

Poor old Matthias. There are a few churches named after him that know who he is, but most people don't. His feast day is today, February 24th, on a weekday when only a few people are in church. Some years, his feast day lands on a Sunday so that it gets bumped by Epiphany or Lent. Some years, his feast day falls on Ash Wednesday, in which case, of course, the first day of Lent takes precedence. Any way you slice it, Matthias, an obscure, relatively unknown saint who only rates a verse or two in the Book of Acts to begin with, tends to get overlooked, but we're going to give him a little love and respect this evening.

Here's really about all we know about Matthias. There were nine days between the day when Jesus ascended to heaven and the day of Pentecost. During those nine days, the apostles and some of the disciples stayed together praying. The apostles had been waiting together because the Risen Christ had appeared to them earlier in this same chapter of Act to tell them to stay in Jerusalem waiting for the promise of the Father. So they prayed and they waited, waited and prayed, and like most of us when we are waiting and not knowing what we should do they got into a little mischief. Peter came up with an idea: "We need to replace Judas."

At some point, Peter reminded them that when Judas committed suicide, he left an opening in the fellowship of the 12. Surely, he thought, we can't function with only eleven apostles because there were twelve tribes in Israel, so there had to be 12 apostles to symbolize Israel in its wholeness. What is more, because the apostles, which means "those who are sent," were the personal representatives of Jesus, then they had to find a replacement who was an eye-witness of Jesus' ministry: one "who went in and out among us."

The reading from Acts tells us that there were 120 people in the room where they were staying. In addition to the remaining 11, Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as James and Jude, his brothers, were there. Probably Mary Magdalene and Salome, and several other women were present, and it stands to reason that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were also there. So, out of all those people, who would they choose?

Can I first just point out that that had to be one strange job interview? It was the first time anyone but Jesus had chosen someone to bring on board and they thought they'd better find someone with previous experience, which led them to a short list of two people: one man, Joseph also called Barsabbas, and Matthias.

In his plea to choose a replacement, Peter reminded the people of what happened to Judas. I can only guess that he wanted to impress upon his fellow apostles and the replacement candidates that what they were engaged in was genuinely serious business. Jesus had chosen Judas because Judas was a good man that Jesus trusted. Along the way, something—greed, jealousy, despair—*something* turned Judas away from Jesus, leading him to become overwhelmed by guilt and wind up dead in the field he had bought with his payment for the betrayal.

And so, properly sober after Peter's passionate plea and some prayer, the apostles cast lots and the lot fell to Matthias, who was then enrolled with the 11. After that, we hear nothing further about Matthias in scripture. Tradition says that he was an exemplary apostle. One account claims that Matthias preached the Gospel to "barbarians and meat-eaters" in the interior of Ethiopia until he died and was buried at Sebastopolis. Another account says he went to Colchis, an ancient region in the western part of modern Georgia, where he was crucified. The Greek Orthodox say that St. Matthias planted the faith around Cappadocia and on the coasts of the Caspian Sea. Still another account tells us that he was stoned and beheaded in Jerusalem and that his remains were eventually taken to Germany by Charlemagne's mother Helena. Most say that he was martyred and so we use red vestments this evening to honor him.

Obscurity is Matthias' legacy, but this silent saint touched our history just long enough to reveal God's grace. Consequently, as a patron saint, Matthias is a perfectly suitable example for people whose faithful companionship with Jesus qualifies them to be an appropriate witness to the Risen Christ even when their service goes unheralded and unsung. Perhaps his very anonymity is what has made him the patron saint for many people recovering from alcohol addiction.

But the life of Matthias serves the larger church in another way. Peter insisted on maintaining orderly structure. And so Matthias was elected and order was

restored, only to collapse in the delightful disorder of Pentecost, which was, of course, the gift of the Spirit that Jesus had told them to wait for in Jerusalem—the promise of the Father that Peter got just a little out in front of.

Episcopal priest Fr. Sam Portaro wrote this about St. Matthias: “We need the ghostly presence of Matthias when we are tempted to place tradition or structures ahead of relationship; when we confuse self-examination with self-exultation in a culture where everything, including our religion, conspires against our communion with one another.¹”

Matthias arises from the ether and returns to it. He is mentioned nowhere else in all of the New Testament. In time, Paul would become the more obvious candidate to be named the 12th apostle, but then God’s engagement in human history is the story of how God consistently works with people that don’t make sense to us. David was so puny that his father, Jesse, didn’t even think of him as he paraded his other sons to be considered to be king of Israel. Mary was an unknown peasant girl when the angel Gabriel came to her with some startling news. Peter was a clueless fisherman and Matthew a despised tax-collector. Bartimaeus was blind and Zacchaeus was so short he had to climb a tree to see Jesus. And Matthias—chosen mostly to resolve Peter’s concerns for respectability—Matthias replaced Judas who had failed so shamefully. And yet these are all remembered, some for great things, some for small, because God worked with whatever they gave.

Most of us are not headed for great earthly glory. You and I are unlikely to be remembered with parades or full-page obituaries in *The New York Times*. And none of us can be an apostle, chosen by Jesus or by the other apostles tossing dice. But listen to Jesus speaking to each of us when he says, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.” Every one of us who chooses to follow the Risen Christ becomes his disciple, transformed and sent into a broken world. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” That’s what Matthias did. We, too, can abide in God’s love and bear fruit. Even when we serve in obscurity.

¹ Portaro, Sam Anthony. *Brightest and Best: A Companion to the Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1998.