

Sermon Draft

Text: Acts 1:15–26

Sermon: Unity in Christ

The final Sunday of the Easter cycle completes our preparation for the descent of the Dove, Pentecost next Sunday. For one last Sunday, it is still the season of Easter, in which we rejoice that “Christ has triumphed! He is living!” The Lord and King of his people, the Church, reigns mightily and victoriously yet today. His people’s enemies have been defeated.

This is the season to remind God’s people that the Church’s one foundation is not a two-thousand-year-old set of principles, guidelines, inspirational messages, laws, or helpful hints for living a good life. The Church’s one foundation is our resurrected, ascended, living, reigning, and praying Lord Jesus. The Church is united to Christ in his life with the Father and the Spirit.

The close-knit band of believers will soon begin to expand into a much larger gathering intended to be just as closely bound to its Lord and to one another.

It is all about unity, unity in Christ. In our Psalm we hear “how good it is when brothers dwell in unity.” And our Epistle from Revelation we read of the perfect union of the Father, who is love, and the Son, who is the eternal recipient of that love, is reflected in the unity of love among God’s people. And Jesus prays in our Gospel for the protection of his Church, made one and sanctified in him.

In the Book of Genesis, the Lord called the twelve tribes, the sons of Jacob, the whole family of Israel, to be his covenant people. Twelve makes a complete family, all God’s people gathered into one communion, the full portion of his faithful people. That fullness was destroyed by the unfaithfulness of Dan, the first of the children of Israel to turn from the Lord God (Judges 18). The fellowship of God’s Israel is broken. The twelve is now eleven: broken, incomplete. The outward appearance of unity and completeness might be maintained, but what is broken cannot make itself whole again. Sin cannot be undone, except if God himself should do it. He has promised it.

How shall the work of sin be undone? How shall God's people be made one again? Our text from Acts tells us during the days that immediately followed Jesus' ascension, the Eleven and the other disciples, about 120 in number, awaited the coming of the 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 Psalter, 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, passages from Psalms 69 and 109 came to Peter's attention. Here was a Word from the Lord to direct their action. 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 (vs 15–20).

“So one of the men who have accompanied us during all 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 men must become with us a witness to his resurrection” (vs 21–22).

Why only one witness more? Why not both Matthias and Barsabbas? If this were simply a matter of adding witnesses, certainly thirteen would be better than twelve. Indeed, soon enough the number of those who proclaim the resurrection would swell, as Barnabas and Paul and Apollos joined in.

At the beginning of his earthly ministry, Jesus chose twelve 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 our 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.

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. God's people are made one by Christ's saving work.

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 incarnation. As with the Eleven, he would have followed the Lord, not by chance, his own decision, or his act of commitment, but by the call of his Lord.

Two disciples met these qualifications: Joseph, also known as Barsabbas and by the Latin name "Justus," and Matthias. We know nothing about them; they are strangers to us. What is important about them both is that Jesus called them.

They faithfully followed him. *“Then they cast lots”* (v 26). Given that the choice was so important, this course of action must seem particularly inappropriate to us—almost like throwing dice or drawing straws. Why is there no report of personal investigations, interviews, and a thorough discussion?

The simple answer is that the assembly is not making the selection. Neither the will of man nor good luck nor blind fate will determine. The choice is not in the hands of men, even men who have called upon God to assist them. As with the Eleven, so now the Lord who called them at first would choose one to complete the number of the Twelve. The whole matter is out of their hands. God’s choice is Matthias.

The number of the Twelve is restored. This is the fruit of the saving death and resurrection of our Lord. Israel is made whole in Christ. We are told no more about Matthias. All our attention is directed to the apostolic witness to Christ and the power of his resurrection.

This Good News is proclaimed for nations and peoples as the Twelve, the evangelists, apostles, and apostolic ministers in every age go into all the world, inviting all to the Baptism that incorporates us into Christ and makes us members of his body, 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. So, too, we are called to be witnesses to the resurrection.

Amen