



**“Drafted”**

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring  
Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California***

***Sunday, May 24, 2009  
Acts 1:15–17, 21–26 (NRSV)***

## **ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE**

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

The events described in today’s reading are from the history book of the first Apostles and they occurred about the same time in the religious calendar and organizational life cycle as we are in now. Today’s story took place a day or two after Pentecost (which is next Sunday on our calendar), as opposed to a few days before.

Luke, the historian and author of Acts, was a kind of prototypical Church Clerk, and among many things, his account in the later part of Acts 1 is the minutes of the first Service Enlistment Committee meeting in the Christian Church.

The challenge before the committee was the need to discern and call—some would say “draft”—new leadership for the apostolic ministry that they were to be about.

Serving on the committee was a formidable job in and of itself, and the challenge was compounded by the Apostles’ grief and confusion over Jesus martyrdom, and their lack of focus in the face of an enormous mission. To make matters worse, the Apostles needed to fill a key vacancy among their ranks, which would not be easy. They needed to replace Judas. Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

Can you imagine? Who would have wanted to follow that guy?

While you and I might have been content to settle for a lineup of eleven Apostles, eleven was not a suitable number. The first Apostles understood themselves to be part of a Jewish reform movement, as Jesus was. Israel had twelve tribes. The Apostles mission was first to the Jews, and so they needed twelve (not eleven) Apostles.

Much like a modern sports team, no serious coach would go on the field without a complete lineup. If you want to play baseball, you need nine players. If you want to carry on Christ’s mission, you need twelve Apostles. It was as simple as that.

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<sup>1</sup> See Matt. 27:9-10; Acts 1:19. According to Matthew, Judas took his own life as a sign of remorse. Luke, by contrast, says that his gut burst open and his bowels gush out in a field. Both say that he was buried in a cemetery for strangers, while Mark and John’s gospels are mute about Judas’ end. See Luke 22:28-30.

***We of-fer Christ to all the world a-round us, born in-to faith,  
Re-leased from pride and shame; Em-braced by love, we show how  
Love has found us; at peace with God, we speak our Sav-ior's name.***

**SCRIPTURE READING** Acts 1:15–17, 21–26 Stephanie S. Spencer

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus—for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry. 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 must become a witness with us to his resurrection." So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

**SERMON**

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Numbers are never just numbers in the Bible. They always play a symbolic role. In addition to the number twelve (12) being significant in terms of the number of Apostles, the number one hundred twenty (120) figured prominently in the mission of Israel.

Luke reported in Acts 1:15 that "the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons." This number was significant because, according to Jewish law, one hundred twenty men were required to form a synagogue with its own council.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the decisions of this group gathered in Jerusalem were legitimate. They met the minimum requirements for a synagogue, and the number twelve was the number needed for the synagogue council.

According to Luke, the author of Acts, the succession plan for Judas unfolded as follows: the eleven were together in Jerusalem, with the one hundred twenty, including Peter, the one who denied Jesus three times.

Despite his tainted credentials, the other Apostles gave him a hearing and affirmed his recommendation about a criterion for choosing nominees for the apostolic nominee. Peter's proposal was that all nominees be people who had been continuous followers of Jesus since his baptism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> N.b., Peter and Paul differed over this criteria. Eventually, Peter's criteria lost out.

Given that criteria, two names were surfaced: Joseph called Barsabbas and Matthias. According to the minutes of the meeting, the Service Enlistment Committee prayed for the spirit's guidance, and then they drew lots. (Imagine that, biblical evidence of a lottery in the early church.)

Now that I've got your attention, think about this scenario with me for a moment. The roster of the Apostles was rounded out by lottery.

The selection of Matthias wasn't anything like the call of Moses, Isaiah, or Jesus. There were no great sound effects or animation—no burning bush, no flaming coals, no heavenly dove—just lots. They drew lots.

I point out the utter pedestrian nature of Matthias' call to make a point. The point is this—sometimes—perhaps most of the time—we don't get Cecil B. De Mill's theatrics with our calls. We simply get our lot, which sometimes seems like the "short straw."

Yet no matter how short that straw may seem—God's still has a mission in mind for us—even when if we don't fully grasp or welcome that mission.

I wonder, have you ever had an experience like Matthias? Have you ever felt like you were drafted into a lineup to fill a role that you had not necessarily had in mind for yourself? Have you ever felt like you drew the "short straw"? But in the end you accepted it, and did what needed to be done?

Think about your own calling—drafting—for a moment. What has that experience or those experiences been like for you? How have you responded? While you're pondering these questions, I'll share a few examples that come to mind from my observations of others.

This weekend our nation observes Memorial Day. Though it has become for most of us the kick-off to summer, and an occasion to have a cookout or head to the beach, tomorrow was first set aside in 1868 to honor fallen military service men and women who died in the line of duty. Following World War I, Memorial Day was expanded to remember service persons who died in the line of duty in every military action associated with our nation.

Though there have always been men and women who have enlisted in our armed services on their own accord, the most significant losses of life in our nation's military history have always been associated with times when a draft was enforced.

The military draft has always been a source of controversy in our peace-loving nation. We have not all believed that war is the way to solve our world's conflicts. We have not all believed in the mission of every war in which our nation has engaged. And we accept that people of faith may have a variety of faithful ways of responding to the call to enlist in the military, especially when drafted.

Some have enlisted before their number came up. Others responded when it did. Still others chose conscious objection and community service, while others chose to leave the country. Within our own Eden UCC history, men and women in this congregation chose each of these options.

I understand that the discernment process related to military service is a complicated matter. I make no judgments about whether any of these options was a higher calling, and today, especially today on the cusp of Memorial Day, I think it's important to say thank you to each and every one of the members of our community who faced the challenge of the draft head on, and did their level best to respond in ways that seemed faithful to God's claim on their lives.

So we all have some sense of what the military draft is about. Another way that perhaps some of us may feel drafted into service, not completely of our own choosing, is through neighborhood, school, or community service. Recently, I've been thinking about and personally celebrating what vital roles Eden Church members play in our community.

I see so many of you doing what many are not willing or able to do any more. I see you volunteering at our schools and with youth arts and sports programs, with service clubs, such as the Rotary, PEO, the Historical Society, the fraternal and sororal organizations, and social groups, like Hill and Valley and the Sunset Club.

While some take for granted the importance of these organizations, I do not, and I hope you won't. These are the organizations that knit us together as a civilized society. They are what make our democracy stronger. Thank you. Thank you for your service.

Some of us have been drafted into the line of duty for military or peace-loving purposes. Some have been drafted into community service. Others, meanwhile, and often simultaneously, have been drafted into the care of loved ones. The late poet, May Sarton, describes beautifully in her poem, "AIDS," the challenges and importance of accepting this sort of calling.

## AIDS<sup>5</sup>

We are stretched to meet a new dimension  
Of love, a more demanding range  
Where despair and hope must intertwine.  
How grow to meet it? Intention  
Here can neither move nor change  
The raw truth. Death is on the line.  
It comes to separate and estrange  
Lover from lover in some reckless design.  
Where do we go from here?

Fear. Fear. Fear. Fear.

Our world has never been more stark  
Or more in peril.  
It is very lonely now in the dark.  
Lonely and sterile.

And yet in the simple turn of a head  
Mercy lives. I heard it when someone said  
"I must go now to a dying friend.  
Every night at nine I tuck him into bed,  
And give him a shot of morphine,"  
And added, "I go where I have never been."  
I saw he meant into a new discipline  
He had not imagined before, and a new grace.

Everyday now we meet it face to face.  
Every day now devotion is the test.  
Through the long hours, the hard, caring nights  
We are forging a new union. We are blest.

As closed hands open to each other  
Closed lives open to strange tenderness.  
We are learning the hard way how to mother.

Who says it is easy? But we have the power.  
I watch the faces deepen all around me.  
It is the time of change, the saving hour.  
The word is not fear, the word we live,  
But an old word suddenly made new,  
As we learn it again, as we bring it alive:

Love. Love. Love. Love.

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<sup>5</sup> May Sarton, "AIDS," in *the Silence Now: New and Uncollected Earlier Poems*, (New York: WW Norton Co., 1988), 36-37.

So those who have learned again and brought alive love in the lives of persons who are dying, in the life of our wider community through civic service, and who have served in the life of duty for peace and freedom, I say thank you.

You have been, like Matthias, persons who have insured that the mission and ministry of Christ continues even in our time. You have keep the wheels of civilized society moving. You have lived out the true meaning of love.

For most of you, I suspect that the calling you received to these ministries was less than flashy, that your experience of service was less than glamorous, and that you have received little in the way of a worldly reward for what you have done. But believe me when I say this: thanks to you, we have gained a glimpse of heaven on earth, and this glimpse is its own sweet reward. Amen.