

“And They Cast Lots”

Salado UMC—13 May 2018: 7th Sunday of Easter

Preaching Text: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

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“The gambling known as business looks with austere disfavor upon the business known as gambling”

— Ambrose Bierce (1842 - 1914).

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Today I feel like the little boy who asked his mother, “Where were you born?”

“In Columbus.”

“Where was Daddy born?”

“In Memphis.”

“Where was I born?”

“In St. Louis. Why?”

“Oh, nothing. Only, isn’t it wonderful how we three ever got together!”

Most of us, if we were to look back over our lives, would have to say that there was a great deal of chance involved in bringing us to this place at this time with the people who occupy our days and nights.

Today is Mother’s Day. We give thanks for the mother we have or had. Mothers have often played key roles in all their children’s lives. In the church’s history many mothers had a dramatic impact on their children who may have changed the course of church history. We esteem Jesus’ mother Mary because of her maternal relationship with Jesus. St. Augustine credited his dramatic conversion to the prayers of his own mother Monica. John and Charles Wesley each credited much of their effectiveness to the influence of Susanna Wesley. Not every person is fortunate enough to have a remarkable mother, but if so, then they are miles ahead in the great race we call life.

We call this good fortunate by several names: chance, luck, or the grace of God. Whatever one calls it, this good fortune is indispensable to having life turn out in ways that are not only meaningful to us but lives that become blessings to others. Hear our days’ lesson which pertains to the cast of the lot:

¹⁵In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶“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— ¹⁷for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”

²¹So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²²beginning 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.” ²³So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” ²⁶And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles (Acts 1:15-17, 21-26).

Casting lots was one way to determine God's choice. It was a traditional practice in Judaism (see Leviticus 16:8; Numbers 26:55; 33:54; Joshua 19:1-40; Micah 2:5; Jonah 1:7-8). By the way, the earliest Essene Christians practiced this exercise at Qumran. Biblical theologian, Hans Conzelmann, writes: "the casting of lots was a widespread practice in Judaism. The lots were shaken in a cloth bag (Proverbs 16:33) or in a vessel (Livy 23.3.7) until one fell out."

In today's text, three major things are at work here:

- (1) a speech/sermon by Peter,**
- (2) the call to prayer, and**
- (3) the casting of lots to discern the Lord's will and a revelation of God's choice.**

Interestingly, there is, in this action of the casting of lots, a synthesis between God's work and the work of the people. This is the way God works. God could work without us, but God chooses to work through us. Do you remember Esther, the beautiful young woman who saved her people in the story from the Hebrew scripture bearing her name? Esther's story presents these words:

For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).

No one knows with certainty how God works for good in the world with those who love God but, we who are believers, have faith that God does!

God is the ultimate gambler. There is a great irony in the fact that we as a church take a stand that opposes gambling, yet we worship a God who gambles on us every day. What we believe and how we enact our faith is ultimately a matter of direct observation. It is upon this faith performance and God's grace that other people either come to the faith or are turned away. Does God gamble with us or is there a deeper purpose to what looks random in God's dealings with God's world?

Several decades ago Boris Yeltsin wrote a book about how he and other freedom loving Russians began the long process of bringing democracy to the Soviet people. Yeltsin said he was very discouraged at times, and even thought of giving up the fight. But there was a Polish labor-organizer in the Gadansk ship yards who gave him courage named Lech Walensa. If Walensa could free the Poles, then surely Yeltsin could do the same for the Russian people.

If we were to investigate Walensa's story, however, he would say that he got his inspiration from an American named Martin Luther King, Jr. It was King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* which encouraged Walensa to fight the democratic fight on behalf of the Polish workers.

If we were able to ask King where he got his inspiration for leading the call to civil rights for African-Americans in the South, he would quickly respond that it was never his intention to be a civil rights leader. Certainly, King knew of the struggle in India led by Gandhi against the British. Besides King was well-educated and had no intention of becoming a grass-roots leader in any democratic movement. No, he was a scholar and writer (systematic theology; Boston University, Ph.D., 5 June 1955).

Despite this reality, one of King's church members got him involved in civil rights. Her name was Rosa Parks. In the 1950s, blacks had to ride at the back of city buses in the South. There was a white line painted at the mid-point of buses in Montgomery to separate whites and blacks. The black folk sat at the

back and the white folk sat in the front of the buses. On 1 December 1955, a bus was full. When a white man told Mrs. Parks to give him her seat, she said “no.” Later she explained that she was tired and could not muster the energy to get up. So, she refused his demand. She said, “Yesterday, maybe she said yes, or last year, but on that fateful day, all she could say was no!” She was subsequently arrested and put into jail. Hence, King became involved as a civil rights leader because of a housekeeper who happened to be on a particular bus and happened to be a member of his Montgomery church.

The God’s Realm grows slowly and steadily. It often it moves by what appears as mere chance. We roll the dice, we put our money on a certain number, we look as if by chance we hold a randomly dealt hand of cards from a dealer’s hand. Yet, as Christian believers, we have faith that there is a certain divine rationale to all that happens to us. Could Mrs. Rosa Parks have brought down the entire Soviet system of communism all by herself because of her decision to sit and not get up in 1955 Alabama? You never know!!—Amen.

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