

May 16, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Acts 1:15–17, 21–26](#)

TITLE: **Plus One**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

How do you decide who belongs to your group of friends? You're thinking about inviting some people over for a meal—how do you choose who gets to come? There are logistics—like how many people will fit around your table and social rules—such as which people will most likely enjoy each other's company. When my parents were newly married, they met five other young couples who lived on the same block and were all just starting families. These six couples formed a Supper Club that ended up meeting for over 30 years. Even though their lives moved in different directions and most relocated to different parts of the city, they stayed in touch for decades. Some of you are part of similar social groups, book clubs, sororities, bible study groups. So you know that it can be a big question to consider adding someone new into a core group of friends.

The followers of Jesus faced this question shortly after Christ was resurrected from the dead and ascended into heaven. Out of the larger group of people who were his followers, Jesus had earlier named twelve of them as a core group of disciples. Judas' betrayal and subsequent death by suicide meant that number decreased to eleven. Eleven felt wrong—incomplete—so the followers decided that a new, twelfth disciple should be named. It is like receiving an engraved invitation from God that was addressed: To the eleven disciples “plus one.”

“Plus ones” are a relatively new social concept. In the past, invitations would be sent to two groups: married couples or single people. But now with so many people not necessarily in one category or the other, the practice developed to allow the invited friend to bring a guest—a “plus one.” That way the invitees can decide who will accompany them to this event—who they'd like to have around that will fit in with the larger group.

The followers of Jesus, including the eleven core disciples, now faced a situation of having to name a “plus one.” Peter took the lead and outlined criteria for choosing this person: It had to be someone who'd been a follower of Jesus for Christ's whole ministry, from the time of his baptism by John through the period of crucifixion, death and resurrection and up until his recent ascension into heaven. It was important that this person truly knew Jesus—had heard him speak, had seen him heal, had witnessed the terrible trial and crucifixion as well as the joyful encounters with the risen Lord. In the end, two candidates emerged as the best choices: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. But how to choose between them?

Now here's where the story gets a little unusual. For this big decision—naming a twelfth disciple of Jesus Christ—the disciples cast lots and chose Matthias. We're not sure exactly how this happened—maybe by pulling a marked stone from a cup, rolling some dice, or something similar.

But it feels like an arbitrary method to make an important decision. We good Presbyterians form committees and meet over a period of weeks to consider who should be nominated to serve as deacons and elders of our congregation. We want to present a diverse slate of candidates—people of different genders, ethnicities, gifts, and length of church membership. We'd never simply roll dice or pick names out of a hat. Or by comparison think about when companies are looking for new employees. Nowadays they use online recruitment services like Zip Recruiter, Monster.com, or LinkedIn. That lets them weed out people whose résumés aren't strong enough and home in on top candidates quickly.

But these business approaches are not the best ways to find disciples of Jesus. An online job application automatically assumes you have access to a computer and email. Depending on what your name is or how it is spelled can sometimes land one application in the "to be considered" pile while another is immediately pushed to the side. And if the application form has several lines to list academic degrees, it is ignoring the economic inequities that keep some people from gaining a good education in America. And if we're honest, we must admit that churches are not immune to these same implicit and explicit biases, and the belief that leadership should only be conferred on those who are successful by the world's superficial standards.

I began this sermon by asking the question: How do you decide who belongs to your group of friends or who gets invited to your party? A lot of times we invite people who are like us—who look like us, talk like us, live near us, earn comparable to us; whose work life, faith life, and cultural life is similar to our own. We are all clannish people; we routinely find comfort in homogeneity. So it's not surprising when our church communities become gatherings of largely one ethnicity, one language group, and one economic group. You step through the doors on a Sunday morning and almost immediately get a sense of who is welcome and more than likely who is not; who will be chosen for leadership and who will not. The business model and sometimes the church growth model use implicit biases to attract a dominant group while discouraging others—often prioritizing whites over people of color, over non-English speakers, and over housing and transportation-challenged members of the same community.

That is why there is much we can learn from how the twelfth disciple of Christ was chosen long ago. To our modern, works-righteousness thinking, the idea of choosing a disciple by casting lots sounds haphazard and illogical. But after Peter set forth the general criteria and two names were proposed, they entered into a time of prayer. There was a strong sense that God was with them in this process and a strong desire that God be honored in whomever was chosen. This was the foundation upon which the believers stood as they made their choice.

Let me share a quick story that illustrates this total dependence on God. I heard it long ago from a dear old South African minister named Granville Morgan. Granville said that a father came home from work one day carrying a big box, when his little daughter came out to greet him. She wanted to carry the box inside but the father told her it was too heavy for her. She kept insisting, so the man set the box down and asked her how

she would ever manage to get it inside the house. Clutching the box in her straining arms, the girl said, “I’ll carry the box, and now you can carry me.” Granville would then laugh at his own story, smile and say, “That’s a lovely story, isn’t it. I’ll carry the box and now you carry me.”

There’s a deeper truth in that story worth remembering. We’re not told anything about why Joseph Barsabbas or Matthias were chosen from a larger pool of equally qualified candidates. And even after Matthias is chosen as the new twelfth disciple, we never hear about him again. But maybe that’s the point. It was never about “us” controlling the choosing process. It was never about “us” deciding who was best based on worldly criteria of education, wealth or ethnicity. It was never about us finding someone we’d like in our group, someone we could vouch for and document how their skills earned them this recognition. Sure, we had to pick a “plus one”, but someone else was carrying us—guiding us—reminding us that something bigger than our narrow human categories is at work here. Casting lots took the whole decision out of our biased, flawed, limited human hands. It was shown to be a matter of unmerited grace—of unprejudiced acceptance—of God’s generous, unconditional love.

Now, to see if this sermon has truly sunk in, imagine yourself standing in that crowd of 120 listening to Peter name off the criteria for the “plus one” disciple. Imagine that the two names put forth are Joseph Barsabbas and your name. You are potentially the one being called to be a witness to Jesus Christ—to embody this amazing gospel of justice, mercy, and resurrection hope out in the world. What’s your reaction to that? Do you think, “Oh no, I’m not worthy of this. I’ve not earned it—I’ve not studied enough—I sin and mess up, embarrassing Christ, denying Christ, failing to be all that I’m sure this position requires of me.” Yet remember who stands around you: Other disciples who fled from the cross, led by a fisherman who denied the Lord three times. It has never been about credentials—about earning a spot. It has always been about a free invitation to come to the party; to come to the banquet feast; to come be the “plus one” at the table of grace. It was never about us; it was always about the one carrying us.

Years ago Dietrich Bonhoeffer said this: *God has a future for each person which [God] will create through the Word. Now is your time of grace and salvation...God claims you wholly and completely. Do now what God wants from you.* You are the twelfth disciple, the “plus one.” Now go and live out your calling.

AMEN