

On the fortieth day after his resurrection, Jesus told the disciples to stay in Jerusalem and to wait for the promise of the Father, when they would be baptized by the Holy Spirit. He told them that after they had received the power of the Holy Spirit, they were to be his witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. And then, he was lifted up from the ground, and a cloud “took him out of their sight.”

The eleven walked back to the city from the Mount of Olives, and spent their time in prayer along with Jesus’ mother Mary, his brothers and the women who travelled with them. Sometime during the ten days between Jesus’ ascension and Pentecost, Peter announced that they needed to find a replacement for Judas. It was the first faith crisis for the church. They needed to choose someone to lead. They were all chosen by Jesus. How could they be sure they had found the right person? Perhaps a nominations committee was formed? Biographies of the candidates might have been shared with the community. However it happened, eventually there were two names to choose from, Joseph and Matthias. They prayed to ask God who should be the next disciple and then they cast lots to see which man was the right one.

Casting lots, is an interesting process for decision making. The technical name is cleromancy and it’s the equivalent of rolling dice or using a Magic 8-Ball to reveal the will of God.

Did you ever have one of these? A Magic 8-Ball? Can you imagine if we ran the church this way?

- Should we start a new building program?
- Is Pastor Heidi the right person to be our pastor?
- Should we add to the budget for remodeling the parsonage?

*Pastor Heidi had a Magic 8-Ball that she consulted for each of the three questions. Results were mixed. ;-)*

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Those decisions seem awfully important to trust to a Magic 8Ball or a bag of wooden sticks. But that’s what they did. They believed that casting lots following earnest prayers was a good way to discern the will of God. And it follows a pattern that shows up throughout the Bible.

While knowing what the church should do is important, if you’re like me, what you’d really like to know is what God wants you to do. What is God’s will for me? What direction should I take? Is this the right person? The right job? The right community?

In 1988 I had been called to serve as the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Ava, Missouri. It was the culmination of years of study. I had been working to get to that point from the time I was twelve or thirteen.

On the day of my Ordination, everyone had to be at the church three hours before the service. After the rehearsal and before the service began, I was sitting in a pew with my aunt Pixy, who is also my godmother. I remember telling her that I hoped I was doing the right thing. Pixy said she had felt the same way about her marriage to her second husband. They had gotten married about three months earlier. It was days before the wedding and she was nervous but she figured that, if it didn’t work out, she could always get out of it later on. She gave up worrying and just said “yes!” Her logic was that if I wasn’t supposed to be a pastor or if I wasn’t supposed to be the pastor at that church – I could always get out of it later.

It was a kind of simplistic solution to my problem, but at the time, it made as much sense as anything else. The good news is that I'm still a pastor and Pixy and Jim will celebrate their thirtieth anniversary in a few days.

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I've said this before, but I spent the better part of the last two years trying to discern what God wanted me to do next. It's frustrating to not be sure; to ask and ask. To choose one path only to have it end prematurely.

I had friends and family who seemed so certain of where God was calling me, but I couldn't always see it. I wanted to absolutely know the right answer, but I wasn't always confident that I knew what it was.

Which is really annoying. However, as we try to discern God's will for our lives there are some things that we can count on as certain.

The first is that Jesus makes it so clear what the framework for our lives should be. No matter where we go or what we do, the Bible makes it really clear that we are called to love God and love our neighbor. All of the decisions we make about our lives ought to be framed within those two great commandments. One of the questions we should be asking ourselves is *If I make this choice, does it allow me to love God with all I am and does it give me the space and time I need to demonstrate that love by caring for other people?*

Several years ago, my friend Dave had to decide whether he was going to take a new job at his company. It would have meant more responsibility, a slightly larger salary and it was an acknowledgement that he was doing a good job, but he didn't take it. For Dave, working at his job, 48 weeks a year, made the other four weeks possible. It's not that he hated his job, it's that he loved his family and he loved going to Leadership Lab.

For more than forty years the synods in Illinois have been holding an annual event known as Leadership Lab. Having been there, I can tell you that it is a wonderful opportunity for teenagers to learn about themselves and their faith. Dave had been a musician at Lab and he served as a group leader for the folks who were "fourth years" and going off to college in the fall. If Dave had taken the new job, he wouldn't have been able to go to Lab anymore. His family would have needed to relocate and he'd no longer be eligible to serve as a staff member.

He told me once that he worked all year long for that one week at Lab. It meant that much to him. Over the last thirty years, Dave has spent an exhausting, exhilarating week sharing his faith with 450 youth from all over Illinois. His three kids and his wife have come along, first as participants and then as staff. It is one of the centerpieces of their lives as a family. They don't get paid for working at Lab. It means late hours and early mornings. There is always something that goes a little wrong. But there are also all kinds of things that go right.

And Dave is there, sharing his faith and his love for God and neighbor.

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Sometimes, of course, we make bad decisions. We choose unwisely. We don't risk what we have to try something new. We see an opportunity to serve our neighbor and we let it go by. It's important to remember at those times that we live under a canopy of forgiveness. God doesn't always reveal what we're supposed to do.

I knew a guy in seminary who said that while he was on a silent retreat, Jesus had woken him up in the middle of the night to tell him to become a priest.

***On a silent retreat*** – he heard the voice of Christ, ***telling him what to do***. That kind of thing never happens to me. God’s will is rarely revealed to me with the bells and whistles that others describe. Thankfully, I know I am not alone in that. Moses may have seen a burning bush and Elisha may have seen the chariot of fire but as Paul told the Corinthians, some of us “walk by faith and not by sight.”

We may pray and pray to God but never hear a **voice** responding to our requests for help. I am pretty sure that there are more of us who experience **that** reality than are woken from a sound sleep to find a bright light at the foot of our bed and the voice of Jesus directing us to go to seminary.

Martin Luther said at those times we just need to act boldly.

We need to be brave.

It’s no accident that our gospel acclamation during this season of Easter has been “Be Not Afraid, Sing out for joy!” Together we made a very important decision about my being your pastor and big decisions call for bravery.

We choose our path knowing that even if we’ve made a mistake, God will understand. God will forgive us. Grace is abundant.

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Here’s another thing to keep in mind when you are trying to figure out what God wants for you- there is nothing, not even a bad life choice that can separate you from the love of God. In Romans 8, Paul says, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God...” And so whether we know it or not, God is at work in the midst of our decisions. In a way, Paul is saying that God is always working to make the best out of our decisions. As people claimed by Jesus Christ and committed to Jesus Christ, we choose, we decide, and we act. And we do so bravely, knowing that nothing can keep God from loving us.

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On Pentecost, the disciples experienced a clear bright, shining noisy sign that God was calling them to get out there and share the good news of Jesus Christ. They spoke in languages they didn’t know. People from all over the world came to hear them speak and they understood in their own language exactly what God was all about.

There was no missing the message that day.

But ten days earlier, the disciples had to trust that the man they were choosing was the right one, but the selection of Matthias wasn’t totally random. He was chosen from among those who had known Jesus. Who had heard him preach and teach. And although it’s not in the Bible, ancient records say that he was probably among the 70 who were called by Jesus to go out two by two and proclaim the gospel. Matthias had experience and he was a known entity. He fit the job description. The eleven had done their due diligence before they tossed the dice.

I’m not suggesting that we leave our life decisions up to prayer followed by a session with the Magic-8 ball, but I do know that sometimes life is a crapshoot. Even for those who are trying to follow the will of God.

Robert Deffinbaugh wrote, “To be perfectly honest, I believe many of the decisions we make and actions we take are of this same kind [as the disciples choosing Matthias.] They are based on our best understanding of the Scriptures and the situation, based on the best decision-making process we know, and done as though this were the will of God for us. Often times it will not be until much later that we will either see the hand of God at work in the matter, or we will not see it.”

Whether it's casting lots or asking the Magic 8-ball – cleromancy – using some random method to entrust your decision to God – is not the most important part of the process that the disciples used.

They prayed and they prayed **together**. They talked about the decision together. They relied on God and they relied on each other.

It can be easy to forget or rush into something without praying. And do we pray together? Is it a part of your decision making process?

Whichever path you choose- whoever you pick as a partner or leader – remember that Jesus prayed that his followers would be protected after his ascension. He blessed us with truth and his Spirit and so we are sanctified. We are made holy.

We are not in this on our own.

We have been sanctified so that we may go out into the world sharing the love of God. Proclaiming the truth and the Word.

We all have our own ways of doing it. And so even if you leave it up to a Magic 8-Ball, nothing can separate us from the love of God.