

“Starting Fresh”

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Based upon Acts 1:15-26, 1 Cor. 5:6b-8

Have you ever wondered why the disciples bothered to elect a replacement for Judas Iscariot during the time in between the Resurrection and Pentecost? Jesus had told them that he would send them the Holy Spirit who would equip them for ministry, and it certainly seems as if the Spirit’s choice to succeed Judas was Paul. After all, he is the real star of *The Book of Acts*, not Matthias, who is never mentioned again. Now granted Paul wasn’t chosen before Pentecost. But still some Christians wonder whether Matthias’ election was some kind of control move on Peter’s part which he justified with a couple of lines from the poetry of the psalms. Maybe the election was evidence that Peter had doubts that the Spirit would come, or was afraid what would happen when she did? It wouldn’t be surprising if the disciples were a little afraid, given that Jesus had told them to spread the good news of the Resurrection in “Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (*Acts* 1:8). Eleven of them had to cover the whole world! Maybe Peter thought that if they at least had the number of people Jesus originally started with, then they would be better able to take on their massive task. I don’t know. I do know that Peter and the disciples have been accused of all kinds of less-than-faithful motives in their selection of Matthias by people who are uncomfortable with the fact nothing is said in *Acts* about God specifically commanding the disciples to pick a successor for Judas.

But what if it wasn’t lack of faith or patience which motivated the disciples to find a new number 12? What if it was actually the fact that they had strong faith and a deep understanding of God’s commands? They were freshly energized by the good news of the Resurrection, after all, and knew even before Pentecost that nothing was impossible for God. But while they were hanging out in Jerusalem in an upper room somewhere, waiting for the equipping of the Spirit, twiddling their thumbs and staring at each other as they tried to manage their excitement and their impatience, they were faced with a constant reminder of the potential for failure in the form of Judas’ absence. Tradition holds that Judas was a Zealot when he was alive, which means that he was most likely a man of action, inclined by both his nature and his politics to push for Jesus and the others to do more. It was that very nature which led him to betray Jesus, an action which had shocked the disciples who had called him friend for three years. But big presences leave big absences. While they waited, the disciples were faced with a glaringly empty chair. If it had been Passover, that chair would have been set aside symbolically for the returning prophet Elijah to come and declare the Messiah’s arrival, but this chair marked the Messiah’s betrayer. It screamed sin, corruption, and death. So maybe the election of Matthias was not about circumventing God’s plan. Maybe it was the disciples’ way of maximizing the chance of success for God’s plan for them by replacing negative energy with positive?

I’m speculating of course, but it was Paul’s Passover metaphor in today’s text from *First Corinthians* which got me thinking about the election of Matthias story in this new way. Paul told the Corinthians to clean out the old yeast in their lives and hearts so that they could be a “new batch.” He told them to celebrate the Resurrection not with old yeast, “the yeast of malice and evil,” but with “the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

When he offered this advice, Paul wasn't thinking about Judas. He was thinking about the morally corrupt behavior taking place within the Corinthian congregation. A man in the church was having an intimate relationship with his father's wife and boasting about it on the grounds that now that he and everyone in the congregation had been saved by Christ through the Resurrection, they were all free to do as they pleased. "Ew," Paul said. "That's not what the Resurrection implies. It implies the exact opposite, calling us to live holier lives, not more sinful ones. Metaphorically speaking, Jesus was the Passover Lamb. That means that just as Passover marks the liberation of the Hebrew slaves, so we have now been liberated by Christ and are living in a new Passover season. So in the same way that good Jews rid themselves of the corrupting influence of yeast during Passover, we must rid our hearts of those influences now. If Jesus was the lamb, then we must be the unleavened bread."

Passover just ended on Friday. But since most of us here were not Jews before we became Christians, we may not be familiar with the particular Passover tradition Paul was alluding to in his letter. During Passover, when Jewish people celebrate how God liberated the Hebrew people from slavery and oppression in Egypt and led them safely through the wilderness to the Promised Land, they are not allowed to eat leavened bread. There are three reasons for this. First, eating unleavened bread reminds them about the hasty exit that the slaves had to make from Egypt. They did not have time for their bread to rise. Second, eating unleavened bread was a symbolic way to reject the ways of their oppressor's culture. The Egyptians were one of the first cultures to discover the power of yeast to transform grain. They were famous for their leavened bread. So by refusing to eat bread like theirs, the Jews were reaffirming that God, not Pharaoh, was their Lord.

But the third reason that the Jews did not eat unleavened bread is the most relevant to today's text. They avoided leavening during Passover to purify themselves. You see, in the First Century, at least among the Jews, yeast and leavening were seen more often as corrupting influences than as positive ones. To make leavened bread, people in those days did not use convenient little Fleischman's packets of yeast. They mixed flour and water together and let the mixture sit out for a while. Since wild yeast is everywhere naturally, it would land in the bowl and ferment the grain making the kind of bubbles you see in the image on your bulletin cover. This is basically what sourdough starter is: fermenting flour. So, despite the fact that for most of the year the Jews had no problem eating leavened bread, for the very holy week of Passover, they avoided it because Jewish theology equated leavening with impurity, corruption, and sin.

In order to prepare for Passover, therefore, Orthodox Jews work very hard to remove all the leavening and leavened grains, not just from their refrigerators but from their lives. They wash everything thoroughly. They use different utensils and dishes, and they perform a ceremonial ritual called the "*Removal of the Chametz*."¹ (*Chametz* is not yeast. It is a Hebrew term which describes "any food product made from wheat, barley, rye, oats, or spelt that has come into contact with water and been allowed to ferment and rise."²) The night before Passover,

¹ See e.g. "*The Removal of Chametz*", Hebrew 4 Christians, retrieved April 3, 2018 from http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Spring_Holidays/Pesach/Chametz/chametz.html.

² See Troster, Rabbi Lawrence, "*Cleaning Out the Leaven on Passover— in Body and Spirit*", Blog post, March 24, 2013,

Jewish families gather a paper bag, a white feather, a candle, and a wooden spoon. Then they proceed to hunt all over the house by candlelight in search of leavening or leavened bread. Usually parents hide ten tiny pieces of bread around the house for the children to find. The bread is swept into the spoon with the feather and deposited into the paper bag. Then after all the chametz has been found, the family goes outside and burns the bag, saying a special prayer which is supposed to nullify the power of any crumbs that were overlooked.

There is still one more remaining step, however, that must be done in orthodox homes. In addition to hunting for actual chametz, each person must hunt for spiritual chametz by performing a spiritual inventory of their souls.³ As one Jewish website explains, “Chametz represents that swelling of ego that enslaves the soul more than any external prison. It is for this reason that once a year on Passover, when we celebrate our freedom from slavery... we are extremely careful to eradicate any chametz that we may have.”⁴ “*What inside us is sour and corrupted?*” they ask themselves. “*What inside us is fermenting anger, greed, pride, idolatry?*” These things must also be removed with God’s help in order for the person to be holy during Passover.

Paul was referring to this process when he reprimanded the Corinthians for their immoral behavior. “Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch,” Paul advised, using a word for “clean” or “purge,” *ekkatharate* in the Greek, from which our English word “catharsis” is derived. It is cathartic to give your life a good scrubbing inside and out, to let go of old ways of thinking about yourself and the world; it is also necessary, Paul insisted, if we truly are going to be Easter people for more than a day. The Resurrection of Christ liberated us from being bound by the ways of the world and the ways of sin. Jesus made us a new batch of dough. So if we want to live as Easter people, we must not allow the wild yeast of the world to spoil God’s wonderful new batch. We must clean up our souls and our acts so that we will look as different to the world as matzah bread does from Wonder bread.

I think that by replacing Judas with Matthias, the disciples were cleaning out the old yeast so that when the Spirit came on Pentecost, they would be fresh and new, and ready to do Christ’s bidding. They replaced a person who symbolized in their minds sin, corruption, and betrayal with a person who symbolized faithfulness and loyalty. “We want someone who was with Christ even before he began his ministry. We want someone who has been faithful since John the Baptist, and who remained loyal even through all the difficulties,” Peter insisted. Matthias qualified, and by sitting in Judas’ spot, made the Twelve into a fresh batch ready to share the Bread of Life with the world.

But what about us? Are we truly Easter people in Paul’s sense of being unleavened bread? For most Christians today, notwithstanding what the liturgical calendar says about Easter being a 50-day season, Easter is really just a day-long event. Then it’s back to the real world which is filled with wild yeast: corruption, malice, fermenting sins of all kinds. We aren’t really

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https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-lawrence-troster/cleaning-out-the-leaven-on-passover-in-body-and-spirit_b_2926509.html

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

changed or new people; we are the same people we were before Easter minus the flowers and eggs. We are Good Friday people, realists who are all too aware of the problems of the world and the sins and shortcomings within us.

“If we could only see the risen Christ,” many Christians think, “then we, like the disciples, would be better able to live as liberated, hope-filled, newly impassioned servants of our risen Lord.” But I do not believe that our doubts are really the problem. I think that the problem is that we do not really expect to be changed, and therefore do not work hard enough at changing. If we want to be newly energized Easter people, we have to work at getting rid of the old and embracing the new. Lent is supposed to be the time we identify the old yeast in our souls. But I say it is never too late to get the chametz out. What are the sour things that ferment in your soul? Anger, malice, pride, greed, self-indulgence, idolatry? Time to let those things go because it only takes a pinch of them to affect the whole loaf. What about the leftover yeast of Good Friday: despair, shame, resignation? That yeast has to go too. Take a feather to your heart and mind, look in all the nooks and crannies with the light of Christ, and pray to God that anything you miss will be nullified by God’s saving grace.

As you do all of this, keep in mind the good news of Easter that Paul proclaimed to the Corinthians; in reality whether we feel like it or not, we are unleavened bread already, thanks to Christ’s death and resurrection. He already nullified the corruption of the old yeast within us, at least as far as God is concerned. So, our work is not so much to make ourselves good enough to receive God’s liberating grace or be loved by him; our work is to try to preserve what Jesus did for us so that our lives and the lives of others will be better. We need to protect the truth of Easter within us because Christ gave his life to give us that truth, and has work for us to do in his name.

One of the interesting facts about Matthias, who apparently was so faithful that he qualified to become the new number 12, is that we never hear about him in the Bible before or after the election. He isn’t mentioned as a follower of Jesus in the gospels, and his ministry after his election is completely ignored in *Acts*. All we know about him apart from today’s story comes from non-biblical sources. They recount that Matthias went on to be a missionary in what is now Georgia in the north, or in Ethiopia in the south. He was either beheaded, stoned to death, eaten by cannibals, or died of old age. He changed the lives of many, but never became famous like Peter or Paul. In other words, no one really knows what happened to him. That makes him a good stand-in for us. We who have read the gospels, walked through Holy Week, and celebrated the empty tomb have been with Jesus from the beginning. And we who are here in church on the Sunday after Easter, which is traditionally called “low Sunday” by pastors because so many people skip it, are clearly among the faithful who did not fall away. So that means that we are in a position to replace the stain of betrayal and corruption, and the hurt feelings that Judas left behind, with a new energy, one which is grounded in the hope of the empty tomb, the love of Christ, and the sustaining grace of God. It’s a big responsibility, but one we are more than capable of fulfilling with the help of the Spirit. We just need to make sure we don’t let the wild yeast of the world spoil what God has made new.

What is bubbling inside you most these days? By the grace of God in the risen Christ, may it be the joy that comes from knowing you've been set free, the truth that God loves you as you are, and the determination and excitement of those who know that a new creation is unfolding through Christ, and we get to be a part of it. Amen.