

When the Lot Falls on Me
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; I John 5:9-13; John 17:6-11
Easter 7

John 17:6-11

[Jesus prayed,] ⁶“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.

⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

⁹I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

I John 5:9-13

⁹If we receive human testimony,
 the testimony of God is greater;
 for this is the testimony of God
 that God has testified to the Son.

¹⁰Those who believe in the Son of God
 have the testimony in their hearts.
 Those who do not believe in God
 have made him a liar
 by not believing in the testimony that God has given
 concerning God’s Son.

¹¹And this is the testimony:

God gave us eternal life, and this life is in God's Son.

¹²Whoever has the Son has life;

whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

¹³I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

¹⁵In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said,

¹⁶“Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus—¹⁷for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry....”

²¹“So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²²beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.”

²³So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.

²⁴Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”

²⁶And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

The Sermon

In the mid-1950s, when poets could still change the world or at least pose a credible threat, there was a literary movement out of New York called the Beat Generation. One of the originators of that movement was Allen Ginsberg, who in 1955 wrote a seminal piece called *Howl*:

*“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection
to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night...”ⁱ etc. etc.*

Ginsberg also wrote a companion piece called “Footnote to *Howl*” and some of the lines go like this:

*Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!*

The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy!

...

*Everything is holy! everybody’s holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is
in eternity! Every[one]’s an angel!*

*The bum’s as holy as the seraphim! the madman is holy as you my
soul are holy!*

*The typewriter is holy the poem is holy the voice is holy the hearers
are holy the ecstasy is holy!*

...

Holy the solitudes of skyscrapers and pavements! Holy the cafeterias filled with the millions! Holy the mysterious rivers of tears under the streets!

Holy the lone juggernaut! Holy the vast lamb of the middleclass! Holy the crazy shepherds of rebellion!...

Holy New York Holy San Francisco Holy Peoria & Seattle Holy Paris Holy Tangiers Holy Moscow Holy Istanbul!

...

Holy the sea

holy the desert

holy the railroad

holy the locomotive

holy the visions

holy the hallucinations

holy the miracles

holy the eyeball

holy the abyss!

Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours! bodies! suffering! magnanimity!

Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus came back to the disciples, according to Luke, during the forty days after the crucifixion, and he would talk to them about the kingdom of God.

He told them the Holy Spirit would come upon them, and they'd receive the Spirit's power; and then they were to go out and be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. When he had said that, according to Luke, they saw him lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

So they went back to Jerusalem, and they went to the upstairs room where they were staying. And in the next days, they and many others, including Jesus' mother Mary, were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!

*Everything is holy!
everybody's holy!
everywhere is holy!
everyday is in eternity!
Everyone's an angel!*

Imagine everything they had been through. Everything they had seen.

They weren't apostles because they were all friends. There's no indication that they had all even known each other before Jesus came into their lives.

And it wasn't that there hadn't been anything else to do. Most or all of them were called away from productive work.

They did it because Jesus had seen them and called them, and they *felt* called in their hearts, or they *knew* they were called in their minds; and they followed.

And what they saw and experienced firsthand was not only astonishing, but taught them something, *proved* to them something fundamental about life:

about why we are born, and about who and what we are meant to become in the world.

They saw and learned that the world we see with our senses is not all there is.

And they saw that our Creator is not just a cosmic inventor, but that God is love, and they saw the love of God and the love that *is* God fully embodied in Jesus.

And so to follow him is more than to appreciate him; our calling is not just to quote him approvingly: to be a disciple is something more than academic or philosophical.

We are supposed to make human lives better, as he did. We are supposed to make sure people have enough food, as he did.

If the people he loves are tumbling over the cliff, we're not just supposed to keep building hospitals at the base of the cliff; we're supposed to climb up those cliffs and find out why people keep getting tossed over, and change the conditions that keep causing it to happen.

That was the call of discipleship, and it was laid on a whole community of people, called together.

We each have to walk this lonesome valley, but contrary to the song, we do not have to walk it by ourselves.

When it was time to restore the fellowship of the Disciples to twelve, they remembered their own call, but this time, they didn't have Jesus among them to appoint, by divine authority, someone who would take the place of Judas.

And so was created the first nominating committee, which is further proof that the disciples were Presbyterian.

They proposed two candidates, Joseph called Barsabbas, also known as Justus, and Matthias.

And then they prayed. And they said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship.”

And then it was time to determine which one, Justus or Matthias, was God’s choice.

What do you do when you have to make a decision, and Jesus is not standing there in the flesh to just *tell* you what you’re supposed to do?

Casting lots as a mechanism for revealing God’s will went back as far as the People of God could remember.

Moses was told to apportion land to the twelve tribes of Israel by lot (Numbers 26:52-55).

When God told Moses how his brother Aaron was supposed to approach the Mercy Seat in the Tabernacle, Aaron was instructed to bring two male goats for an offering and cast lots on each of them.

And depending on how the lots fell, one would be given as a sacrifice, and the other would be kept alive and sent away into the wilderness as a sin offering—the scapegoat (Leviticus 16:1-10).

What do you do to try to determine God’s will for your life?

When you have to make decisions—decisions that will define you, for yourself and those around you—

decisions about what to do with your money;
or whether it’s time to speak out for what’s right,
even though your conclusions may offend someone’s politics,
or someone else’s religion,
or someone else’s sense of propriety;

or what you plan to do with your life;
 or what relationships God would have you prioritize;
 or what aspects of your life as you have known it
 may need to be thrown away or gently retired...

when you have to make the kinds of decisions
 that will shift the tectonic plates underneath you—
 and, by definition, under those around you—

What do you do to try to discern what God wants for your life?

When the apostles cast lots to determine whether Justus or Matthias was the one being called to become part of The Twelve, it wasn't because they trusted in the mystical powers of a mystical world, that the lots had some kind of magic.

It was because they trusted that God acts in the world—sometimes in ways that we can recognize, if we look with the right lenses, but sometimes in ways that defy explanation.

As Proverbs 16:33 says,
 “The lot is cast into the lap,
 but the decision is the Lord's alone.”

I'm tempted to rhapsodize about the trust those first apostles had to have in God, but I wonder if they had any more than you or I have.

They trusted because they *had* to trust, which is pretty much our deal, too.

When they cast lots, that was what they had at their disposal.

So, they prayed for God to speak through the lots, into their situation, just as we ask God to speak into our situation through our prayerful polity.

holy the visions
holy the hallucinations
holy the miracles
holy the eyeball
holy the abyss!

So they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

When someone is called to ministry in the Church, it's not one person saying "I'm called" and everybody says, "Oh, OK." We empanel committees, we vote, we pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit; and when both the individual and the Church agree that there is a call there, that's when it moves forward.

But sometimes we're called in private, not to some office of the church, not to chair a committee, not to pastor a congregation,

but to follow the still, small voice of God into a benevolent, personal ministry of doing something justly; or quietly loving, through an act of kindness; or walking humbly with God, within the privacy of our individual relationship with God.

Sometimes, no lot is cast at all, but we know we are being called to faithfulness, being commissioned to go do something good for someone, being sent out into the world to deliver the most urgent and crucial message in the universe; to stop listening to what everybody else's agenda wants me to do, and start doing the things that God created me to do.

As the John O'Donohue prayer goes,
"May I have the courage today
To live the life that I would love,
To postpone my dream no longer,

but do at last what I came here for
and waste my heart on fear no more.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Trusting in God’s guidance is about allowing God to be God so that you and I can be disciples without feeling like we’re supposed to be God.

It’s about allowing God to be God so the Church can be the Church without having to get everything perfect the first time. We’ll make some mistakes but it’s OK—we’re not God. We have a God who will keep picking us up again and letting us try again.

But in the end, of course, it’s not really about “allowing” God anything, because we do not have the power, the authority or the cosmic goodness to be God.

It’s about *recognizing* that God is God
and that I am not,
and you are not,
and John Calvin is not,
and the disciples are not,
and mission trips are not,
and preaching is not,
and nothing and no one is God except God.

And God can be God perfectly well all alone, *but chooses not* to be alone.

And we can make the choice not to be alone, either, but to embrace the call God puts on our lives, trusting that

*God gave us eternal life,
and this life is in God’s Son.
And whoever has the Son has life.*

So we cast lots, and draw straws, and roll the dice, always asking God to speak into our lives and our circumstances, our moral catastrophes and our noblest aspirations; and to imbue our fragile hopes, our fragile world, our fragile lives with holiness.

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ⁱ Allen Ginsberg, "Howl" from *Collected Poems, 1947-1980*. Copyright © 1984 by Allen Ginsberg. HarperCollins Publishers.

ⁱⁱ Allen Ginsberg, "Footnote to Howl" in Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980*. Copyright © 1984 by Allen Ginsberg. HarperCollins Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ John O'Donohue, "A Morning Offering," in O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).