



Sermons **from Northwood United Church**

“What to do if your Pastor is Martyred”
John 17:6-11, Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
Will Sparks May 20, 2012

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

When you have an important choice to make, how do you make it. Do you talk to friends? Family? Do you have a personal “Board of Directors” that you consult, like a friend of mine suggested we all have? Do you pray about it? What about a spiritual adviser- a particular person whose wisdom you have come to rely on? Do you make a pros and cons list and try to look at the choice objectively. How do you make really important life decisions?

We are heading into wedding season and in terms of understanding what makes people choose the life partners they choose (which is a pretty big, important life decision), the whole thing feels a bit random to me. I mean, I sit with these couples before they get married and we talk. There are some couples who appear to be so beautifully suited to each other, and I discover years later that it fell apart soon after they were married. Other couples for whom I have deep concerns somehow, by some unseen hand of grace make wonderful partnerships. Every time we talk about God drawing us together, and I wonder, how do we know at the time that the choices we make have to do with God? How do we know it is not more about family history, or ego or just blind luck.

In our culture in which we place a high value on personal autonomy, we choose our own life partner and that assumes a high degree of self-awareness. In other cultures, marriages are arranged, which assumes a high degree of community awareness. Frankly, I am not sure what is the best method of making such a huge decision. I don't know the best method of choosing.

The followers of Jesus in the earliest days after Jesus' death had a choice to make- who would lead them as one of the 12 witnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus. Regardless of why eleven was not a good enough number and why thirteen would have been too many, their method of making such an important decision, though utterly natural to them, is a bit baffling to the modern mind. If we had been there we would have held an apostleship convention, we would have asked for a bio of each candidate. We likely would have interviewed them or perhaps given each a few minutes at a microphone. Then we would have engaged in what is really a rather new custom, electioneering. There would have been ballots, discussions, arm twisting, deal making, but eventually we would have made a choice by voting. Their method? Cast lots. That's it.

Now it is important to be clear about the question they were basing their choosing upon. The question for the early followers of Jesus was not, who would make the best apostle, or who is most suited for the role of apostle, or even who has the skill set necessary. No, the question was, “Who has God chosen?” So, instead of testing the will of the people and assuming that is God's will, they cast lots and assumed that method would leave more room for the Spirit to speak, than trusting the frailty of human wisdom.

There are a couple of assumptions beneath this kind of choosing: First, and probably most important, it assumes that God has a path, and that the task of choosing is really the task of uncovering that path which is already there. It assumed that God has already provided the people the energy needed and that we need to discern, or get out of the way, Is that an assumption you make when you have a big decision to make?

This casting lots business is also very egalitarian- everyone's gifts are valued, and all are seen as having something to contribute. And because one was not chosen strictly on talent or resume, the chosen leader might actually depend upon the Spirit. It reminds me of the early Anabaptists. Michael Sattler, an early reformer radical in a time when radical reformers risked their lives for the faith wrote in a little paper on church order and discipleship and gives instructions on what to do when your pastor gets martyred. (This is said quite matter-of-factly, kind of like we might explain what to do when your pastor takes a holiday) Sattler said that should your pastor be martyred for the faith, another member was to be chosen right away to serve as pastor.

In the church of that day, all members were seen as gifted and critical parts of the body, as ministers in their own right and as potential pastors. And the trick was to figure out who God wanted as pastor at any given time. So according to Michael Sattler, who by the way, was martyred for his beliefs during the reformation in the 16th century, any one of us could be called by God to be the pastor. And that assumption and conviction is a great leveler which causes each of us to think carefully about our role in the community and to take our part quite seriously.

A clergy colleague who lives near an Amish community in Kansas put a comment online that "pastors in Amish and many Mennonite churches are chosen by lot... A number of persons are recommended by the elders as possible pastors; the same number of bibles is put on a table, and each potential candidate chooses a Bible, In one Bible there is a slip of paper that designates that "chooser" as the new pastor (Pamela Tinnin in Partridge Kansas).

Just to give you a taste of how that might work, and based on the assumption that God just might be calling any one of us to lead in some way, I have put a red mark on the back of one bulletin, right beside the place it says "worship leader." Who got that bulletin with the red mark? Great! You get to come up here and finish the service.

All kidding aside, this casting of lots to choose seems kind of random and risky and almost silly to us today but probably the most important assumption that it rests upon is the assumption that being a disciple, a follower of Jesus, a part of this particular kind of community puts us in ministry and lays a claim on our lives. In the early church there were no holy bits reserved for clergy. Every bit was a holy bit, from the laying of the table, to the preaching of the gospel, to the digging in the garden to the caring for the children, visiting the sick. It was all the ministry of the whole people of God.

At baptism, which is the initiation rite for all of us, we not only marvel at the incredible blessing of God on every one of us and in every one of us, but we wonder at the call. We say "look!" A blessed child of God! I wonder what ministries God will unleash on the world through this person.

In the early church they just assumed that you were chosen for your part, God placed you here for a purpose and for a ministry. And in the case of the pastor being martyred, if you were chosen, then that was an indication that what you bring to the table is what God needs here. Now I am a creature of my time and I took statistics in university, so I am not as keen on the casting of lots as they might have been. However, I love the assumption that you are called into ministry. Our job together is to figure out what your particular part of God's ministry in the world and in the church might be. And don't assume that your part is something you have always wanted, or even something you feel up for. You may well be called to do something you never imagined. But that is what living as a disciple, in trust and in love with God, is all about.

There are no passengers on this ship. Only crew. You are chosen. Amen