

Acts 1:12-26

Theme: Going forward

Do you ever find yourself wondering what things would have been like had that one thing gone differently? Maybe you feverishly wish this, but always to no avail. Spending time in that thought zone isn't beneficial. It's better to resolve to walk God's paths going forward in saving grace rather than linger in regret and the world of the would-haves and if-onlys.

When you're reeling from upheaval, how do you go forward? Introspection is good. Recall the facts and then examine if what you did and said, not anyone else, was the best course of action. Last, hopefully having learned something or grown, you go forward with a little more wisdom. This is all easy to say but hard to do, especially last bit. Resolving to adopt a better mindset that translates to new and beneficial habits, jeesh, who does that well?? Someone maybe, but most of us are better at ruminating, spending much time and emotional effort wishing things had never happened, happened differently, that we'd have been different, or be different now. Dwelling on what can't change because it's done is futility, but we do it.

This chapter of Acts makes me wonder along these lines. The believers returning to Jerusalem after seeing Jesus go up into glory and gathering in prayer to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit is great to see! However, the conversation about replacing Judas I wish would never have had to happen. There was forgiveness for Judas. What would it have been like for Judas to believe forgiveness in Jesus was really actually his? Would he have gone on to write in II Judas, "I betrayed the Lord and am now a living testament to what the forgiving love of Jesus overcomes."? Imagine if Judas was a common name because of its connection to failure and forgiveness, the human condition in a breath.

Maybe it took Peter standing up among the believers during this inflection point to help them go forward with clear direction because even though they returned with great joy, reality and its messiness was waiting for them in Jerusalem. So, what would the tone be going forward from this crucial juncture in the wake of great emotional and spiritual upheaval? Their faith fueled actions in the days between Ascension and Pentecost are the tone. Their whole number, 120 souls including Jesus' mom and now believing brothers, acted like people who knew Jesus had overcome the world by his death on the cross and resurrection from the grave and they, by believing in him, had overcome it also! This united them and gave clear purpose going forward.

We see how the church dealt with the substantial matter of filling the position left vacant by Judas. Peter handles the delicate situation with dignity and tact not heap scorn on Judas, but speaking of him with much lenity saying, *“Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ He was one of our number and shared in our ministry.”* Peter could be this way because he knew he’d been forgiven. Then, continuing to set an example, Peter let God lead through his Word, *“‘May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,’ and, ‘May another take his place of leadership.’”* Scripture guided them going forward, that Judas’ place had to be emptied so Jesus would suffer for the sins of the world after being betrayed, but also that the work announcing the gospel of Jesus was so important and pressing, another needed to be sent out to do it.

What they didn’t do, and very God pleasingly so, was judge Judas, which would have been easy. Betrayal, remorse without repentance, and hanging himself usually seem to us like clear indicators of where Judas is. However, even the apostles did not make the pronouncement. They knew who the only one was with the knowledge, ability, and position to make such determinations: their ascended Lord Jesus. They knew full well Jesus would judge according to God’s good will because Jesus explained to them that all judgment the Father entrusted to the Son. These early believers acted like people who believed Jesus would return and render God’s righteousness. So even though they could have made an accurate guess about Judas, they did not. Can we say the same of ourselves? I am not so sure we do a good job on this, and not just in respect to Judas, but in general of just not making determinations and judgments about every person in every situation, but trusting God to make these decisions. By their fruit you’ll know them, so when fruit is born, focus on that, the actions, without making sweeping castigations against the person! Even if all the evidence seems to point one way, does that give us license to go forward in making judgment? It doesn’t. That’s not our job, not our place, and we’re bad at it when we try. Better than this is letting God be God and living like we believe and know that Jesus is in charge and renders God’s righteous verdicts.

Going forward, the believers acted as those with the peace that surpasses all understanding. The peace of Jesus gave them clarity to use well the intellect he also gave them to establish necessary criteria for a fitting candidate. Here’s what they determined, *“Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, ²² beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.”* Everything Jesus said and did during his public ministry is validated in his resurrection,

so the next apostle had to be eye witness to all of that because what Jesus said and did, his perfect life, his death and resurrection, is the salvation of the world. The next step? More prayer! And get a load of this one. It's not long and flowery like we might expect for such an occasion. It's brief, to the point, and faith filled, *"Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs."* The Lord chose Matthias through lots they cast.

What's this mean for you? I know this isn't a very nuanced take because everyone's situation is so specific, but it's what believers who carry burdens do to go forward in the grace of God believing in him rather than ruminate on the past. Identify the facts: Christ came into the world, he was perfectly lovingly obedient and he was for you, he died, he rose, he ascended, he reigns in glory for your good. These facts will never change, they are your peace, joy, and solace in all things, no matter how messy. Pray and pray continually, pray together. Pour your hearts out to God making big, bold requests of him, trust that the Father, who gave up his own Son to suffering and death so you, a sinner would be saved, will do for you better than you can ask or imagine. Spend time thinking about how can you be and help others to be witnesses to the resurrection! God, who knows your heart, has chosen you. You know this. Christian, go forward in the Holy Spirit to live it. Amen.