

Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26
John 17: 6-19
Easter 7/B
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The Elephant in the Room

In our self-help age of grief counsellors, in an era when Elizabeth Kubler Ross's seven stages of grief are so well known they are a question in *Trivial Pursuit*, in a time when we know the expression "the elephant in the room" does not refer to wild-life but to the thing that most needs addressing but that everyone is skillfully ignoring – living in this time, the elephant in the Upper Room where the disciples are hanging out after Jesus' death and resurrection appearances is a huge beast. The elephant in the Upper Room is one that haunts us still some 2,000 years later, and, like the disciples, we mostly like to avoid that elephant.

In our story from the early church, our scripture reading from Acts, today we hear the disciples stressing because they are down a man, and the optics of 11 disciples instead of 12 aren't good. That there were 12 disciples was deeply symbolic, representing the 12 Tribes of Israel, a sense of completeness, of wholeness, a symbol of diversity and strength. How could the movement continue to reach *all* the people of Israel if there were only 11 of them? No, a replacement had to be found, and found quickly. Equilibrium had to be regained. They had to get back to normal, quick-quick.

But nobody was talking about the elephant in the living room: Judas. Judas, one of the 12. Judas, called by Jesus like the rest of them to be a disciple, to be one of the 12. Judas, who ended up collaborating with the collaborators, selling out Jesus into the hands of cruel empire that quelled dissent by the obliteration of crucifixion. Judas, who collected his 30 pieces of silver, but did not pass go. Judas, who in some gospels hung himself, and in other accounts committed hari-kari, but in

all accounts took his own life. Nobody is talking about Judas. He is the elephant in the Upper Room.

Judas is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. Like the character Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*, Judas' reason for betraying his friend seems like motiveless malignancy. Did he do it for the money? Was he disillusioned with Jesus? Had he hoped the deliverance Jesus spoke of was literal deliverance from the evil empire of Rome, an empire that ground down the 99%? Did Satan really enter him and make him do it? Was it all part of some divine, pre-ordained plan that had to be fulfilled – God-the-puppeteer yanking his strings? Wouldn't the Bible be a better read if the disciples had those kind of conversations? Wouldn't the disciples have been better disciples of Jesus if they had had those kind of conversations?

Judas betrayed Jesus. But at least he only did it once. What about Peter? He betrayed Jesus three times, and look at him now in this story from Acts – he's calling the shots. He's the one who says, in effect, "Friends, we once were 12 and now, thanks to that rat Judas, we're down to 11. We no longer look like a complete team. We need a replacement. Let's move on, and get on with it."

And nobody names the elephant in the room. They quickly determine the criteria for Judas' replacement: "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." Here's an interesting thing about this bench-mark. It leaves out several of Jesus' followers who were more steadfast than Peter who is laying down the qualifications. It leaves out those who Jesus included. It leaves out...anyone? Need a hint? "One of the MEN who have accompanied us..." Did it occur to Peter that Mary Magdalene might qualify – she, along with Joanna and Mary the mother of James were present at the crucifixion when the men had run off to hide. She was also the first witness to the resurrection. For whatever reason, having a woman named as a new disciple didn't cross Peter's mind. And no one else spoke up. We might name this moment as another

betrayal of Jesus, who insisted on full inclusion in his words and in his actions. The eleven men choose Matthais, who is never mentioned again in scripture. Just sayin'!

So this story from the early church stands as one of those very stark reminders that the church is made of people and people are human. We make mistakes. We mess up. We don't deal with stuff; we don't deal with elephants in our living rooms. In replacing Judas, the disciples made a safe choice. They chose Matthais. Maybe they thought there had been enough turmoil. Maybe they thought the time wasn't right to send a bold signal that Jesus' radical work of inclusion was going to continue in their selection of a new disciple. Or maybe they didn't think at all – they just went to the default position. Jesus called 12 disciples, representing the 12 tribes of Israel, representing the diversity and strength of Israel. So, when looking for a replacement for Judas, it seemed obvious: the replacement had to be a Jewish man. Matthais. It was so obvious. And Matthais, poor guy, is consigned to oblivion. He is never mentioned again.

But even this uninspired choice can't derail the Jesus movement, as we will see next Sunday when we continue the story of the early church and Pentecost, the most astonishing, inclusive, multi-cultural event ever blows everyone away. Ever and always, the Spirit opens us up to new people, to new ways of seeing, to new ways of welcome, to new relationships. The unity Jesus prayed for when he yearned for all to be one was not the unity of uniformity, the unity of sameness. It is a unity of Spirit, where we can lay aside our prejudices and assumptions, and begin the hard work of really listening, the hard work of understanding, and the hard work of hospitality. It means thinking outside the box, and looking to the over-looked for wisdom.

The arc of the Christian story bends toward justice, ever welcoming, ever including the over-looked and the looked over. The disciples are in for big surprises as we keep reading in the book of Acts, and most of these surprises are surprises of welcome and inclusion as the mischievous Spirit continues to draw people to love one another. The welcome and inclusion isn't only to more-of-the-

same, but to those previously not welcome, not included. And the challenge of living in the arc of this Christian story continues for us today. Who is it that we over-look and look-over? Who would we be astonished to find ourselves sitting beside in the pew? How could we move from a reaction of shock to a joyful welcome? How could we move from thinking this is “our place” to remembering it is “God’s place”, that the glue that holds us together is not of our own making but of God’s gracious welcome for all of us.

And so, we yearn to make heaven on earth – a place where Judas and Jesus are friends again, where Peter tells Mary Magdalene “I should have nominated you”, a place where Palestine and Israel have reconciled and live in peace, a place where hunger and want are met not just with generosity but with distributive justice, a place where we know we have a place at the table – all of us. A place where we embrace diversity and welcome the stranger with love. A place where we know we are loved, not for what we have done but for who we are, beloved children of God. Amen.