

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from our risen and ascended Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

***"You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"*** (Acts 1:8). With those words, Jesus encouraged His apostles as He was bodily ascending triumphantly into heaven as Emmanuel – God with us.

Today on this Seventh Sunday of Easter, these witnesses are no longer hiding behind locked doors for the fear of the Jewish authorities. No, this joyous assurance of the Ascension of our Lord knowing that He will return again filled their hearts and drove out all fear. From the moment they left the Mount of Olives, they worshiped the Father and His Son, Jesus, in full public view.

But as how unified the Eleven were as they were with one accord devoting themselves to prayer, they were not complete. Jesus called Twelve men, not eleven. The outward appearance of unity and completeness might be maintained, but what was broken cannot make itself whole again. Sin cannot be undone, except if God Himself should do it. So, how shall the apostles be made one again?

During the days that followed the ascension of Jesus, the Eleven and the other disciples, about 120 in number, awaited the coming of the promised Holy Spirit by devoting themselves to prayer. Their prayer arose out of their study together of the prophets – *who had pointed to the incarnation of Christ, His ministry, sufferings, death, and resurrection* – and of the Psalms, the prayer book of the twelve tribes of Israel, of the whole people of God, of Christ Jesus, and of the Church in all ages.

In the course of their prayers from God's Word, Psalm 69 and Psalm 109 came to Peter's attention. Here, was the Word from the Lord to direct their action. As the de facto leader, Peter took the initiative in doing something. Since Jesus had chosen Twelve men, Peter and the others believed that a replacement for Judas should be selected. As Israel had been broken and scattered because of sin, so, too, the apostolic circle had been broken by the sin of Judas Iscariot. The Twelve were now only the Eleven. The full number of the Twelve must be restored.

After citing Scripture, Peter concludes that someone must be chosen to take Judas' place. But who? Well, it would be a man who has the same qualifications as the other apostles. That is, he must have been with Jesus from the beginning of the Savior's ministry – *His righteous fulfilling Baptism by John* – to the day of His ascension. Like the others, the man who is chosen must be one who had seen and heard and touched and eaten and been instructed by the risen Christ.

So, the group of believers nominated two men who met these qualifications: Joseph called Barsabbas who was also called Justus – and Matthias. But why one witness more? Why not both? Well, if this were simply a matter of adding witnesses, certainly 13 would be better than 12. And in the coming years, the number of those who proclaim the resurrection would swell, as Barnabas, Paul, and Apollos joined in.

But remember, at the beginning of Christ's earthly ministry, He chose 12 men – *the living picture of Israel made one in Him and in their call to follow Him faithfully*. Their unity, too, was broken by unfaithfulness by Judas Iscariot. This time there is no possibility of maintaining the illusion of fullness. The fellowship has been broken. This is what sin does. It drives us away from God and away from one another.

The restoration of the Twelve is the very picture of the Lord's saving work. His death breaks the power of sin and His resurrection proclaims healing for the broken and reconciliation of those driven apart by sin. You see, filling the place that Judas deserted and restoring the full number of the Twelve not only brought an additional witness to the resurrection, but it was also a witness to the power of Christ's resurrection to reconcile the estranged and make His people, His new Israel, whole.

The man who would complete the number of the Twelve would be like the Eleven with respect to His faithful following of the Lord, a witness to all He said and did in the days of His earthly ministry. As with the Eleven, this man would have followed the Lord, not by chance, or by his own decision, or by his own act of commitment, but by the calling of His Lord.

Again, two men met these qualifications: Joseph called Barsabbas who was also called Justus – and Matthias. So, the group of about 120 prayed to Jesus saying: ***“You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show 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”*** (Acts 1:24-25).

Through prayer, they were confident that Jesus had made His choice and that He would indicate His choice. They trusted that Jesus would name the new apostle through them. So, as it was custom when there was a tie, they cast lots, where they would write names on pebbles or pieces of broken pottery, shake the container with the lots, and the name that flew out first would be the choice. The lot fell on Matthias.

The Eleven and the nearly 120 disciples were confident that the Lord made His choice, since this was in accord with Proverbs 16:33: ***“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”***

Sometimes it still happens when two men are equally qualified for a position in leadership in the church. When an election results in a tie, it is proper to draw lots in some way to determine the Lord’s choice.

But you can’t help but feel bad for Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus. Every one of us is at times the “unchosen one.” Unchosen ones exist everywhere. The ones who didn’t make the team, get the promotion, get the job. Even though the lot did not fall upon him, he would still be a witness.

It is likely that this man continued his discipleship to His Lord Jesus, likewise to the nearly 120 that day.

Jesus said: ***“You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”*** (Acts 1:8). Jesus, here, is not commanding them to be His witnesses, but He promises that, as a result of receiving the Holy Spirit, they would just naturally be His witnesses. They would feel no outward compulsion to bring their testimony of the redemption won by their Lord through His death on the cross and sealed and ratified by His resurrection and His ascension. They would do it with great joy and zeal that would never tire. The Holy Spirit would make them witnesses who say: ***“We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard”*** (Acts 4:20).

With the Apostles now unified as Twelve, plus the other disciples, the events of the Ascension and the upcoming events at Pentecost give them the encouragement to spread the good news of Christ to all nations. This they did through the exalted Lord who gave the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit continues to operate with power through His Word. The Word of the Lord proved its creative power: how it was preached, brought forth faith and sustained it in the hearts of many, was embattled, and went on from victory to victory.

Due to the Ascension, the Twelve were content to be witnesses. Gone were their dreams of power connected with personal prestige. No one would argue who would be the greatest (Luke 22:24) or sit at Christ's right or left hand (Mark 10:37). No one again would speak about an earthly kingdom.

But how would they be able to proclaim the divine truth of salvation in Jesus Christ without making a mistake? Well, the Holy Spirit would empower them to bring testimony that would be in perfect accord. The promise Jesus had made would come true: ***“The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you”*** (John 14:26).

And so, it would be. At Pentecost, the Apostles would be filled with the Holy Spirit so they would remember all that Jesus had taught them. Peter would preach nothing but the purest divine truth with no human additions, such as hopes and dreams that Jesus would bring in a glorious earthly kingdom, or promote social justice, or approval of sins. Paul and the other apostles would do the same. The apostles were plainly inspired by the Holy Spirit. So, to accomplish Jesus' prophecy of ***“to the end of the earth”*** (Acts 1:8), Jesus gave His Holy Spirit to endow the apostles with the gift of divine inspiration. Through the inspired Gospels and the Epistles, the eternally true, infallible testimony their Lord entrusted them was spread to the very ends of the earth. Through the Scriptures, the apostles to this day bring the glorious gospel witness to the end of time.

But what was the response the apostles received when they witnessed to a hostile world? They were mocked and ridiculed. They suffered. They died a martyr's death. But they were never intimidated by any opposition, by danger as the price for telling the truth. You see, the Holy Spirit filled the apostles with a great boldness and courage, so that under persecution they not only remained steadfast and unflinching, but considered the sufferings they often received from their witnessing to Christ to be badges of honor. They could not help but tell of the good news of Christ.

This Good News of salvation would be proclaimed for all nations and peoples as the Twelve and all disciples would go into all the world, inviting all to the Baptism that incorporates us into Christ and makes us members of His Body the Church, announcing forgiveness to the penitent and unbelieving, and calling us to oneness in Him and with all believers, through our eating His Body and drinking His Blood in His Supper.

Since, we too, have seen, heard, tasted, and touched Jesus in His Means of Grace – *His Word and Sacrament* – we are also His witnesses. By grace through faith in Christ alone, we are all unified and restored and sent to proclaim the good news of salvation in Christ alone! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

**+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +**