

The Flip of A Coin
Acts 1:1-17, 21-26
© Stacey Steck
Preached April 21, 2013 at San Jose, Costa Rica

I have a method for playing roulette which is a sure thing. That's right, I never lose playing roulette. Well, at least that has been true the three times I've ever played! My method is simple: never bet more than the least amount you can win. In roulette, there are a variety of odds you can bet on each spin of the wheel and if you diversify your bets and play your chips right, you will break even or better often enough to keep playing long enough to win big. Now, those of you who may be growing uncomfortable with the thought of your pastor gambling might wish to take a closer look at today's passage from Acts in which you will find that gambling is a profoundly Biblical and spiritual practice. This is, after all, the way Matthias was chosen to take the place of Judas as the twelfth apostle. It was in a game of chance called "casting lots." Casting lots is not unlike drawing straws or cutting a deck of cards, or choosing which hand holds the white queen. It is chance given divine purpose, the luck of the Lord, the fate of God Almighty. The names of the two contenders, or a symbol that represented them, would likely have been placed on stones, and then the winner's lot would be the one chosen in a blind draw. Simple as that. Stay tuned for subsequent sermons, which will extol the virtues of dancing and smoking. Just kidding.

No matter our beliefs on whether or not gambling is a sin, it is pervasive in our society, so pervasive that nearly all of us are involved in it in one form or another, whether we know it or not, or like it or not. If you go to the casino or play the lottery, you are gambling. That one seems pretty obvious. But, if you own life insurance or auto insurance you are also gambling. If you have money in a pension plan, you are gambling. In all these ways, you are betting that the odds, or fate, or the market, will leave you better off, or at least let you break even. In the life insurance game, you are actually betting *against* yourself, betting that you'll die before you have been able to accumulate enough money for your loved ones to be financially secure without you. With car insurance, you are betting that you'll have an accident before you can fully pay for whatever damage results, and the company is betting that you won't have an accident at all, or at least that it will be cheaper than the sum total of your premiums paid to date. Investing is gambling, gambling that your money will earn more in the stock market than under your mattress. Face it, we gamble even if it's legal and even when we don't want to call it gambling. Just remember, however, that in gambling, the house always wins!

This sermon is not, however, about gambling, except as it illustrates the issues of trust involved in decision making in the church and in our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. You see, we seem to be quite willing to gamble in all kinds of ways except those that matter the most. If our Council were to come before you and say that after a great deal of soul searching and prayer, and a

thorough process of discernment, it had decided to leave the choice of continuing our ministry of being the heart hands, and voice of Jesus Christ in Costa Rica's English-speaking community, or closing the doors and wishing each other well, to leave that choice up to chance, or divine will if you prefer, I suspect there would be some misgivings, if not a call for their removal as leaders of the church. We would deem irresponsible any decision which took the power of the vote out of our hands. The hard won rights of democracy, celebrated annually in all the countries from which we come, would be at stake, and heaven forbid we should allow a power higher than the right to vote to make a decision about the direction of God's people.

Looking back at the early church, however, we see precisely that no power other than God is thought to be able to make a divine and important decision like the one that faced Peter and the rest of the disciples. Judas had betrayed Jesus and his companions, and left the leadership team one person short of the twelve needed to reconstitute Israel and prepare the way for the message of the Gospel to reach Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. Jesus had made clear to the twelve that they would be an integral part of God's plan of salvation for the world, but the plan was now threatened by the death of one whom God had chosen. They would need another to fill the ranks, another whom God must choose. And just as Jesus had chosen the original twelve, they must leave the choice of the replacement twelfth to God. And so, using the method so many of their ancestors had used

when they needed to make important decisions, they left it up to God. And so they flipped a coin. They played the lottery, so to speak.

My hometown basketball team, the Cleveland Cavaliers, is arguably the worst team playing professional basketball this season and thus will be eligible to choose one of the best players in the next draft. When you choose that high, they call it a lottery pick, because the players chosen in the first round are so good it is like winning the lottery. And God knows the Cavaliers need a pick-me-up on the court and at the box office! Perhaps God picked the gentleman from West Virginia I once heard about to win the largest multistate lottery jackpot ever in the US because God knew he would tithe his winnings to the church. God knows we could use that around here! I have often secretly thought that I will win the lottery when God knows that I will give it all away! Purify my heart, O Lord, and lead me to buy a ticket once in a while.

Some of you may be recalling Shirley Jackson's famous short story, called "The Lottery," a staple of high school and college creative writing classes everywhere. In this story, an unnamed village annually conducts a lottery to determine which of its residents will die by stoning at the hands of the rest of the village to ensure a good harvest. The lottery is conducted by means of drawing from a black box folded pieces of paper, one of which contains a black dot. You can guess what the dot signifies. Tessie Hutchinson is this year's choice and the

crowd accepts her selection without question. Some higher power has spoken, be it chance or God, and who are they to question it?

Now, I ask you, is there anything inherently wrong with choosing in this way? In both Shirley Jackson's story and in the passage from Acts, the candidates have been chosen according to specific criteria, have consented to participate, have acknowledged the validity of the method. On top of that, the method is inscrutable; no one can tamper with it by campaigning, by bribing, by extortion. It is understood that the one chosen is chosen for a reason beyond the understanding of the participants, and in the case of Acts, for a divine reason and for divine purposes. As far as human beings can see, each of the options is equal, so God must be able to know which is the right choice.

There are all kinds of ways of making decisions within a body of people. Some groups strive for consensus, the idea that everyone needs to agree with the decision before it can be made. Other bodies recognize that such a consensus can never be reached in their deliberations and so choose that a simple majority of 50% plus one will carry the day. Some decisions in a voting body require a super majority, a percentage set higher, like two-thirds, or three-quarters, since there is so much at stake in the outcome. Our church uses a combination of these methods. Indeed, our own Nominating Committee will soon be hard at work finding candidates for you to vote on for as members of the Council. Exercising our democracy is great. But what if we played the lottery instead?

Oh my! We might have to trust. You see, this is what really underlies the possibility of a divine lottery in the life of the church. You see, we would have to trust several things. We would have to trust that *God* is really choosing, rather than chance. We would have to trust each other that there was no hanky panky, no adjusting of the straws in the hand to deliver a predetermined winner. We would have to trust that even those who might not agree with the outcome would abide by the decision and support the winning position, since it was, after all, God's choice.

There is a sense in which the process of voting indicates a failure of nerve, an inability to trust God. I say this because when we have decided to take matters into our own hands and vote, it is precisely because we cannot agree on, or find, more than one solution which is suitable, or one which is acceptable to everyone, and with which we may trust *God's* choice and be comfortable. If we look back at how the early church ended up with Matthias as the newest apostle, we see how much easier it is to not vote. Through a process of discernment, based on their interpretation of Scripture and the criteria that the new apostle would need to be both some one who had "accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us" and someone who would "become a witness with us to his resurrection," in other words, who would be willing to testify, the company of 120 was able to find two with whom everyone seemed comfortable. Then, the group prayed to God seeking God's assistance and then left it up to God when the

lots were cast. God gave them, and gives us, what we need to prepare for these choices: Scripture, the power of the Holy Spirit, and prayer. Why then do we need to vote? Are we afraid that God will not choose as carefully as we would?

God gives us a role, and God selects when we have been faithful to God's teaching, when we have placed God's interests before our own, when we have placed before God options on which we as a community agree, when we seek God's choice, and when we trust God to make the decision. Take the distribution of the Promised Land to the twelve tribes as an example. In this case, there was land to be divided and rather than negotiate or use coercion, Joshua chose a wiser course which says much about why God left him in charge after Moses. When there was land which needed to be divided, Joshua quickly realized that should he be the one to choose, it would leave him in a no-win situation, so he left the choice of which tribe got which parcel to the casting of lots, to God's choice. He sent three men from each tribe to go out together to survey the land and divide it into parcels upon which they could all agree. Kind of reminds you of splitting the last piece of cake among squabbling siblings — the one who cuts the cake gets the second choice. In this way, the tribes could neither claim that someone else made a decision to which they were not party, nor that Joshua favored any one of them over the others. And so they returned and Joshua cast lots before the Lord and the land was distributed without incident or division. If only legislative redistricting could be handled so diplomatically.

There are many Christians who believe that the church's biggest problems stem from the fact that it has strayed too far from the simple organization it was as depicted in the book of Acts. If only we decentralized, or met only in houses, or had less complicated leadership and decisionmaking, it is thought, we could be more faithful to what Jesus had in mind when he charged the apostles with the great commission. I disagree. I believe that God has a plan and a bright future in mind for the institutional, denominational church and its sometimes cumbersome processes. Our way of doing church means that we wrestle with decisions which are not always easy but about which the whole body is entitled to have a say. I am not naive enough to believe that we can do away with decision making by voting, but I am still idealistic enough to think that we can do our best to return to the basis of the kind of decision-making done by casting lots, a trust in God and each other that helps us prepare for our decisions with creative choices and common conviction. It is not to romanticize the early church to suggest that casting lots is something for which to strive, for the level of trust required to make a decision in this way is a level of trust would do well to attain, and which Jesus left his disciples as a legacy. May we develop the kind of trust in God and in one another, which will lead us to follow God's leading for our church and in our lives. Amen.