

Making difficult choices is one of the things that churches are notoriously bad at doing. Partly, it's the nature of a church. All these people and voices. All these opinions and options. It's just overwhelming sometimes. So it can be challenging to find consensus.

And on top of all these human voices, you've got another voice to listen to: God's voice. Is this what God wants? Is this what the Bible says we should do? Is this the best stewardship of our resources? It takes an already complicated process and makes it that much more burdensome.

But in our First Lesson for today, we read about a church not that much different from our own making a huge decision in what looks to be the length of... a day. Maybe two.

Because the church in Jerusalem following Christ's Ascension and before Pentecost really wasn't very large. About 120 members, the Bible says. About the same as our own active membership. And they are led by the Apostles. By the 11 remaining disciples of Jesus. After... you know... Judas "turned aside" from his position. And, specifically, they are led by Peter, who continues his role as the strongest voice in their group.

But they had originally been 12 disciples. Not 11. And for a bunch of converted Jews, the number 12 has a fair amount of significance. After all, there were 12 tribes in Israel. And these Apostles represent a new people of God. A new Israel. And so they feel like they need to return their number to 12. Makes sense.

But how do you choose an Apostle? Jesus himself chose them. And they probably still don't know why He did, because they were nothing like the men you would expect to find leading a church. Fishermen and tax collectors, as they were.

But they figure it out. And they actually go about it in a way that is fairly instructive for us. Not prescriptive. This isn't the only way you go about decision making. But certainly descriptive and helpful to us.

First, they set a goal. What are we trying to achieve here? What does this man we're searching for look like? Well, there are two important aspects to him. First, he needs to have been around for a while. All of Jesus' ministry, in fact. He needs to have seen Jesus baptized in the Jordan River. And he needs to have stayed with us throughout Jesus' ministry. Throughout His crucifixion and resurrection. All the way until today.

It's a steep requirement. But there are obviously those in their group who meet it. Men who followed Jesus almost as devoutly as the twelve did, and yet were never included amongst that inner circle. So they move on.

Second, he needs to be a witness to Jesus' resurrection. That's the whole point here, really. An apostle needs to be someone who says boldly, confidently, without hesitation, "Jesus Christ rose from the dead. And I witnessed it. I saw it happen. And I can tell you about it." According to St Paul, there were about 500 people who could say that.

So they have these two criteria. And after they weed out all the men who are recent converts and they weed out all the people who didn't witness the resurrection, they're left with two choices. Joseph Barsabbus and Matthias. Both, apparently, good choices. Both qualified for the task. But there's only one seat open.

So they do something that baffles many people: they roll the dice. They pull a name out of a hat. They play rock, paper, scissors. They choose one, seemingly at random. And then say, "Congratulations, Matthias. You're an Apostle."

It's an interesting little sequence of events. But, as I said, I think it's helpful. Not in the specifics of what they do, but in the underlying principles behind them. How their church goes about making a decision. Because it really boils down to two steps.

First, there's what I call sanctified decision-making. Everyday we make choices. Hundreds of them. We make little tiny choices. What am I going to wear to church? What am I going to eat for breakfast? Which shoe am I going to put on first? And we make big choices. How can I be a better parent? Should I find a new job? What do I say to my friend who has cancer?

We roll these choices around in our minds, trying to figure out the best option. And because we're good Christians, we try to come up with a Christian way to find an answer. We turn to the Bible. And we look in those pages in the back. You know, the ones that list different Scripture passages by topic.

And we look for the one that says, "How do I make sure my grandchildren don't start smoking meth?" And it's not there. "How do I know if I should take this job in Kansas City?" Not there either. "How do I help someone overwhelmed with medical bills?" Nope. Sorry. Nothing about that either.

So we start praying. Good idea. I highly recommend it. But then our prayers start turning into something like, "God, if I'm supposed to do this, give me a sign." You ever prayed that one before? Yeah, I have too. And sometimes a sign comes. A door opens. A friend shows up with words of wisdom. Great. Go for it.

But sometimes there's no sign either. Sometimes nothing happens. And we're left right back at square one. What do you do? How do you make a decision?

Well, I'll tell you what you do. You do what the disciples did. You use your brain. You look at the problem. You weigh all the evidence. And you make a decision.

And I know you're all thinking, "But, Pastor, this is a sermon and there's nothing spiritual about that." But guess what? There's something tremendously spiritual about that. Because those minds sitting in your heads right now are not ordinary human minds. They are baptized minds. With baptized thoughts. And baptized feelings. And baptized intuitions. Making baptized decisions.

St Paul tells us this over and over again. Romans 8, "*Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*" Again, in Romans 12, "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" He says it again to the Corinthians, "*We have the mind of Christ.*" And again to the Philippians, "*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*"

Making decisions is a spiritual act. Because they are not just decisions. They are sanctified decisions. They are baptized decisions. And that doesn't mean that every decision we make is perfect. We're sinners too. And we make sinful decisions as well. We do our best to avoid them. Through things like prayer and the reading of God's Word. And the renewing of our minds through receiving the Sacrament. But they happen.

But even then, they're not sinful decisions like the world's sinful decisions. As we read in Romans, the mind of sinful man leads only to death. The world makes sinful decision and they die for them. Forever. They suffer the eternal consequences of their sin. We make a sinful decision. And we still can look forward to life and peace. Because Christ has rescued us from the consequences of our sin.

As a seminary professor of mine used to say when we would fail a test or have trouble with an assignment, “Don't worry. You're still baptized.” There isn't a bad decision in the world that can take that away from you. You are and always shall be a child of the living God. And nothing can take that away. Not even your own poor choices.

Which really is why, I think, the New Testament church could do something as absurd as roll the dice on who would be an Apostle. Because they weren't Apostles based on their merits. They were Apostles because Christ made them Apostles. And this new Apostle wouldn't be an Apostle because they had chosen the man with the best qualifications. He would be an Apostle because Christ would fill him with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost morning and make him an Apostle.

And our decisions aren't going to send us to hell or lift us to heaven because of how perfectly we make them. But only because Christ made a decision that we should be His own and live forever with Him.

So use the mind that God has given you. Use the Spirit that dwells within that mind, sanctifying its very thoughts. As Peter told that first church, God knows your heart. Roll the dice if you have to. And trust that no matter what happens, God is with you. And you are still baptized. Amen.