

The Main Ingredients
Preached by
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Hebrew Scripture Reading: Psalm 1

The truly happy person
doesn't follow wicked advice,
doesn't stand on the road of sinners,
and doesn't sit with the disrespectful.
Instead of doing those things,
these persons love the LORD's Instruction,
and they recite God's Instruction day and night!
They are like a tree replanted by streams of water,
which bears fruit at just the right time
and whose leaves don't fade.
Whatever they do succeeds.
That's not true for the wicked!
They are like dust that the wind blows away.
And that's why the wicked will have no standing in the court of justice—
neither will sinners
in the assembly of the righteous.
The LORD is intimately acquainted
with the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked is destroyed.
So wrote the psalmist. We are thankful for God's enduring word.

A Reading from the Book of Acts: Acts 1:15-17; 21-26

During this time, the family of believers was a company of about one hundred twenty persons. Peter stood among them and said, "Brothers and sisters, the scripture that the Holy Spirit announced beforehand through David had to be fulfilled. This was the scripture concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus. This happened even though he was one of us and received a share of this ministry."

"Therefore, we must select one of those who have accompanied us during the whole time the Lord Jesus lived among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when Jesus was taken from us. This person must become along with us a witness to his resurrection." So they nominated two: Joseph called Barabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.

They prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's deepest thoughts and desires. Show us

clearly which one you have chosen from among these two to take the place of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas turned away to go to his own place." When they cast lots, the lot fell on Matthias. He was added to the eleven apostles.

Message: *The Main Ingredients*

Today's text is not one many of us are familiar with—I suspect because it's not particularly exciting and involves people we aren't familiar with. When this text appears in the lectionary—a list of suggested readings—the organizers removed another of its challenges. The full story would have gotten a PG-13 rating for graphic content. In the midst of his speech Peter goes into extensive detail about Judas' crime, the manner of his death and the gory aftermath. So, powers that be determined those details would so offend or distract contemporary listeners that it was better to omit than include them.

Part of the text's challenge is its simple nature, almost a vignette in the history of one congregation's life. Is there a sermon in every moment of life together? (My preaching mentor would say, "Probably, if you are paying attention.") This story is also particularly old-fashioned in a number of ways, so there are references we might miss. But what can we understand that might help us for today?

The story begins by telling us that the community of believers was about 120 persons. In Jewish tradition, 120 was the required number of men (yes, men) necessary to form a synagogue and appoint a council for leadership. This congregation had reached a critical juncture in its life and were ready to take the next step.

It was assumed in this early congregation that the original disciples called by Jesus were the appropriate ones to form that council—neatly a council of twelve—a number reflecting the original twelve tribes of Israel and the reason Jesus chose twelve disciples. But almost immediately upon the death of Jesus, one of the original twelve (Judas) was lost due to his betrayal of Jesus and his own subsequent death.

Peter announced two "musts" ("It is necessary..." in Greek) for selecting another council member. There were some main ingredients without which a worshipping community faithful to Christ cannot be said to exist.

The first was that they must choose someone. Twelve was the necessary number and they had only eleven. The second "must" ("It is necessary...") main ingredient was that whoever was chosen must have traveled with Jesus for his whole ministry, from baptism to death. Two candidates were produced; no word on whether or not they were asked if they wanted to serve. The sense of honor and calling was assumed for anyone who followed Jesus for his entire ministry. The group prayed for guidance and the complete number of twelve was once again achieved with the addition of Matthias.

Let's think about those "main ingredients." First: one hundred and twenty necessary to elect a council; then, twelve for a council. As a culture, unless we are interested in numerology or playing the lottery, the symbolism of numbers as having spiritual power has largely been abandoned. Nonetheless, it is probably the case that for many years and, in some places, still is a tradition to have a council of 12. The practice is more likely based on the number of disciples than the number of original Israelite tribes.

The next main ingredient was that those so chosen would have been eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry from baptism to death. Two were nominated—the text is unclear about whether they were nominated by the disciples or by the people. The two were never heard from/about again in the entire New Testament. The fact that the early church had at least two folk to

choose from reminds us that Jesus had many followers for his entire ministry who were not part of his intimate table fellowship, but were nonetheless recognized as disciples.

"...eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry from baptism to death." That is still a steep criterion. Not even the apostle Paul would have qualified, nor quite frankly, as the church spread would there have been enough of the original number to serve, let alone anyone in our congregation's long and storied history down to our own time.

In many ways, on the surface, this early congregation doesn't have much in common with contemporary ones, as much as Protestants like to think our practice is based on early church practice. Because this nascent Christianity was still a sect of Judaism, Jewish community guidelines are applied without question. Unlike some rules about things like cleanliness, purity, food, and worshipping with Gentiles, and other issues which we refer to as "inclusion," these two necessities will not be challenged, so much as simply go by the wayside over the millennia. So it is that both of Peter's "main ingredients" for community life are no longer characteristic of our life together: one through casual erosion and one through attrition of likely candidates over time (disciples, even the best of them, don't live for millennia.)

We don't know if any grieved the loss of the symbolism of the 12 for a council, even if they didn't believe there was an essential power attached. Life in the church suggests some did—and that others thought they were silly. People undoubtedly grieved when the last actual physical follower of Jesus was gone—an era had ended. Yet, they found ways to carry on and enrich the life of the faithful community beyond those original lifetimes. From earliest times, the church has had to confront this human dilemma and, that it held together more or less, ought to be a lesson to us.

Some grieve change; some don't. Each and every one of us values some tradition more than another. The valuing of the particular tradition make no individuals more less faithful; more or less smart; more or less evolved than any other. We don't hold together and move forward by suggesting otherwise. As did the early evolving church, we need to practice making community knowing that change is inevitable; that we have to make choices; and that sometimes the choice is not to change even if for the sole reason of valuing the power of tradition, without ever making tradition our god.

It's unlikely that eye-rolling was common in Peter's time, but he might learn how to do it, if he appeared in churches today and looked at our communal life. He would probably understand that it wasn't possible to have leaders who physically travelled with Jesus, because he never expected the world to have to wait this long for Jesus' return. But he might be confused by the fact that people barely make it through three holy week services, remembering just the final days of Jesus' life; by those who say "no" to serving on the council; that while we use the language of honor, people don't feel honored; he would probably never understand why it is no longer a plus to indicate one has been so chosen on their resume.

But, remembering that Peter was often drawn, day by day, by failure and success, nightmare by nightmare, often kicking, screaming, preaching fire and brimstone into the present life of the church, evolving even in his own time, (He, himself, was the inclusionist leader of his time), if anyone could make faithful sense of our life today it would be Peter. From Peter and from this earliest occasion in the life of the church, we can learn about life together and its hope and possibility for every new day.

Change always happened and it was always hard. People needed to think creatively about meeting needs, making changes, embracing new people and a new day. Their answer was not to go their own way in frustration or disappointment; but to choose to go

together. Their answer was not to abandon every tradition but to keep some and let some go, while respecting all their adherents. Their answer was to pray and allow themselves to be guided by the Spirit to discern together the main ingredients for faithful life together. Their answers may well be our answers in every new and challenging day.

As we come out of a year of life suppressed by a pandemic, as we both look forward to and experience more opportunities to be together again in different ways—in homes; in our church home; for both celebrations and comfort in loss; in mission; and one day again sharing a meal at tables other than the one where we share the Lord's Supper, we will welcome the return of "normal life," the company of people we have missed desperately, the rituals and symbols of holy and common spaces. We shall rejoice—quietly, perhaps with tears, perhaps with prayers of thanksgiving. We shall also grieve what has been lost—people or events, holiday traditions ... the list goes on.

We shall also discover that our return to normal is actually an entry into to the opening days of a new normal. Some of us will miss some things more than others; some will be frustrated about one thing and others about a different thing. We shall do best in faithful community when we: respect one another's losses; not try to persuade one another we are mistaken in loss or gain; and together, if not embracing all change, at least recognizing that change is not only happening now, but that it and our response to the reality of life as it is, is necessary to the survival of the church. ... We shall do best when we remember that traditions are not the main ingredients of our life together—but they do point to those main ingredients—reliance on God, mutual respect; recognition that faith is a gift; and that is an honor to be called together to serve the Lord by serving the world. May it be so for us in all the days ahead.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Compassionate God: We give you thanks for the privilege of sharing worship, for a community of caring; for a place and a people with whom to celebrate healing and possibility; weddings and the anticipation of babies; the laughter of children and the wisdom of those who have accrued more of life's experience. We are grateful for the comfort and encouragement in heroic battles against disease, in nurturing patience in returns to health and activity; in the comfort to us as we grieve; in support in struggles with vocations or relationships.

Together, through our faith we find strength and wisdom for the living of our days and the energy and commitment to share what we have found here with the world around us.

We pray for a world;

where too many nations are rattling their swords and testing their weapons and disease still stalks every population.

we pray for a nation where natural disasters and human violence rock towns and cities disrupting lives
where drought threatens ways of life far beyond the desert's edge

where those with many gifts seek to find their ways with those who suffer misfortune,

where life on hills of health and education might pour more fully into the neighborhoods below them both literally and figuratively

we pray that we might be your instruments of justice, peace and life abundant in the ways made possible to us through the gifts you have bestowed on us

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day, our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.