

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
Paul Gunn, Pastor

THE UNITY OF THE DISCIPLES

Acts 1:12-26

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The title of today's message is "The Unity of the Disciples" and I'll be preaching from Acts Chapter 1, starting with verse 12.

My two points today are as follows:

- Peter looked toward the future, not the past
- Peter's appeal was one of unity

BACKGROUND: After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to many people. He performed miracles, ate food (proving he was not a spirit), and spoke numerous times. One day he told his disciples they would be witnesses around the world, and then he ascended into heaven on a cloud. Two men dressed in white asked the disciples why they stood there gazing and told them Jesus would return the same way he had ascended.

The disciples took that as their charge to spread the Gospel.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 1:12-14

Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. ¹³ When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

EXPLANATION: Here's a quick review of the history of the twelve disciples: They were men called by Jesus to follow him. They were from a variety of backgrounds. As I've shared with you before they were probably men who, for some reason, weren't chosen to follow a rabbi. Boys in that day prepared to "try-

out” to be the disciple of a rabbi. Those who were not selected were sent to follow their fathers’ trades. Some of the disciples were a rough and tumble bunch, some more refined, and a few we really don’t know much about.

Jesus, the rabbi, called these young men, or boys, to follow him. His mission, however, was different from the other rabbis. Jesus taught his followers that he was God’s son, that he came to pay the price for sin, that he would be crucified and would rise again. During their time of tutelage under Jesus, they watched him heal the sick, walk on water, and cast out demons. They watched him feed multitudes with just a little bit of food. They had more eye-witness accounts of Jesus’ work than anyone else. They struggled and Jesus challenged their unbelief.

At the time of the crucifixion, they all fled. When Jesus arose from the dead and appeared to them, it all began to make sense to them. Their faith became stronger than ever. And after a period of time, Jesus ascended into heaven, leaving it to them to share God’s story of salvation.

As Peter spoke to them in Acts, he spoke as one with authority. If you remember, his previous speaking engagements were those of saying the wrong things on impulse. Now, refined and more mature, Peter recalled the Old Testament.

PETER LOOKED TOWARDS THE FUTURE, NOT THE PAST

SCRIPTURE: Acts 1:15-20

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) ¹⁶ and said, “Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ He was one of our number and shared in our ministry.”

¹⁸ (With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. ¹⁹ Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

²⁰ “For,” said Peter, “it is written in the Book of Psalms: “‘May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,’ and, “‘May another take his place of leadership.’”

EXPLANATION: Growing up, Peter had no idea one day he would help fulfill the Old Testament prophecy - Psalm 109 - which is known as the Judas Psalm.

After the crucifixion, what did the disciples do? We don't know what all of them did, but some returned to what they had grown up doing. Fishing. After Jesus died, perhaps they thought it was all over, and they just went back to their old way of living. Certainly, there was nothing wrong with fishing, but Jesus had called them to do something else with their lives.

After Jesus appeared to them following the resurrection, they would never return to their old occupations. Peter, in a sense of urgency, told his fellow apostles now that Judas was gone, it was time for someone to take his place. There was no time to ponder why Judas betrayed Jesus, and there was no time to go to this place where Judas died and build a memorial. Had they left a vacancy they may have become known as the "remaining eleven apostles." They could have said Judas didn't contribute much anyway so no one would miss him. They did none of that.

Peter looked towards the future and didn't spend much time reflecting on the past. It was time for them to get moving and spread out. They were now the mouthpieces of God.

Not only did Peter looked towards the future, not the past, but...

PETER'S APPEAL WAS ONE OF UNITY

SCRIPTURE: Acts 1:21-26

"Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who has been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, ²² beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

²³ So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. ²⁴ Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." ²⁶ Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

EXPLANATION: With Peter's desire to have another apostle on board, he made the qualifications clear. The person must have been with them the whole time, witnessing everything from Jesus' baptism with John until his ascension. That narrowed the field of potential candidates. Peter didn't want a new and inexperienced believer. He wanted someone who had been with them through everything. He realized all the challenges Jesus had put before them was intentional. Peter did not want a novice taking on the mantle of apostle.

They didn't have a debate. They didn't have a business meeting. They didn't form a committee and do nothing. They acted and they acted in unison. As I understand it from verse 15, all one hundred twenty followers of Jesus were included in this decision.

Two were nominated. They prayed and asked for God's will to be done. Then they cast lots. What that looked like I don't know. Was it a form of voting? In the Old Testament, the priests sometimes used the Urim and Thummim, which were two objects that helped them know God's will. We can't say they were like dice, because dice are merely objects of random. Was the followers' casting of lots like the Urim and the Thummim? We don't know. What we do know is this: once the decision was completed, they didn't second guess it.

ILLUSTRATION: Once I received a questionnaire from a church looking for a pastor. I filled it out and returned it. A few weeks later I got a letter in the mail stating I had made the cut and was now one of seventeen under consideration for pastor. I wrote them back and told them now they had sixteen. In my letter, I said perhaps all the candidates were qualified and if so, what then? What would they do to eliminate the others other than nit-picking? What they should have done was pick one person and go for it and spare everyone the drawn-out pain.

TO CONSIDER: What were the differences between the two candidates, Matthias and Barsabbas? The reason we don't know the answer to the question is because it didn't matter. What mattered was choosing the right person. They didn't debate who was the most attractive and would thereby win the most converts.

I've wondered about Barsabbas. Whatever happened to him? You know, today we live in a feel-sorry world, don't we? If there were a decision to be made like this

today, we'd probably end up with thirteen apostles because we wouldn't want to hurt Barsabbas' feelings. I've wondered why they didn't just add Barsabbas to the group anyway, what would it have hurt? "The thirteen apostles" sounds weird, but what would it have hurt? Perhaps their twelve-passenger van only had twelve seatbelts. Peter took the scripture literally when it said, *May another take his place of leadership*, indicating there was only room for one.

Think of it, a man who had witnessed everything the disciples had witnessed - from John's baptism of Jesus to the ascension - this man had the same credentials as Matthias yet he was not chosen. The reason he was not chosen is this: God had another plan for Barsabbas. We know nothing more about him.

And what about Matthias? Whatever happened to him? We don't know that either. Historical writings from the day make different claims. One says he went to what is known today as the country of Georgia (not the state) and was stoned to death. A grave marker is there. Another source said he preached in Ethiopia and died there. Still another source says he preached in Jerusalem and was beheaded. We really don't know what happened to him either.

CONCLUSION: These things we know: Peter looked toward the future, not the past, and the people were unified as they recruited Matthias to take the place of Judas. My, my, the followers of Jesus had come a long way, hadn't they? The ones who had asked Jesus who was the greatest among them, and the ones who had fled when Jesus was arrested and carried off to his crucifixion - they were now mature and ready to go shake up the world.

APPLICATION: What is the application of this message in our lives and in our church today? I see several takeaways:

- Let us look toward the future with excitement. Let's move forward. The apostles didn't let Judas' failure define their future. Let's not let those who've let us down in the past define our future.
- Let us be unified. Had the one hundred twenty followers of Jesus not been unified at this point, there would have been little hope for the Gospel of Jesus to move forward.

As I understand the Scripture, this was the last time they'd all be together. They knew they had no time to waste. Their future was unknown, but they knew it was in God's hands.

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Thanks to Jennifer Anderson for her editing assistance.

Sincerely, Paul Gunn
Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
Nashville, Tennessee
USA