

"Disappointment and Determination"

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; John 1:43-47

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

May 14, 2017 – 5th Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

A century ago when Albert Schweitzer left the comfort of his life in Europe for the jungles of Africa, he discovered that living there could be even more challenging than expected. He quickly found labor to be in short supply around his rural mission hospital at Lambarene, and so this meant he would have to do a share of the manual work himself.

One visitor to the medical center saw the prestigious doctor moving about with a wheelbarrow. She was shocked at such an important person having to do this dirty work and asked rather judgmentally, "How is it that you push a wheelbarrow?" Without breaking his stride Schweitzer replied, "With two hands, madam. With two hands"

Albert Schweitzer had long wanted to help others in great need, and increasingly he was drawn toward service as a medical missionary. It was not a minor decision because, to follow this call, he had to first **become** a doctor through years of preparation. He would have to give up a successful career in teaching and music in order to work long, hard hours for a subsistence income. Ultimately he did just that because he sensed being chosen for this particular work. He was determined to carry through.

Now being chosen is also the theme of our reading from Acts this morning. The text tells us that, after Judas betrayed Jesus, it left an open place among the disciples. Perhaps many were considered as a replacement, but in the end it came down to just two: Joseph and Matthias. We assume that both were qualified to step into the inner circle of the apostles. Both must have been exemplary persons; nevertheless, only one could be chosen.

Those with vote didn't seem to have been able to make a selection on merit, perhaps because both men had outstanding qualities; so, our reading tells us, they cast lots. This was the easiest way out of their predicament. Casting lots was something like throwing dice or flipping a coin. Clearly, someone would be the winner and the other the loser. That would end the indecision.

So the men prayed, threw the lots, and the advantage fell to Matthias. It was he who would be invited to complete the circle of twelve. And the other candidate, Joseph, also called Justus (which means "righteous"), is put aside and we never hear of him again anywhere in the Bible.

Whenever I read this account my curiosity is aroused. Maybe yours is, too. I wonder how Joseph accepted his fate of not being chosen? Did he remain faithful, though in the background of history? Was he broken or bitter from how close he had come to a position of influence? Wasn't it just a bit unfair to be surnamed "The Righteous One," to lose out to plain old Matthias, surnamed nothing?

Experience gives all of us something in common with Matthias—the winner—but perhaps we can identify better with the one who wasn't chosen. From childhood on up, we know what it's

like to get our hopes up for something and then to have them dashed. As we get older we are better able to put our disappointments in perspective, but that doesn't mean they don't hurt. Sometimes our losses color all the rest of our life.

It was the fortune of Matthias to be chosen and Joseph not to be. Such was their lot in life. Both men had to come to grips with how it turned out. Both had to find their way ahead after the decision was made.

In my only time to run for political office I lost a bid to serve on the Marysville City Council by eight votes. I was just 28 then and wonder if a different outcome might have changed my life. I know that two years later I decided not to enter the race for state representative though I was asked to run. How much of that decision was influenced by my earlier disappointment in a losing cause? Maybe it was good that things turned out as they did!

I imagine every one of us has, at some time, lost out on a job application, been passed over for a promotion, or failed to be chosen for some honor. In school, you remember what it's like to be selected for a team or a part in a play, or just thanked for trying out. We all have disappointments in our lives. where who we are, or what we do, doesn't seem to be good enough. Sometimes our hopes aren't met because of understandable reasons. Other times, it's just bad luck that seems to do us in.

Misfortune and disappointments are realities we have to deal with. Bitterness can overtake us and cause us to give up on life or, just as detrimentally, can lead us to a fixation to prove ourselves. Anger can drive us to become super-achievers in order to vindicate ourselves, to declare in every possible way, "I am good enough." Usually such unhealthy behavior, however, fails to provide real satisfaction, and rarely does it bring happiness.

When disappointing things happen in life, perhaps it's a good time to take a closer look at ourselves and our aspirations. There's a familiar little prayer that's used in almost all recovery programs, and for good reason. You've probably heard it: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." That prayer has been a new beginning for countless people.

Late in Thomas Edison's life fire swept through the main buildings of his industrial complex. On just that one night in 1914 almost all of his experimental work went up in flames.

As he walked through the charred embers of his business the next day, Edison suddenly turned to his son and said, "There is [sometimes] great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew."

Less than three weeks later his firm produced the first phonograph. Subsequently they would turn out dozens of other inventions that would leave an important mark on the world.

Edison knew there was nothing he could do to change the reality of that fire and its destruction. It was not what he wanted, but he found a way to deal with it. He accepted his circumstances and then kept on working. Out of the rubble, he rebuilt his factory; out of disappointment, he rebuilt his life.

Sometimes fate seems to deal us a poor hand in life. Often things turn out differently from what we would have wished. At such times we can simply crumble under the weight of shattered dreams, **or** take a deep breath and try to discern where to go from here. Losses are not easy to cope with, but neither do they have to destroy us. Frequently they can be a springboard to something even better in the future. How we deal with our hurts and disappointments is often the truest test of our character.

What holds true for individuals, also applies to churches. Sometimes even best laid plans don't work out as expected. Everything can start to unravel from that point on unless folks make a determined effort to regroup, revise, and redirect. Yet, in some way every crisis holds the promise of coming closer to Christ if we look to him for the strength that will carry us forward.

The starting point for any hard journey in life begins with remembering we are loved and affirmed for who we are, not what we aren't. From that assurance we can build or remake our lives. We can face disappointment and stand up to loss, because we know we've already been chosen where it really counts.

I'm convinced that God is not interested in all the "might have beens" concerning us. We often agonize over our past decisions and repeatedly second-guess ourselves. We analyze our moves to the point of absurdity and can make our lives miserable. Instead, I think God will simply inquire of us some day, "What did you do with life as it came to you? What did you make of what you had to work with?"

We don't always get what we want—and perhaps even deserve—and that's just the reality of life. We won't always get chosen even when we are the best person for the job. Our ideas will not always be adopted by others even when they make good sense. We're all bound to have plenty of disappointments to put in our album of life, but we have to find a way to live with them.

When Jesus calls to us, "Come, follow me," he invites us to take whatever we have, grow our life upon that base, make it fruitful by serving others, and realize the potential that God provides us in every situation—the good that can be easily lost amid our disappointments.

Remember our two disciple candidates, Joseph and Matthias? Well, I already indicated that we never again hear of Joseph, the Righteous, after he loses out in the draw. So then what do we know about Matthias, who is chosen as that 12th disciple? Interestingly, beyond these verses today he, too, is never mentioned further. So much for victory.

While we'll never know further about these men lifted up today, we do have the chance to shape the outcome of our story. We can let life's events crush and destroy us, or we can turn to God to encourage and enable us. Some adversity can prove to make us stronger, even as fire tempers steel to hardness.

We cannot change what happens to us, but we **can** determine how we will respond to our adversities. Jesus shows us that this choice is always ours, but he also promises that he will be with us to help us turn our disappointments into determination that will lead us faithfully into tomorrow.