

Reflection on Acts 1:15–17, 21–26
Rev. Christine Gilbert for St. Andrew's Uniting Church

After Judas' betrayal and death, there was a vacancy on the council of the apostles. Twelve is not a magic number but, like three, seven and forty, it is a symbolic, fulsome one in scripture. In it, there is thought to be completion and roundedness. So following Jesus' ascension, the community gathered to select a twelfth apostle using a technique that might sound a bit unusual to our ears.

The initial selection was narrowed down to two—two people who knew Jesus personally and accompanied Jesus from his baptism through to his ascension. This personal relationship represents a break from the longstanding custom in which leadership was a matter of family ties and status. Like royalty, priesthood was passed from father to son but, as history proved, such entitlements all too often bring negative results. Therefore, it was imperative for leaders of the emerging church to have witnessed Jesus' life, death and resurrection firsthand, to know it as *the defining story* for the beloved community. For his story is our story, his life, our life.

This initial sifting was measurable and discernible from a human perspective. But from there, you might say, things were handed over to an invisible, intangible realm.

"Lord, you know everyone's heart," the community prayed, "*Show us* which one of these two *you* have chosen." Then they cast lots. Though it was a familiar form of decision making that appears throughout scripture, it may seem unusual or even unorthodox to us now. In fact, a practice akin to rolling dice smacks of something that belongs in a casino, not a church!

So, what are we to make of this? What principles might we draw out from this practice? How might what we see here inform something of our own life of faith?

The technological and scientific advancements of previous generations and today bring many gifts to us. The speed of the COVID vaccine development with scientists working around the world is just one example, as is the contact tracing system in Australia that allows us to live with relative freedom and normality during a pandemic.

But this same culture has shaped us into people who can be overly confident in the material and concrete. We have been conditioned to put our trust (and faith) in things we can observe, handle and manipulate as well as having an overreliance on *our own human efforts and innovation*. The unseen forces at play are missed, ignored or dismissed outright. We objectify and explain them away, thus dissolving their holy otherness and the potential for grace within them. And, by the way, the church is not immune to the effects of what is usually called secularism!

So, we might ask: What is it, then, that moves the heart when we see smoke from funeral piers tens of thousands of miles away in India? What stirs the soul when we listen to music, look at a painting or encounter the elements of nature? What is the source of shock and anger when we hear of youth in Port Lincoln falling to their death from a rubbish bin or tit-for-tat explosions between Palestinians and Israelis that kill children and destroy land and property?

I'd like to say such movements of heart are evidence that an undercurrent of life and being exists *beyond the material*; a soulful realm that connects us which we do well to learn to recognise, nurture and trust. It is this realm to which the community appealed when they prayed and cast lots in their search for a twelfth apostle.

A poem by Wendell Berry might provide a helpful, down-to-earth illustration for us. In his life-long work of writing Sabbath poems, Berry occasionally ventures out into the fields and woods that surround his Kentucky farmhouse on Sunday morning to listen for the Word of God in creation. In the first three lines of this poem from 2014, he proclaims faith in the spiritual world that, as he puts it, is "confirmed" by all that lives and breathes. Berry writes:

The above-ground woods is confirmed,
sustained, immeasurably is made, by the
half or so of it that is underground.

(What we see is created and sustained by what we cannot see.)

We must acknowledge first that it is dark, and
we are blind by sight. This is the stratum

known only by result, where the dead become
alive, where the seed, abiding alone, dies
into the commonwealth of the living. We see
only by the light we bring, never to know the
dark lives as they are lived in the dark.

*(In other words, we can never know the unseen mystery below the surface. If
we dig open the soil beneath a tree, that which abides in the dark is changed
by the light we introduce. Worms and bugs retreat back into the dark. The
moistness is exposed to the air. Berry goes on...)*

...We mine out of this darkness,
according to our light, facts as dry as
bones. Can these facts live?

What I hear in Berry's poem is not a rejection of the material and the scientific, but an invitation to embrace a more wholistic view. He encourages an openness to mystery, awe and grace by welcoming into our consciousness that which is beyond sight. And, as Berry knows and demonstrates through his farming, the more aware we are of the unseen Spirit in our midst, the more faithfully we are able to participate in the work of God in our world.

Learning to connect with and abide in "the half or so" hidden within all things opens us to the joy of revelation. Like the fresh shoots on the tree in our midst or the flowers that emerged in Jennifer's garden which adorn this space, we are able to see growth and life that happens through a *gracious partnership*. It does not depend solely on us!

This is something indigenous people of every land know and live so well, including our own. And in our western world that is often fractured by dualism of many kinds—material vs. spiritual, religious vs. secular, practical vs. visionary—it is their leadership alongside the voices of artists and poets that beckon us to follow them in paths of healing and hope. May we open ourselves to this needed perspective and recover a more wholistic way of seeing and being. May we learn to enjoin ourselves to the gracious partnership of earth and spirit and discover the freedom, joy and life that awaits us.