



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Ordinary People

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

May 24, 2009

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year B)

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

A friend of mine used to be the choir director for a small congregation in Arkansas. About fifteen years ago, she told me that her church had talked about doing a Christmas play. And this was not going to be a play done by the children only. No, this would be an intergenerational production with parts for all ages.

And so their work began. They selected a pageant and started securing church members to fill the parts called required. Remember, this was a small congregation, which meant that before very long, everyone in the church had a role. The entire congregation would be involved in the production.

Then someone asked: “If we’re all in the play, who’s going to watch it? They’ll be no one in the audience.”

It was a shocking question really, and they did what any church might have done in similar circumstances. They scrapped the production and moved on to more practical concerns.

When my friend first told me that story, we both laughed at the absurdity of such a planned production. It seemed such a perfect example of a church’s grand dreams being crushed by a common curse—the sheer impracticability of it all.

But that story won’t go away. It keeps circling in my mind, haunting me with an image of a church in which everyone has a part to play. Somehow, the story keeps echoing in the recesses of my mind a simple yet profound truth: God has swept us up—you and me and all God’s children—God has swept us up into a story in which we are all given a part to play, and, as Shakespeare reminds us, “all the world’s a stage.” We don’t cancel the play when everyone finds a role; no, when all God’s people find their part, that’s when the houselights fade and the curtain goes up and the unfolding drama of life in God’s kingdom comes into view.

The passage we read from the Book of Acts gives us a glimpse into early church life. And what we see is a group of disciples adjusting to transition and a change in leadership. The disciples are—in a sense—regrouping after the ascension of their Lord and they are organizing themselves for their mission in the world.

It wasn’t a mission they had to create—it had been given to them by Jesus. As Luke tells us just prior to this, Jesus had told them that they would be his witnesses, and he told them how they were to go to the very ends of the earth to preach the gospel of the kingdom of God.

But in order to do that mission well, the apostles had to handle some housekeeping business. They had to find a replacement for Judas. And, while at first read it sounds like an awfully suspect way of choosing a replacement disciple—who would think to cast lots or draw straws or roll the dice to select leaders in the church—a closer read suggests what

made it possible. They prayed. They reminded God that God surely knew everyone's hearts and that by the drawing of lots, God would show them which of the two nominees would take Judas's place.

The two men nominated were named Matthias and Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus. All that we know about them is that they both had similar and very specific qualifications. Both had been with Jesus from the day of his baptism until he was taken up into heaven. Both were qualified to be what was needed now—someone who could serve as a witness to the resurrection.

Then, with a roll of the dice, one disciple is chosen and the other is not. We are told that the lot fell on Matthias, and from that point on we never hear his name again.

It seems to me that what Luke is doing by focusing on this odd housekeeping detail here—and then not mentioning Matthias again—is really shining the spotlight not on any one of them, but rather upon the particular call that God has given them to service. It's what the Swiss theologian Karl Barth used to talk about when he talked about the particularity of the gospel. At times the church focuses upon an individual or a group among us so that we can sense God's particular call in their lives, but in doing so, we gain a sense of God's call to each of us.

And if Luke wants us to get anything, he wants us to see that it's a big story into which God is sweeping us. It's far larger than any of our individual stories, and it's bigger than any congregation or denomination's story. In fact, it's a story so big that even all of the Christian church can't contain it. In fact, Luke reminds us, it's a story that will go to the very ends of the earth.

The story of God's love for us and all people, indeed for all creation, is being played out in every home, in every office, at the local school and grocery store. The story's playing at the WalMart and at the old family run hardware store.

You and I and all God's children have a part in the ongoing story of God's love, and if we do not grow weary in doing our part, in bearing witness to the God who has power to bring life, then the gospel will spread from one to the other that God would be glorified and the world would be saved.

Now here's where the church has not done an adequate job of explaining the roles we're invited to play. Too often we in the church—and to be honest, it's often the pastor's fault—we are told that the part we are called to play is as a member of a committee or a ministry team or the Session or any sort of volunteer needed to run the institutional church. And so, sermons become advertisements for church programs and God's call on your life becomes nothing more than "if you serve the church well you serve God well."

Now admittedly, churches need volunteers. I stand in constant amazement at the number of people who have volunteered so much of their time and talent and energy to the work of this congregation. It's amazing what we've been able to do for so long. And, today, I'm especially grateful for these who are willing to volunteer as teachers and leaders among us, and I hope that you will join me in honoring them next Sunday morning for the ministry they offer through this congregation.

But, and this is what you don't get to hear often enough, it's possible to authentically live your life in response to God's call upon you and never serve a day on a church

committee. The part God's calling you to play may take place on the stage where you work, when in the midst of ethical wrangling you speak a word of justice.

Or, you may find yourself treading the boards of the stage at school, when one of your classmates confides in you that she's battling addiction and you love her enough to help her seek the help she needs.

Or perhaps your part is played out on the street where you live when you show hospitality to the new family who just moved—the family whose skin is a different shade and whose religion is not yours. But in a simple, gracious act of hospitality not cloaked in anything remotely religious but in a casserole dish, you play a part in God's play of welcome and grace.

Does the church need volunteers to accomplish its work? Of course. But the church also needs folks who recognize the part they have to play on stages far removed from the sanctuary and classrooms here. We have each been given a part to play. Some will star here. Others on a different stage. But we are part of the same story of God's love that Luke invites us to bear witness of to the very ends of the earth.

A nine-year-old girl named Mary who was interviewed by psychiatrist Robert Coles uses different words perhaps, but she shares the same sentiment. Mary tells Coles about a particular worship service during which she had a clear sense of her vocation: "When you're put here it's for a reason. The Lord wants you to do something. If you don't know what, then you've got to find out what...I was singing in church last Sunday, and I thought that God must be enjoying us, because we were hitting all the notes just right!...I was thinking that maybe God put me here so I could sing like I did."

Allow me to mix metaphors for a moment. Mary has now turned God's story into God's song. I like that.

It reminds me of a story that Paul Duke, a Baptist pastor and writer tells. It's the story of what happened at a dinner party he once attended. Among the invited guests was a gifted musician from the area, whose name was Cynthia Clausen. At some point during the evening, a nine-year-old boy sat at the piano and plunked out the notes to *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. Having taught himself the melody, the boy plunked the notes, albeit simply and haltingly.

When he finished, all the adults gushed about how wonderful his song had been. All but Cynthia Clausen. She simply said: "Play it again."

The boy did as he was asked, and again began to plunk the halting notes to *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. As he did, Clausen reached around him with both arms and began to add all sorts of accompaniment to his notes, and Paul Duke says the boy's face revealed a beaming smile—to think that he was part of music that wonderful.

Whatever meager, halting notes you plunk out, you are not playing alone. Your sisters and brothers in the pews add their notes as well. And, if that weren't music enough, the God who writes the song we're invited to play, reaches loving arms around us and adds notes and passion we never dreamed of, and somehow, by the grace of God, our halting music becomes a symphony of God's love echoing through every house and village and square.

We become God's instruments, and we are tuned to a new song. That's the way Clement of Alexandria described it. We are instruments of God, tuned to a new song. "Behold the power of this new song! It has changed stones into people, to life again, just by hearing this song." God's story. God's song. Just playing our part. Just plunking our notes. But in them and through them and around them, God's work is being done. By the grace of God, the story...the song...goes on. And when they are heard, the world rejoices, and God? Well God smiles as broadly as a child plunking notes on a keyboard, amazed that we've joined in the music.