

SCRIPTURE READING Acts 1:15-17, 21-26.

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said, ‘Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.’ So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.’ So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, ‘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.

SERMON *The Beloved Community: Called and Calling* (Reverend Brent Damrow)

I want you to take a moment and think back on your life about something that in retrospect looks and feels very different from that time you experienced it. Maybe it was a relationship, you know one of those that you were head-over-heels in love, and yet looking back on it is so clear that that one was never your future. Maybe it was a belief that you clung to, even now if you see its limitations, or maybe it was a style of music or a fashion trend that felt all the rage at the time, and even if now thinking back on it brings a wince or maybe a chuckle to your heart instead. But I want you to think back on something that in retrospect looks and feels very different than it did when you experienced it.

I don’t know what you thought about, but for me there are at least two different, deep relationships with others that had impossible contradictions in them between me and them, that everyone else could see except for me. I remember back in first grade, it was the year of a presidential election, and so the teacher decided to have a mock election in class, where we were going to vote on who the president was going to be. And I worked so hard and so fervently to get someone elected, who I now see very little in common with my life. And then, there were those tennis shorts that I wore in college. Tennis was my first passion, and when I went to college in 1987, let’s just say that tennis shorts were a lot shorter than they are now, and I loved those tennis shorts, and now I look back at pictures with me in college with those shorts on and I’m like, “what was I thinking?”

The truth is, though, in the moment, each and all those things brought me great joy and great meaning. The truth is though, that we also change and grow, we learn life and faith are not static things, and yet, as we look back at those moments that seem so different from our current reality, the question is, what do we do with them? Do we hold onto them just to pull out at a cocktail party or gathering to fill some conversation? Well, yes—and no. Absolutely hold on to all of them, but not for the sake of conversation, rather for the sake of contemplation. Not to just remember what was, although you should, but to look at what is and to imagine what might be. You see, I have inherent optimism in the human condition. I think that all of us do the best we can with what we’ve got in the given moment, so chances are, whether with that relationship, that hairdo or that belief, you approached it with full honesty at the time, and it served goodness.

I came across recently a British singer named Paloma Faith, and she offers a helpful corrective, and I use her this morning not just because she's got a great church name, but because she's a British phenom, she's—think about Adele and that voice, mixed with the theatrics of Lady Gaga. She has power and complexity in her voice, her act, her whole life. One example I love is the title of her first album: “Do You Want the Truth or Do You Want Something Beautiful?”

As an award-winning singer and now as a mother, her life has changed a great deal and she's often asked about the lyrics from her earlier songs. She says that what she tries to do is honor those lyrics. She says, “If I go back and look at them in hindsight, the emotions I had when I wrote them may have passed, but it also feels unjustified to change them.” In other words, they were real: they came out of a heart-filled place and they bear witness and testimony to something that was real and her best at that moment. And yet, she says that she does go on writing new songs, right? New lyrics, things that look very different from those original ones.

This morning, we jump way back in our story of the beloved community. The reading from this morning is earlier than any of the other stories we've been encountering this whole Easter season. This important and pivotal moment of choosing a new disciple is one of those things that the beloved community, I bet, looked back on: so full of passion were they in those first days, and yet by the time we got to our reading last week, how much had changed. How many barriers had fallen. How many beliefs that they had once clung to because they served the meaning had given way to bigger and better, broader and wider truths.

I wonder what they would have said about the moment of our reading today. That moment when they had to make their first big decision. In case you didn't quite catch the reading, they were down to eleven disciples and you remember why, right? There is Judas, who is no longer part of the twelve. And I love, this morning, the way that Luke treats Judas. Luke treats Judas in this writing the way Luke treats everyone. I think it's the way that Jesus treated everyone: with honesty and yet compassion. You will notice in this reading today that Judas isn't vilified: there is no disastrous end portrayed here for Judas Iscariot. Instead, what Luke writes is that Judas had been allotted his share; he had been part of the ministry and then, Luke merely says, he was “the one who went his own way.” The one who got off the path of Jesus and followed his own.

And so the dilemma that we have for this beloved community is what to do next. They did what is natural. We want to restore the eleven to the twelve. As much as Luke writes about Jesus making all things new and about new truths unfolding, about not putting new wine in old skins. They say no, we need to go back to twelve. And there's good reason. The twelve, remember, represent the twelve tribes of Israel, represent completeness, represent including everyone. We've got to get back to the twelve.

They turn to some other criteria then in selecting the twelve. And I wonder, if looking back on the criteria they used, it was kind of like me looking back on those tennis shorts. I wonder if they said, “What were we thinking?”

You remember the first criterion that was listed is that it had to be a man. Why?

Luke's gospel is a gospel of breaking barriers. Luke's gospel which continues in Acts is all about breaking barriers. In Luke's gospel the women have great roles. In Luke's gospel there are female prophets and preachers. There are female leaders of all kinds; there are women who helped Jesus make it to the end. There were the women who didn't abandon him; the women

who celebrated his coming. Women were part and parcel of Jesus's ministry. And so how is it that in Luke, in this story of Acts, that for some reason the eleven decided that the first criterion had to be a man?

There is no great biblical scholarship on it, except for that is what it was. That that is what was expected, even if it were being done to bear witness to the one who changed everything.

This morning we sang the Easter truth again. We talked about "Stop! Do you remember the story about the grave cloths and the stone and all those details? We did that today now at the end of the Easter season because we need to remember the truth of the Easter story and how it changes everything. I wonder: When that beloved community looks back here, if they're amazed at how far they had come, in just a few short stories, where suddenly all sorts of barriers would come down. When one of the twelve were no longer able to keep ministering, I wonder if the next time they said, "Hey, why can't we pick her?"

The United Church of Christ is the first denomination in the United States to ordain a woman. Why? Because we entrusted those decisions to individual, small, beloved communities who could look and at the time of the need for a pastor, could look and say "Why can't she be our pastor? She has got every one of the gifts." I wonder if all the other Congregational churches of the time looked around and said, "Wow! I wonder why we hadn't thought of that?" And I wonder what the beloved community thought when they looked back at this story and saw that.

Second, did you notice that it had to be someone who had been with Jesus the whole time, from the very beginning of his ministry, who had witnessed firsthand with their own eyes what Jesus had done and why it had mattered?

I get it, and yet if we think about Luke, Luke himself was not one of those people. Luke himself, if you read the gospel of Luke, Chapter 1, writes that he compiled his gospel from what everyone else had told him. From what everyone else had proclaimed the truth, and here's what I want to tell you. Did you know that the gospel of Luke is known as the "Gospel of Amazement"?

Luke uses the word "amazement" more than all the other gospels combined, and it isn't surprising to me that Luke was so amazed by this story, told by various people with different perspectives: some who'd been with Jesus the whole time, and some who just heard stories about how amazing this whole thing was to different people.

The UCC was one of the first churches in the whole world to become open and affirming, and we were because a small beloved community could look and say, "What were we thinking? Of course we welcome everyone, and by 'everyone' we don't want to put an asterisk. We do mean *everyone*."

I find that when I hear testimonies from people who have been denied being part of the church for any reason, for issues of mobility, of gender, of mental health, LGBTQ status, or anything else, when they are welcomed into the church community, their testimony every time makes you want to cry, because it is so deep. Just like Luke, the one who has been out has become in, and it makes all the difference in the world. Let us not forget about the Ethiopian official from a few weeks ago. After Peter opened the story for him, do you remember what he did? Peter was snatched away, and it says the Ethiopian official, he went on his way rejoicing.

I wonder if when the beloved community looked back, they said, “Yeah, to really tell this story, we need a broader net. To really make this story of church come alive, we need a broader net than those who just happened to be there at the moment, because here’s the thing: what we know is that Jesus is still alive, what we know is that Jesus is still here.”

What I know, Merylle, is that you are coming face-to-face with Jesus right now, and so I trust your story, every bit as much as I trust Matthew’s. I wonder when they look back at this reading, do they wince a bit? Do they say, “Oh my!” a bit? Do they just pull out this story at cocktail parties and say, “Can you believe it?” Maybe. But there’s another part of this story that you need to see and remember because it is how they lived it out.

Did you notice how they picked the disciple? Well, truth be told, they threw lots for it, which we struggle with in our current time because it sounds a lot like gambling or throwing dice. I’m not sure what Jonathan Edwards would have to say about that.

But before they did that, they prayed. They had two candidates they had identified, right? They had the one guy, the guy who had different names and was known in different ways. They knew all about that guy, and then there was this other guy we don’t hear anything about, called Matthias.

And the first thing the disciples did was they said, “Lord, we’re going to pray.” Here’s what Luke knew. To read Luke’s gospel and to read Acts is to see people at prayer. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus prayed all the time. The Dove came to his baptism when he was praying. He was transfigured on the mountain when he was praying. Before he chose his disciples, oh yeah, he prayed. In the garden of Gethsemane, he prayed so intensely that drops of blood fell from his head.

Prayer means everything and so the beloved community remembered that and they prayed. Do you know that they prayed for? They didn’t say, “Oh God, show us the person who is going to speak the best, or present the best, or be the most beautiful or go out there and persuade the most people.” Instead, they said, “Lord, you know their hearts. Pick the one whose heart we need right now.”

The beloved community was a community that profoundly changed year after year. To look at how it ended is to be very different from how it began. But the common dimension through it all was never relying on itself, always turning to prayer and always seeking not just what appearance says but the deeper meaning of it all.

Friends, we are about to come back together again as the beloved community. You each have been on wildly different journeys. You each have experienced different things: for some people I’ve spoken to this has been in some ways a wonderful year of self-discovery, of finding out what’s real. For others it has been so stressful, and they can’t wait for it to get over. And for others, something in between.

I hope we can look back at the way we were church before now. And all the things we took for granted, and in all seriousness, and honor them, but also recognize that things have changed, and as we come back together and as we get used to picking new leadership next week at our Annual Meeting next week, and as we get used to redoing coffee hour and everything else that makes this place so great, maybe we could pray a bit and figure out what God is calling us to do.

I want to wrap up with one fun story. It happened at Yale when I was a student, and there was a preacher who told the story about when he was a guest in a church service. He was watching from his chair, from the front, like up here. He watched as the elements for communion and as the cross came down the center aisle at the beginning of worship. And it was a grand and glorious procession. Everything came forward and then, right about there, about five pews from the front, he watched as the person holding the huge wooden cross bent the cross over and took three steps in a very awkward way because it was heavy, before lifting the cross back up and walking forward.

The preacher told us that he tried to figure it out. Three steps: was that for the Trinity? Bowing the cross: what could that mean? But clearly it was something this church did. Afterwards, he talked to an old-time member who said this, “Oh yeah. Truth is, the roof was caving in at one point about fifteen years ago, and they had to put a support beam across there to make sure the roof didn’t come down, and the cross wouldn’t fit under that beam. And once the beam went away, everyone just assumed that the bending the cross thing had some deep theological meaning, so we just kept doing it even though the beam was no longer there.”

Friends, there will be stories told about this truth where people will say, “Can you believe what they did?” I hope we can look at them with joy, that we can learn from those moments: that it was still important enough to bring in the cross that they would do it any way they could. And I hope we’ll be even a more joyful church going forward. Amen?