

I always find it interesting, and somewhat uncomfortable, to see the faces of the nominees when the winner is announced at the Academy Awards. It is an awkward moment. The nominees hopes are up, knowing they've come this far in the process, it's down to just these 5 or 6... and then, the envelope is opened, one name is called, and the camera pans on all the nominees, one by one, and their reactions – of course, they all clap happily. We don't really know what's going on behind the smiles and claps of the runners up, unless we've been there ourselves. And probably all of us have been there at one time or another, whether up for an award, a scholarship, a promotion, or a position on the team, whether it was recently or far back in our past. We've all had experiences of being the one "almost-chosen." The "could-have-been." Maybe partly there's relief – no speech to make, no standard to now uphold, no expectation of a certain level of performance or of what will be next. But likely there's also some disappointment of not having that moment in the spotlight, that moment of recognition for a job well done. Maybe there are feelings of inadequacy, shame, hurt. Why don't they like me? What did I do wrong? I guess I wasn't good enough.

Our Bible reading today from Acts describes a type of awards ceremony with its account of choosing the next leader in the faith. The church's first nominating committee is right there in the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of Acts. The passage speaks to the organization of the church in its earliest days. Jesus has just left them, he's ascended to heaven, and the disciples, some 120 of them, are gathered around in Jerusalem, waiting for what Jesus says will be the baptism of the Holy Spirit coming upon them. Peter stands up and proclaims the need to replace Judas, as he sees it prophesied in Scripture. Just as there were twelve tribes of Israel in the Old Testament, named for the descendants of Jacob, there were twelve original disciples of Jesus; yet, since the betrayal and death of Judas, there are now just eleven, and thus they are left with an apparent hole in this inner circle. The distinction between a disciple and an apostle is this: a disciple is a learner, a student, a follower, and an apostle is a messenger, someone sent out on a mission. The disciples are in need of a twelfth messenger.

Peter identifies the qualification of Judas' successor as someone who has been with the disciples and Jesus the whole time, from his baptism to his ascension, someone to be a witness of the resurrection. As I read this part of the passage, I'm reminded of a song I used to sing at another church: *Who'll be a witness for my Lord? Who'll be a witness for my Lord? Who'll be a witness for my Lord? Who will be a witness for my Lord?...* There are 2 people identified in the crowd who meet the criteria – Joseph Barsabbas, called Justus, and Matthias. Though the passage doesn't delve into the anticipation of these two candidates, I'm guessing there's at least somewhat of an atmosphere of expectation in their midst.

We are told that after the two are named, the disciples pray, saying, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen." They then cast lots, and the lot falls on Matthias, who is named the twelfth apostle. Joseph

Barsabbas, called Justus, is the runner-up. Casting lots was an ancient and legitimate method of determining God's will at the time. It was akin to drawing straws, flipping a coin, or rolling the dice. Proverbs 16:33 says, "*We* may throw the dice, but *the Lord* determines how they will fall." What faith! Some people may find a game of chance a rudimentary way to seek God's will. Commentators have said that the disciples resorted to this ancient method because they had not yet received the Holy Spirit, given at Pentecost, which happens in Acts 2, the very next verse after our reading today, and which, in our lectionary calendar, happens next week. In fact, we will be celebrating Pentecost here next Sunday. Personally, I think flipping a coin seems like a very efficient way of making a spiritual decision (one commentator noted there was no paperwork or months of long meetings – they accomplished their entire search in 11 verses, one afternoon!). Flipping a coin, to me, seems perfectly adequate when the choices are completely equal, as it appears was the case with Joseph Barsabbas, called Justus, and Matthias. A lot of the time, though, decisions aren't that clear-cut. We don't want to leave things to chance, we're just not comfortable flipping a coin. And aren't we blessed that we do have the benefit of the Holy Spirit to guide us today, as well as a process of discernment laid out by educators in the field of spiritual direction.

I have not always been adept with the discernment process. In fact, I have been known in my past by some to be indecisive. That is to say, there have been times in my life where I struggled, being torn between two choices. We all have. Sometimes it doesn't matter if they're life-changing choices. For example, it could be a couple of good choices on a menu, and we wonder how to decide. Perhaps we ask the waiter for a recommendation, or we consider the cost, or what nutritionally our body most needs, to help us make the decision. With a decision such as this, it may not require consulting a spiritual discernment process of Scripture, prayer, and trust in God. But many of our decisions do.

Last year, at this very time, my sons' varsity lacrosse team kept winning, advancing them in the North Coast Sectional bracket. Games were scheduled by each consecutive win. (So far, it's happening again this year.) Last year, as it turned out, the team made it to the final championship game, which was scheduled right smack in the middle of my own baccalaureate service at seminary. A baccalaureate service is a worship celebration honoring the graduates, and is celebrated just before graduation. My name had already been printed in the baccalaureate program as one of the musicians and singers for one of songs, for which I had been rehearsing. I had to decide whether to attend my own baccalaureate service at seminary or whether to attend the championship lacrosse game of my sons, both of whom were on the team, one of whom was a senior – his last varsity high school game. This was a time for spiritual discernment.

Spiritual discernment can be defined as a prayerful, informed, and intentional effort to distinguish God's voice from other voices that influence us. It seeks the counsel of the Scriptures and goes beyond the analytical to engage feelings, imagination, senses and intuition.

A simple discernment process would look like this:

1. Determine the issue. Make sure it is concrete, with a question that can be answered, such as, who will be the next apostle, Joseph Barsabbas, called Justus, or Matthias? Or, Shall I attend the baccalaureate service, or my sons' championship lacrosse game?
2. Pray for guidance. Be still and listen in silence for God's leading. Pay attention to insights, feelings, and desires that show up in prayer.
3. Be open to any outcome. Leave the outcome in God's hands.
4. Imagine the future by asking, "What choice will I one day wish I had made?" or "Which decision will I regret more if I don't make it?"
5. Make a preliminary choice and see if you experience peace around that choice. Do not wait for certainty. Seek clarity instead.
6. Take action.
7. Keep praying and at some point in the future, evaluate your choice.

Additionally, when we're praying, we need to be able to pay attention to the signs that God uses to send us messages if we're not rolling dice. One sign is **God's peace** – a sense of confidence at a very deep level indicates that we are moving in the right direction. God's peace does not suggest an absence of struggle, but it is the pervasive peace of God that leads us through the struggle. Turbulence, turmoil and misgivings are likely in the initial stages. For example, I knew that if I attended the game, it would require a lot of calls of explanation to people who were counting on me for the baccalaureate service; yet I also knew, if I went to the service, I'd be wishing I was at my sons' game. I'd be wondering who was ahead, and what was the score, and thus, not present for my service. Ultimately, the power of God's truth and love brings serenity and a sense of well-being.

Another sign of God's movement in the discernment process is **Joy**, accompanied by increased energy and power. The thought of being there for my sons and their team, and the group of parents who had been rooting together for four years, brought me joyful energy.

Another indication is **Persistence**: when a consistent message comes from a variety of places and in a number of ways, God may be trying to get through. I have a number of spiritual consultants, close friends, confidantes, and those that I trusted most all led me in one clear direction of confirmation.

God often confirms the way through **Convergence**. Convergence takes place when a number of seemingly unrelated things suddenly come together and make sense, and shed further light on the matter. It occurred to me that though my name was in the program, the service would go on just as well without me. There was another guitar player, there were other singers, and my absence would not affect the quality of the service in any way. The service had other singers, my kids have only one mom. If they won, I wanted to be there to celebrate, if they lost, I wanted to be there to console.

God sometimes encourages us through **fruitfulness** – fruit-bearing may indicate an affirmation of God’s call. It may be clear to you by now that the decision I made was to attend my sons’ championship game. And sitting in the stands with my mom, cheering the underdog team to its victory in over-time, was one of the best moments I have ever had with my mother. I would call that fruitful.

Frankly, I don’t think the disciples in Acts 1 were too far off from this modern-day discernment process. They looked to Scripture, determined the issue, identified the criteria, prayed for guidance, and left the outcome in God’s hands. We don’t know why God had the dice fall in favor of Matthias. Maybe Matthias needed the title of apostle in order to not fall away, in order to have the confidence to serve, to grow in his faith, and maybe Joseph Barsabbas called Justus didn’t need this affirmation. Maybe God knew Justus would be better off with some humility. Joseph Barsabbas called Justus wasn’t chosen, but we can be sure he was still loved by God. What I appreciate about faith, like the faith these disciples showed, is that when you have the trust that God is in control, you can accept the circumstances without flinching. When you do your part, and know the results are in God’s hands, you can trust that it’s all going to work out for the good.

Regarding the fruit-bearing in this Acts passage: neither Joseph Barsabbas called Justus nor Matthias is ever mentioned again in the whole of the Bible. We don’t know what happened to them. So just because Joseph Barsabbas called Justus didn’t win the coin toss, just because he was a runner-up, just because he wasn’t given the title of one of the twelve apostles, doesn’t mean that he didn’t keep on working for the Lord. I’d bank on the fact that he did, in the same way that some actors deliver great performances and though nominated, never win the award for Best Actor or Actress. Consider Leonardo di Caprio, who’s been nominated four times for an Oscar since 1994, or Glenn Close – six times since 1983, and though neither of these performers has ever actually won, they continue acting! Their lack of winning doesn’t stop them from their call to act.

It’s not always the big names, the “winners,” that have the greatest effect or largest influence on our lives. We’re here today, worshiping Jesus Christ the Lord, and it could very well be because of something the un-chosen Joseph Barsabbas called Justus did or said many years ago, that was passed down for generations. Take a moment to think about people in your life who influenced you to have faith in God and to become a follower of Jesus. Whoever comes to your mind, consider them

apostles of the Lord. And if *you* know Jesus, and if you have been a witness to the resurrection, whether it is participating in the flowering of the cross on Easter or watching a sunrise or observing the first buds of Spring-time with a gasp of joy and a tear in your eye, you, too, are an apostle, and have a message to bring. Jesus wants us to share with the world what he has taught us about hope, forgiveness, kindness, integrity, justice (that's -ice not -us) faith. Just as God sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us. We are all called to be disciples, apostles, ambassadors, witnesses to the resurrection.

So in answer to the question to the first part of the song, "Who'll be a witness for my Lord?" The next part is, and I hope you'll sing with me, out loud or in silence: I'll be a witness for my Lord, I'll be a witness for my Lord, I'll be a witness for my Lord, I will be a witness for my Lord! Know and claim that in Jesus Christ, you are already chosen. We are all chosen, thanks be to God.