

I have given
them the Words
that You gave Me
John 17:8



Easter 7-May 16, 2021
Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 and John 17:6-19

“Our Great Heritage”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and
from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

In all of today's scripture readings, we learn about different parts of the church that have been handed down to us. We learn that some of the things we still do today in the church are not new but have been done for thousands of years. Everything from our past that has been handed down to us is a part of our heritage. In the prayer that Jesus prayed just before he ascended into heaven, Jesus identifies “Our Great Heritage”.

On June 4 and 5th our ELCA synod will be having a virtual synod assembly. These also are not new. The first lesson for today describes one of the first church assembly meetings. As with any meeting, you need someone to lead the meeting. It should not come as any surprise that Peter, who never is afraid to speak, has taken charge of this church meeting. This must have been more than a local church meeting since there were 120 people in attendance. If it were just an annual meeting of a local congregation, they would have been more concerned about if there would be a quorum. It doesn't say who decided on the agenda for this meeting, but Peter declares the purpose for this meeting.

Peter says that scripture was fulfilled since Judas betrayed Jesus by guiding people to arrest Jesus. Peter pointed out that Judas indeed was one of the disciples and was numbered among the chosen 12, but now had taken his life after he betrayed Jesus leaving a vacancy that at least Peter decided needed to be filled. I haven't found anything in scripture where Jesus said to keep a full slate of disciples, but since the number 11 is an incomplete number and 12 is what they started with, they decided to have an election.

Another interesting aspect about this election is that Peter announced the qualifications for this position. He stated that the replacement for Judas must be someone who knows what the job entails. The replacement should be someone who witnessed the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he was baptized and followed along and witnessed everything right up to Easter morning when Jesus was resurrected from the dead. With these criteria in mind, Peter presented two candidates. Joseph called Barsabbas whose name appeared as Justus on the ballot along with Matthias. It wouldn't surprise me if each of these candidates would have given a little speech telling everyone what they had done up to this point and how they felt they were qualified to fill the vacancy.

At this meeting, Peter fails to recall or mention how he was selected to be a disciple. He changed the only criteria he met as being a fisherman and dropping his net and following to being a witness of everything that Jesus had done. It was only then, after Justus and Matthias were the only ones that made the cut that they decided to pray about the matter giving the Lord a say between these two candidates. We see from this first lesson the heritage of church meetings goes back a long way and has been handed down from one generation to another.

We think we have really done something new when it comes to Livestreaming our church services so more people can be reached. This too, is not new. When we look back to our heritage and how information has been distributed over time, again Jesus' plan for reaching people far exceeds what we can do today.

When Jesus was asked by his disciples to teach them to pray, he told them to go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. This is how he told his disciples and you to pray, but this is not how Jesus prayed. In today's gospel, Jesus clicked on the button that has streamed to more people than ever before. Jesus did not want this prayer that he prayed to his Father to remain a secret. The streaming platform that Jesus used not only reached a lot of people that day, but the prayer that Jesus prayed that day continues to be heard today, just as is the case again today. Jesus prayed this prayer so clearly that John recorded every word in his gospel to never be forgotten by anyone.

In his prayer, Jesus brings up the importance of heritage. The importance of handing things from one generation to the next. Jesus not only prays for his disciples that heard him that day, but the prayer he prayed that day, he also prayed for you who follow Jesus today. In this prayer, Jesus names the greatest heritage of all. His word. His word that came from his Father and now he has handed it to his disciples, and it has been handed down from one generation to the next and it has now been heard by you again today.

Our great heritage, God's word, is given to you to protect you while you are in this world. This word that was handed down to Jesus protected him when he was in this world. When the devil tempted Jesus to follow him, it was God's word that was given to him that sent the devil away. God's word does the same as you are protected from the devil.

*It is also important that you remember what Jesus **did not pray for** in this prayer. Jesus prayed that you would not be taken out of this world. Jesus does not pray that his disciples and you would be granted every success in this world or be removed from any suffering. Jesus came into the suffering of this world so that you would call on him to protect you from believing that the devil was now in control. Jesus prayed that even though you would not be taken from this world, you are not of this world. You are his and to give you that certainty, he has given you the greatest heritage of all. His word which never fails.*

A combination of three pastors have handed down to us a hymn that we will sing today about God's Word being our great heritage. Martin Luther wrote the tune for this hymn which we will begin by singing "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" based on Psalm 46. A hymn that Luther wrote while he was still in the world and was being housed in this fortress that you see as others were seeking to kill him. This is a picture that Marge handed down to me when she and Ellen visited the places of the Reformation. Luther experienced firsthand when Jesus prayed for his disciples knowing that the world would hate people who do not belong to this world. But in this hymn, Luther had no fear of the sufferings that this world might make him go through. Luther's mighty fortress was God who protected him from every evil of this world. It was then a Danish pastor, N.F.S. Grundvig who was born in 1783 and used Luther's tune and wrote the words to "God's Word is Our Great Heritage." These words then were handed to Pastor Ole Belsheim a Norwegian born pastor who translated these words to English so that we can boldly sing of this great heritage today.

Our parish has a rich heritage. We are today what has been handed down to us. We continue to do many things that have been done from one generation to the next, such as church meetings. Today we give thanks for the great heritage of God's word which was handed down to him and now has been handed down to you. Amen