  
In the United States, 59 percent of people ages 18 to 29 with a Christian background have, at some point, dropped out.

According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, among those of us who came of age around the year 2000, a solid quarter claim no religious affiliation at all, making my generation significantly more disconnected from faith than members of Generation X were at a comparable point in their lives and twice as detached as baby boomers were as young adults.

This reality has a lot of people concerned.  
And what often happens when people are operating out of fear,  
is that they are ready to throw the baby out with the bath water.

But listen to what Evans goes on to say. She writes:

In response, many churches have sought to lure millennials back by focusing on style points: cooler bands, hipper worship, edgier programming, impressive technology.

Yet they are not the key to drawing millennials back to God in a lasting and meaningful way.

Young people don't simply want a better show. And trying to be cool might be making things worse.

That's one of the first things I learned when I served as a youth pastor.

The last thing a youth group wants is a youth pastor who is trying to be cool.

And here's the powerful conclusion of this column:

For a generation bombarded with advertising and sales pitches, and for whom the charge of "inauthentic" is as cutting an insult as any,

church rebranding efforts can actually backfire, especially when young people sense that there is more emphasis on marketing Jesus than actually following Him.<sup>1</sup>

Think about that statement right there.

Which is easier to do, create marketing messages, or actually follow Jesus?

Which is easier, forming a committee to come up with a plan for reaching millennials, or when you see young adults visiting our church, making it a point to reach out to them after the service, introduce yourself, and extend yourself with gracious hospitality?

And here's her powerful conclusion:

Millennials "are not disillusioned with tradition; they are frustrated with slick or shallow expressions of religion,"<sup>2</sup>

When I left church at age 29, full of doubt and disillusionment, I wasn't looking for a better-produced Christianity. I was looking for a more authentic Christianity:

What finally brought me back, after years of running away, wasn't lattes or skinny jeans; it was the sacraments.

Baptism, confession, Communion, preaching the Word, anointing the sick — you know, those strange rituals and traditions Christians have been practicing for the past 2,000 years.

The sacraments are what make the church relevant, no matter the culture or era. They don't need to be repackaged or rebranded; they just need to be practiced, offered and explained in the context of a loving, authentic and inclusive community.

So what's the message for us here at Community Lutheran?

As one of my homiletics professors used to say:  
“Preach the Gospel and get out of the way.”  
Or “administer the Sacraments and get out of the way.”

In other words, keep Jesus the main thing.  
Don't get sidetracked by secondary issues.  
That's what I need to focus on as a pastor.

And as a congregation, as people called to serve the Gospel,  
I think we need to face this challenge in the same way.

Keep the Gospel at the center of everything we do:

- at the center of our worship
- at the center of our prayers
- at the center of how we extend hospitality and reach out
- at the center of everything we do each day of the week

Just as Matthias, was selected as a church leader,  
because he was with Jesus and a witness to the resurrection...  
let us all be witnesses to the resurrection.

That's the kind of Gospel continuity that serves the church well.

So, let our hearts be guided by the Holy Spirit.  
Let us love God, and love your neighbors.

Let us draw close to one another in Christian fellowship.  
and reach out with the love of Christ.

That's what it means to be the Church, the body of Christ. Amen

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<sup>1</sup> By Rachel Held Evans April 30, The Washington Post - Held Evans is a blogger and the author of “Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church.”

<sup>2</sup> David Kinnaman, who interviewed hundreds of them for Barna Group and compiled his research in “You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith.”