

## A man for others

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Seventh Sunday after Easter, May 24, 2009.

*And the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.*

Acts 1:26

When the apostles meet to choose someone to replace Judas, they don't vote on the candidates because this is neither a political vote nor a parliamentary procedure. They are leaving the decision up to God by casting lots. Matthias is thus chosen to join the other eleven disciples. We don't know if he is necessarily the one God wanted, but that is how he was chosen.

When a parish is in search for a new priest, the process is long and exhausting. It is not by a vote or even consensus, but about discerning what God wants for the congregation. The parish develops a profile about their life by examining their strengths and listing their goals and objectives. They review candidates' resumes and hold interviews in search of the right priest that God wants for them. Among the essential characteristics they look for in a priest is one who has a genuine faith in Christ and his mission, who is an effective preacher and teacher, an able administrator and a pastor who likes people and is present and available. The goal is to match the right priest with the right parish. Given the number of unhappy parishes in conflict because of mismatches, they might just as well cast lots. It's simpler and doesn't take as long.

I often find that what people need is to have someone to listen. Very outgoing people often have low self-esteem and to keep from being ignored they will keep the focus of conversation on them. Those who are self-absorbed rarely ask about anyone else for fear of getting off their favorite subject. More secure people are comfortable directing attention to others.

I find that life stories of real people are far more interesting than anything read in fiction. One such interesting personality was Jennie Jerome Churchill, the American mother of England's great Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. She was truly a remarkable person considering the limited opportunities for women in her time. Not waiting for fortune to smile on her, she made her own opportunities. During the latter part of the 19th century, when wealthy American women were marrying British aristocracy, Jennie was married to Lord Randolph Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough. Twice widowed, she had the appearance and energy of a much younger woman and indeed married men considerably younger than she. During the Boer War, she organized and managed a hospital ship to South Africa while both her sons were serving there. A capable and inventive business woman, Jennie Churchill edited and published a widely read literary magazine. She knew both royalty and the great literary and artistic figures of her time which helped to shape the career of her son, Winston, as a writer and politician. She seemed to live on the crest of a wave and was always a part of the action and passion of her world. Her biographer Ralph Martin wrote that "She had courage to match her beauty, an excitement to match her intelligence and energy to match her imagination." Most importantly, she had the ability to treat her friends as she did her pictures, by putting them in their best light.

A very different, but no less interesting personality was Thomas Merton, a Roman Catholic Trappist monk. His voluminous works have fascinated many, both young and old. Merton lived a full life, first as a rather wanton youth and later as a monastic and a very prolific writer. As a devoted and disciplined follower of Christ, he was strengthened in his devotion by his ability to question all aspects of his faith. Though living the life of a monastic, he became a prophetic voice for the controversial issues of his time, including civil rights and the threat of

nuclear war. More than once he had to choose between his vocation and what the world tempted him to do. What he denied for himself, he gained for others by testing Christ's love against the issues of his time.

I've always liked the very simple but profound definition of Jesus as a man for others. Jesus knows who he is and is secure enough to focus on others. His miracles and healing, his preaching and teaching are not to draw attention to himself, but to focus on the kingdom of God. On the night before he died, Jesus prayed for his disciples who had been with him and would carry on his mission after his departure. He prays that they might be strengthened and protected and that their joy will be complete. As he was sent into the world, he will send them out to do the work of proclaiming the gospel.

Following his death and resurrection appearances, Christ leaves the disciples and enters into God's glory. They are left with the assurance that to know his capacity to love the unlovable is to have a glimpse of God's glory. The closer we are to Christ the closer we are to God's grace, God's forgiveness and God's compassion. To be in his presence is to be encouraged to be our very best in all things.

We won't be disappointed if we don't expect much from people, but by expecting more of them, we may be surprised to see them exceed our expectations. There will always be those who will disappoint us as there are those who are disappointed in us, but it is better to encourage the best in others. With encouragement, those who appear to be rather ordinary have a way of doing everyday tasks in extraordinary ways. When we offer most ordinary task as an offering to God, it is always better than what we do on our own.

In the early church, all those who followed Jesus were referred to as the saints. Those heroes of God whom we call saints today began by falling flat on their face and got up again and went on to be stronger and better people. They chose perseverance over whining and complaining. They chose to create the life they wanted rather than to accept the one that just showed up.

A clergy friend of mine who died recently was thought to be an eccentric. He collected many things, including old cars and furniture and many other household items to give them away to anyone who needed them. He rarely had any money because he was always generous to a fault in helping others, often depriving himself of basic necessities. In reflection, we realize that he wasn't so eccentric; he just took the gospel more seriously than most. To live simply, do without, and to give away what you have is, after all, only following the example of Jesus, the man for others.