

Year B, 2018
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Seventh Sunday of Easter
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; St. John 17:6-19

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Israel had twelve tribes. Today, we would call them states or colonies; but in those days, they were more like a confederation of clan or groups of family, so “tribe” is a fitting word to describe them. Jesus saw the significance of continuity in having 12 disciples. There were, of course, many more disciples than that but these leading disciples represented the continuity between the old and the new. They would go on to become Jesus’ Apostles upon whom God would establish His Church and later assist Him in judging those tribes like the Judges of old. St. John of Patmos describes the heavenly city of God that will one day come down from heaven as being built on the foundation of the Apostles represented by 12 pillars.

Apparently the Twelve also understood the importance of this continuity. Judas had committed treason and was, in addition, dead by his own hand. The Church now faced its first crisis: Who would fill the 12th slot? One might think that in this age of so many miraculous events, the Lord would resolve this dilemma for them—send a ray of sunshine to land on the chosen one. Wrong! This is a task for the Church. The Church, which Luke tells us numbered about 120, put forth two candidates who met all the requirements and they prepared to make their decision. They prayed for guidance, of course, but there was no vote. The Church was not a democratic institution; nor was it a dictatorship. Instead, they played a game of chance—they cast lots—assuming that God would work through this mysterious mechanism. Matthias was “chosen” for apostleship. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first and last time that we will hear anything about Matthias. As someone said, “He didn’t set the world on fire but, apparently, he didn’t do any damage to the Church either.”

Nearly four centuries later, Bishop Valerius of Hippo, seeing the renowned layman, Augustine, sitting in the congregation, set aside his prepared sermon and preached extemporaneously on the need for new priests for Hippo, (present-day Annaba in Algeria, on the northern coast of Africa). The congregation decided that moment that Augustine was exactly what they needed and literally dragged him to the altar where the bishop,

against Augustine's will, ordained him a priest. The crowd mistook his tears of frustration for tears of joy. As it happens, Augustine became one of the most important theologians, Church Father and saint of Christian history. That seems to have worked out well.

I was glad to have been here last week when wardens Emily and Melisa announced the vestry's choice for your new rector. I've never been present to hear such an announcement before. It was delightful to be with you to hear it and to applaud, with you, the work of the Search Committee, and to know my successor will soon be here.

Clergy, today, are chosen with one of two major systems (and a third system which is a hybrid of the two): clergy are either hired by the congregation or appointed by the bishop. "You are either called to be called," that is, called by God, trained by the Church, and then wait until you are called by a congregation, "or called to be sent," that is, called by God, trained by the Church and then sent by the bishop. Studies indicate that either system works about as well as the other. I've lived under both systems. There are pluses and minuses to both. Most of you have been in the church long enough to know that sometimes the right person is sent or called to the wrong congregation or the wrong person feels called to the wrong congregation. It can happen under either system. However, both systems are much preferred over Bishop Valerius's. (Look how much time it saved!)

Every church in the Diocese is hoping for Augustine; most will get Matthias; some will get the right pastor for the wrong congregation (or the right congregation for the wrong pastor). There is no perfect, fail-safe system. We need to make the best decisions we know how and then support each other. Somewhere in the jumble of decision-making processes, God is at work and even if we can't read God's mind, we need to pray and work and conference together to see God's movement and support that. From listening to what some of your leadership has said, the Holy Spirit has been clearly seen working in the process and I believe that is true. Hopefully, all of you will see this calling as a new beginning.

This is exactly what John is addressing in his letter: How do we know? How can we tell the Holy Spirit is in our decisions—life decisions,

not just church ones? John says, you know when you are believing the testimony God has given us in His Son. If you believe it, you have life in Him. If you have life in Him, you may ask anything according to His will and He will hear you. And if we know that He hears us, then we know we have obtained the requests made of Him. Now, that's a bold promise. Yet it's no different than how confident you feel about someone when you know them well, especially someone you live with—you know a bit of their mind; you know how they think or feel about something; you know what they would or wouldn't do. My goodness, some spouses can finish each others' sentences! You can bank on it. You can trust. The Holy Spirit isn't going to make the decision for you, but you know Him, and He's going to be with you. And you know each other. You have eyes to see, hearts to love, minds to reason together, and the will to succeed. That's all anybody needs. Pity the person who does not have that kind of fellowship!

It looks as though Matthias was short-term assignment. One tradition says he planted the faith in Cappadocia and along the coast of the Caspian Sea. Another tradition has him going to Ethiopia and dying at the hands of cannibals. He was the only person selected by the Church to be one of the 12 Apostles... and every once in a while the Church produces an Augustine. Thanks be to God. Amen.