

ORDINARY PEOPLE:

AKA JUSTUS

Acts 1:12-17, 20-26

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 29, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a summer sermon series entitled "Ordinary People."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said, '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—for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.'... 'For it is written in the book of Psalms, "Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it"; and "Let another take his position of overseer."

So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning 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.'

So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and 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 from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.'

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

In one of Broadway's longest running musicals, *Chicago*, a quiet, self-effacing character named Amos Hart – husband of celebrity inmate Roxie Hart – sings a lament whose title he uses to describe himself: "Mister Cellophane."

*If someone stood up in a crowd
And raised his voice up way out loud
And waved his arm and shook his leg
You'd notice him*

*If someone in the movie show
Yelled, "Fire in the second row
This whole place is a powder keg"
You'd notice him*

*And even without clucking like a hen
Everyone gets noticed, now and then
Unless, of course, that person it should be
Invisible, inconsequential me*

*Cellophane, Mister Cellophane
Should have been my name, Mister Cellophane
'Cause you can look right through me
Walk right by me and never know I'm there
...*

*Suppose you was a little cat
Residin' in a person's flat
Who fed you fish and scratched your ears?
You'd notice him*

*Suppose you was a woman wed
And sleepin' in a double bed
Beside one man for seven years
You'd notice him*

*A human being's made of more than air
With all that bulk, you're bound to see him there
Unless that human being next to you
Is unimpressive, undistinguished, you know who...¹*

I.

Most of the Biblical characters with whom we have spent time this summer are people whom, even if we have read the Bible cover to cover, we have likely not noticed:

- Lot's Wife
- Paltiel
- Orpah
- Huldah
- The centurion at the cross
- Joseph of Arimathea.

Even if one or two of these ring a bell for us, I doubt any of us will be familiar with the final two characters in this series: Joseph called Barsabbas; and the mother of Rufus.

Joseph in fact is so obscure – invisible, cellophane-ish – that even Luke – the writer of the Book of Acts in which Joseph appears – seems confused about his name.

- At first, Luke refers to him as Joseph, of which there are many in the Bible.
- Then Luke adds the descriptor “Barsabbas,” which can mean “son of Sabba,” “son of an oath,” “son of an old man,” “son of conversion,” or “son of quiet.”²

¹ John Kander and Fred Ebbs, “Mister Cellophane,” in *Chicago* © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.

² C. M. Kerr, “Joseph Barsabbas,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1915), available at <https://www.biblestudytools.com/encyclopedias/isbe/joseph-barsabbas.html>.

- Finally, Luke tells us that Joseph is “also known as” – AKA – “Justus.” But “Justus” is simply a surname, a family name, a last name, like Jones or Smith or Smulekoff, not much help in letting us see this particular Joseph as an independent human being. “Mister Cellophane.”

In fact, there is so little in the text itself about Joseph that we are left to *carefully reading* the text for clues about him and then using our *imagination* and *common sense* to move him from being a stick figure to at least an etching in whom we might see some of our *own* characteristics and experiences under God.

II.

In brief, after Judas’ betrayal of Jesus that led to directly to his arrest, trial and crucifixion, the original disciples – now called apostles – gather to find someone to replace Judas, so they can be restored to their full number of twelve, modeled on the twelve tribes of Israel. These apostles are in that period between Jesus’ ascension into heaven and his giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which will empower them for the preaching, teaching, and healing on which they are about to embark and which will lead the church to explosive growth in the early chapters of the Book of Acts.

As is often the case with matters apostolic, Peter takes the lead in the process of selecting the twelfth apostle.

- He calls the meeting to order with a line from Psalm 109: “Let another take his position of overseer.”³
- The selection process is open and transparent, witnessed by about 120 people.
- All eleven apostles are present.
- It is not a back-room deal in a smoke-filled room.
- Peter announces *criteria* for any nominees for the position:
 - The twelfth apostle must be someone who, like the other eleven, has been with Jesus from the time he was *baptized* through the time he was put to *death*.
 - And it must be someone who, like them, has witnessed an *appearance* of the risen Christ and who therefore is poised to become “a witness to his resurrection.”

(Clearly, the hiring was to occur from within!)

- Peter puts forward two names, both of whom are qualified: Matthias and Joseph, called Barsabbas, also known as Justus.
- It is unclear whether Peter has personally chosen the nominees or the group has nominated them, but when it comes time for the election, two names are on the ballot.
- The eleven apostles then enter a period of prayer, what we might call “spiritual discernment.”
 - “*Lord, you know everyone’s heart,*” they pray. “*Show us which one of these two you have chosen...*”

³ Psalm 109:8.

- It is clear the apostles believe that God makes the *final choice* concerning who will be the twelfth apostle and that their task is to *discern* and *ratify* that choice.
- (In the Presbyterian Church, 2000 years later, we still follow that same process when we are selecting a Pastor or Associate Pastor – God *chooses*, we *discern* and *ratify*.)
- As soon as they finish asking God to “show” them the chosen candidate, they lift their heads and look around; and then something happens that I have always thought rather odd: “They *cast lots*” to try to determine the choice. *They cast lots???*
 - Has God been silent?
 - Has God not answered their prayer?
 - Are they confused, conflicted, unclear about the choice before them?
 - Are they faced with two highly-qualified candidates, or with two neither of whom quite seem quite to fit the bill?
- It has always provided me with a little relief to see that even in Biblical times prayer doesn’t always reveal an immediate answer, because that is a way we often experience prayer when we are facing a major decision.
 - College or military service
 - Marriage or graduate school
 - Accept this new position or remain in the position we have
 - Continued treatment or hospice.

“For everything there is a season,” declares the Preacher in Ecclesiastes. “And a time for every matter under heaven.”⁴ It appears we are not alone among those for whom seasons and times are not always obvious; but by the same token, it seems that for the eleven apostles to “cast lots,” “draw straws,” “flip a coin” treats a major decision in the life of the early church as if it were a bet on horses or a selection in a March Madness pool.

- Fortunately, commentators on this matter come to our rescue. Most point out that “casting lots” has a long and distinguished history in the Bible as a way of *discerning* God’s will: Moses’ brother Aaron,⁵ the twelve tribes of Israel,⁶ the prophet Micah,⁷ and even the sailors who found Jonah asleep on their stormy ship⁸ -- all cast lots as part of discerning the will of God.
- So however seemingly odd the process, when the lots are cast, the lot falls on Matthias, and he becomes twelfth apostle.

⁴ Ecclesiastes 3:1.

⁵ Leviticus 16:8.

⁶ Numbers 26:66; Numbers 33:54; Joshua 19:1-40.

⁷ Micah 2:5.

⁸ Jonah 1:7-8.

- Joseph, son of Barsabbas, also known as Justus, is *never again* mentioned in scripture.

*Cellophane, Mister Cellophane
Should have been my name...
'Cause you can look right through me
Walk right by me and never know I'm there.*

III.

So what do we make of this Joseph called Barsabbas, this “son of quiet,” this “Mister Cellophane”?

It may be that Joseph was not as obscure as his disappearance from scripture would lead us to believe.

- In early Christian tradition, it is said that Joseph went on to become Bishop of Eleutheropolis, where he died a martyr and was elevated to the status of a saint.⁹
- Perhaps the tradition reveals that we have a deep human need to believe that in the end no one really loses, that every story turns out well, that every life is important, even when we are not chosen, finish second, or don't place at all.
- The tradition may reveal that we share with early Christian writers a deep human thirst to be noticed.

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On the other hand, perhaps Joseph is a reminder that at the end of the day, the things we think we might want, the things we consider, the things for which we put forth our names or for which we campaign are ultimately *beyond our control*. There was to be – after all – only *one* twelfth apostle.

To make it more personal:

- Perhaps the person with whom we want to be in relationship is not after all the person with whom God intends us to “walk, and talk, and keep sweet counsel.”¹⁰
- Perhaps the family matter we want settled *one* way in *our* time frame is not the *way* or *time frame* in which God intends the matter be settled.
- Perhaps the acceptance we seek to that graduate program, the appointment we seek to that position, the election we seek to that office, is not what the Holy One has in mind for us.

It is worth noting that while Joseph never again appears in scripture, *neither does Matthias*, the one *chosen* to become the twelfth apostle. They both disappear into the crowd of history: *invisible*, but not necessarily *insignificant*.

IV.

After the selection is made, the pace of the New Testament picks up.

⁹ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, Book 4, Chapter 8, Section 1.

¹⁰ A wonderful phrase I heard Dr. Gardner C. Taylor use decades ago to describe marriage.

- The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost¹¹
- Explosive growth on the part of the church¹²
- Preaching, teaching, healing¹³
- The sharing of goods¹⁴
- Admission of Gentiles into the faith without requiring their conversion to Judaism¹⁵
- Missionary journeys of Paul¹⁶
- The spread Christianity from its base in Judaism into the Greco-Roman world geographically, politically, and culturally.

In all this activity, heroic people come to the fore: Stephen.¹⁷ Peter. Paul. Lydia.¹⁸ Dorcas.¹⁹ Giants of the faith. Giants of the earth.

But for every one of these giants, for every martyr and missionary, there were and are dozens, hundreds, thousands, of quiet, humble saints – Mister and Ms. Cellophanes – who keep the worship, mission, fellowship, and education of the church going, every day of their lives. Remember: one meaning of “Barsabbas” is “Son of Quiet.”

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In some of the classes I have taught at Westminster I have shared with you the story of Jeannette Williams. When I moved to Iowa in 1990, she was a long retired school teacher who every Saturday morning before we served communion the next day in worship, would drive her rusted yellow Oldsmobile to the Hy-Vee grocery store, buy bread and grape juice, drive to the church, spread them neatly across the communion table, cover them with cellophane, then return the next day to partake herself.

Jeannette Williams never married. She had no children. She had outlived her family. She lived alone in a small apartment next door to the least-used funeral home in town. When I began my service in her church, she was nearly ninety and had been preparing the communion elements for nearly half a century.

But her memory was beginning to fade. And her driving that yellow Oldsmobile across white ice made those of us in the church concerned. So we asked if we could provide her with an assistant, and we held a lunch in honor of her decades of service. When she arrived at the lunch, she couldn't understand why she would be sitting at the head table.

¹¹ Acts 2:1-13.

¹² Acts 2:41, 47.

¹³ Acts 2:42-43.

¹⁴ Acts 2:44-45.

¹⁵ Acts 10:34-48; Acts 15:1-35.

¹⁶ Acts 15:36-28:31.

¹⁷ Acts 6:8-8:1.

¹⁸ Acts 16:11-15.

¹⁹ Acts 9:32-43.

A few days later, when the newly-recruited assistant went to her apartment to be trained, Jeannette Williams opened her cedar chest and pulled out a dozen black, leather bound journals, all the same size, most with yellowed pages.

Each page of each journal was dedicated to a Sunday on which she had prepared communion:

April 3, 1955

Three loaves of bread: 72 cents

Two cans of grape juice: 30 cents

218 people served

Pastor presiding: Dr. Ted Lilley

Elders serving: Jack Walters, Ted Kubicek, Lou Burkhalter (They were all men in those days.)

May 6, 1955

The same.

Every first Sunday of every month for nearly fifty years. The careful recording, the detail, the chronicling of every time bread was broken and wine served.

Who knew? Who knew?

Suppose you was a little cat

Residin' in a person's flat

Who fed you fish and scratched your ears?

You'd notice him

Her name was Jeannette Williams. His was Joseph, son of Barsabbas, "Son of Quiet," also known as Justus.

What is your name?

Amen.