

Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 12th
Sermon Title: Under the Deborah Tree
Scripture: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

In today's scripture from Acts, as the eleven agree to cast lots to decide who shall replace Judas, to keep the number of apostles at twelve, the eleven pray, "Lord, you know everyone's heart, show us the one you would have us select in these lots." We should assume that it is their intention to make this important act of spiritual discernment a "decision of the heart." Today is the Seventh Sunday of Easter, the last Sunday of Easter before Pentecost, as well as Mother's Day, and so I will engage us in yet another resurrection meme called the "decisions of the heart," in other words, spiritual decisions informed by the heart. In this regard, we might ask the question: "What would Mother do or say?" "How would Mother decide?" In our current world, we might equate heart-informed decisions with trauma-informed decisions, even though the two are not absolutely the same. In trauma-informed decisions, we seek to avoid anything that would further traumatize any of us, any action that would add unnecessarily to the significant burdens we already bear in today's dangerous world. "Do no harm!" is a statement we sometimes hear from surgeons or doctors, of both the mind and the body, and also pastoral care professors when teaching seminarians. If you can avoid harm, if you can avoid trauma, you are to be congratulated with success! And this is an important accomplishment when constant trauma seems to be the order of the day.

In this regard, we might think of Emperor Constantine, who in an effort to avoid sin, postponed his confession until his death-bed. Yet, it is not really the case that sin or harm is avoidable—Constantine was deceived. The sins of commission and omission are frequently cited in theological literature as examples of this deception. "Do no harm," and "taking calculated risks for good" are not antithetical; it is better to say that faith is more adaptive than technical in that we need to consider the processes of deciding and acting and not just the outcomes we want.

Christian Ethics has evolved so very much since I took my seminary course so long ago now in the 1970s. Suffice it to say that moral decisions have grown

increasingly complex over the decades since my graduation from seminary, not just a matter of comparing moral absolutes to moral relativity. No longer do we ponder whether there can be a case law that handles every situation in life, no longer multiple fences around scripture, such as the Talmud, that attempt to explain every detail of Scripture without leaving anything to our imagination. “Do no harm” is not an excuse for doing nothing, for the absence of moral action, for faith without action.

Yes, if all we do is avoid, then we miss out on the type of success we can only have when taking a risk, albeit a calculated risk. The eleven agreed that they needed to select a twelfth; they could have been content with leaving the number at eleven, but they took a calculated risk of selecting a twelfth one, to restore the number of apostles to the number Jesus chose when he called them out of the world to work for the kin[g]dom. And, out of the thousands of people that were potentially available during Pentecost, they instead nominate two of the original band of followers, Justus and Matthias, two who had been with Jesus from the beginning of his baptism by John. And, to be fair to both, they decide to let the odds determine the result, the roll of the dice, as we might say today, but where there are only two possible results. Now, these two Justus and Matthias are known to the eleven, but unknown to us, the readers, the hearers, as unknown as the thousands being added to the young movement, the followers of the Way, meeting in the name of Jesus, thousands of diverse people, of every ethnicity, gender, skin-color, age-in-years, added each day through the decisive winds of the Holy Spirit. Justus or Matthias, who shall it be, O heart of my own heart? O heart that knows every heart?

There must be twelve and not thirteen because this is the number Jesus selected. And, Jesus had carefully selected his band of twelve so that they would be diverse in their personality, so that, in their combination, they could be “all things to all people” as Paul puts it. “All things to all people, so that by all means, we might win people to Christ Jesus.” Yes, it takes all of us, our whole village, if you will, to do the work of evangelism. None of us are unimportant in this rather long process of growing. But we need to look like the Body of Christ when we act as a community of faith, each part working together for the greater good. Our decisions need to be made with a whole heart. Refuting the ancient morality of Socrates, that an unquestioned life is not worth living, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: “the

distinction between life that is worth living and life that is not worth living,” will not only destroy the beloved community, but also eventually destroy life itself. On the 500th year anniversary of the Reformation in October 2017, the great female historian, Phyllis Tickle, shared with us that her greatest fear about the future—that our great moral and ethical thinkers within the church will no longer honor all life as precious (Festival of Homiletics keynote).

It is left to us to ask, why not all? Why not the whole village? Why not all who come, all being born in the Spirit at Pentecost? Why not all? It’s a legitimate question. The primary leadership principle behind Kansas Leadership Center (KLC) is the strong belief that everyone can lead, anyone can be trained to lead, any member of the team. And while KLC has been successful in training leaders in the current business climate, we might also acknowledge that leadership is always difficult and takes a special ‘calling’ inside of us, a special skill that we work hard to develop through experience. ... Lord of the heart, who shall it be? All things being equal, which of the two, Justus or Matthias? Lord, we know that you can work through the casting of these lots, just as surely as through the Urim and Thummin, the ancient “Lights” and “Perfection”, on the breastplate of the High Priest in the Temple, in the holy places. And, we must acknowledge that it might be ... that no lot was ever cast, that this was a process of waiting for a sign from the Holy One to reveal the best candidate. The casting of the lots, the lights in the room uniquely reflected off of the jewels on the breastplate, were ways of deciding truth that eliminated bias. But what if bias is simply spiritual experience stored within the heart? What does your gut say? What does your heart say? And where is the Wisdom of the heart that overcomes prejudice, overcomes even past experience? If people change, should we not let them change rather than hold them to past experience?

“Lord, you know everyone’s heart, show us the one you would have us select in these lots.” “You who are not limited to experience, reveal to us the wise choice! The best choice for our own time, and not just past times, the best for what will be rather than just what used to be. The decision to select a new settled pastor may have more to do with our dreams than our memories, to quote Rev Dr. Thomas Jewell during an earlier search process at WOCC in 2013. Is that possible, do you think?

In Minneapolis, Minnesota, there is a sculpture outside one of the downtown churches, entitled “Resurrection.” Paul T. Granlund is the artist. The sculpture celebrates the human ability to renew oneself and one’s surroundings, capturing in this giant sculpted image, a theology of grace, that all reality is an undeserved gift, a spontaneous gift of life, where the organic emerges from the inorganic. The notes about the artist reveal the thought behind it: “The artist opened the earth, representing each continent on earth as a human figure, each one large enough to stand inside in such a way that you may draw an imaginary line from any figure through the center, and that line will touch another human figure, another continent. Resurrection is the birth of freedom from the chains of heavy stone that surround us, a muscular breaking forth into the light of day, the broken stones pushed away to the side, the human soul alive in grace!

The resurrection story of Deborah is one for the ages, a human soul awakening to freedom. It bears the markings of the story of Joan of Arc (Joan D’Arc) which occurs in a much later time and place, a story of wisdom and leadership during war. Only a few times in the long history of Israel does someone come along that has the full support of all the twelve tribes, or even half of the tribes. Deborah was such a one. She was married, to be sure, wife to a man named Lapidoth, most likely around the year 1185 BCE. But the scriptures refer to her as ‘mother,’ a mother from the tribe of Issachar. ‘There arose a mother’ in Israel ... just at the right time, just at the time of greatest danger to all the tribes. Let me tell you her story! (Judges 4:5)

Deborah rose to fame as a ‘judge,’ one who sat under a palm tree and gave advice to the people who came to consult with her. You may remember that Moses was such a judge, sitting from morning to evening and listening to the problems of the people who came to see him. ‘When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another,’ in the words of Moses (Ex. 18:13-27), and I am exhausted by the end of the day. His father-in-law, Jethro the Kenite, intervenes in this insanity of Moses, and calls for him to appoint other judges to help, ‘people who are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain. And so, Deborah became such a judge. The palm of Deborah, as it came to be called, was located in the hill country of Ephraim, between Ramah and Bethel. Like Moses, she became

famous and popular very quickly. She was known far and wide for how she resolved disputes and delivered justice. It is clear also that, at some point, she began to hear the stores of homesteaders in the north who had lost all they had to the invaders, stories of travelers who no longer felt safe traveling north to Galilee. These were the times when ‘caravans ceased’ and ‘travelers kept to the byways.’ (Judges 5:6). Deborah, no doubt’ heard the stories of atrocities committed against tribes to the north. She heard the cries of the suffering and afflicted. Deborah heard their hearts crying! To sit under the tree of Deborah is to hear hearts crying! Do we today hear hearts crying? Do we hear hearts crying in Ukraine, or China, or Israel, or Palestine? Ann Jolly, our pastor’s wife when I was a youth at FCC Wewoka, once handed out wall posters to all the youth of the church which said: “War is not good for children and other living things!” Like Deborah, she heard hearts crying.

Deborah lived on the edge of paradise and desert; she heard the call of her people through the individual cries of those who visited her. She heard the cries of the children through their mothers’ tears. She heard the cries of the mothers grieving for their husbands, for their children, in the vein of “Rachel weeping for her children.” The First Testament describes her birth into freedom: “There arose a mother.” There arose one named Deborah to respond and fight on behalf of children, husbands, and mothers. And so, God arises through the leadership of this one mother whose name is Deborah. And many respond to her cries to come and help .Her gathering army is described as a ‘myriad of raindrops,’ falling from above. They are truly like a myriad of raindrops because they cannot be measured. As a side note, today we still refer to what is called the ‘Deborah number’ in physics and rheology, being the point at which solids become liquids; the greater the Deborah number, the more solid; the smaller the Deborah number, the more fluid. The Deborah number is the tipping point of the heart! When the heart finally knows what it must decide, for whom it must decide.

The ancient Song which bears her name, the Song of Deborah, commends those in Israel “who offered themselves willingly (נָדָבוּ - *nadab*),” when “war was in the gates.” As the original poetic language suggests, the volunteers יִדְבְּנוּ לָבוֹ are those who offer themselves freely and spontaneously to defend Israel and their homes. They are the ones “whose hearts prompt them to give (Ex. 25:2).” They are the ones who have searched their heart and know the truth. (Jg. 5:16-17). Do our hearts

prompt us to give? Where is the battle we must join today? We are facing today more and more what is called an asynchronous warfare, where civilian and military alike face moral injury, the need for soul repair. Our battle today is for hearts and minds to know peace, to wage peace, and to risk peace. And, with the undying love of Jesus, put on our armor, the belt of truth, the shield of faith, the sword of the Spirit, the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of justice, and the gospel shoes of peace (Eph. 6:13-17).

It is a very interesting observation that the tribes of Israel did not engage in seances, omens or soothsaying, to predict an individual's future or the collective future of their tribes. Israel is one of the few peoples of the region who did not do so. Instead, Israel's theology called for her to wait for God to send a leader. At the proper time, God would send a leader to tell them what God was doing and what God would do. God was and is a just-in-time God. God provides words for us to speak at the time we need to speak them. God provides the army to fight at the very time the enemy arrives, and this the case in spiritual battle as well as physical battle. And, in the case of Deborah, there was no army and no one seeking to fight the enemy (Jg. 5:8). If such an army would be joined together, someone would have to call them out to meet the danger. Perhaps Deborah never thought that she would be the one God called to lead. The poet sings: "Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, and sing your song." (5:12). Oh, if she could but find someone else. Like many other women whose stories are in Scripture, Deborah was persistent! No doubt she engaged Barak many times before he agreed to hear her out. "Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, and sing your song."

Like the other prophets of Israel, the prophetess Deborah was NOT a seer into the future. She was NOT like the Oracle of Delphi in Greece, providing mysterious stories of the fateful future which could only be interpreted looking back. But Deborah believed in what God had promised her that the cries of Israel's children would be heard, that the cries of human suffering would be heard. God came among his people and chose Deborah for the task of leadership. God gave her the skills she needed at the time she needed them. God gave her the charisma to lead, not just her tribe of Issachar, but all the tribes of Israel. As the poet states, 'even the stars above were enlisted in the battle.' (Jg. 5:20). God acts with justice and is faithful to relationships with his people. When God arises, God's enemies, our

enemies, are scattered to the wind (Ps. 68:1). When Deborah awakens, the “mountains melt” before the Lord into a sea of mud from which the chariots of the otherwise stronger enemy cannot escape. (Judges 5:5)

The fig tree was a sign of God’s blessing for those who studied the scriptures and reflected on what they learned from them and shared what they learned with others. It was the prophet Micah who predicted that a time would come when the people would beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and would study war no more. And we would know when this time of peace had come, because each one shall sit under their own fig trees, and never be afraid again. (Micah 4:4). And, this is, perhaps, why the fruit of the fig tree was so important to Jesus. The fruit of the fig is the fruit of peace. Jonah had sat under the shade of a tree (*che-chi-on*) that withered and died while he was yet deciding whether to go to Nineveh to preach again to the people he had no hope of changing. Surely, Jonah said: ‘O God, why did you take away my shade?’ A friendly shade quickly disappeared while Jonah was seeking the tipping point of his own heart (Jonah 4:6) while hearts were crying in Nineveh! Arise Deborah, awake and sing your song! Know the tipping point of your heart! Alleluia! Amen.