

Easter 7-B
St. John's Cathedral
May 13, 2018

I wonder if any of us who are part of the life of this cathedral parish right now – a parish in the midst of a discernment process to choose a new Dean, finds it interesting that the disciples, (in today's reading from Acts) completed a leadership discernment process by casting lots. Casting lots is sort of like drawing straws or rolling dice. You'll find some references to these kinds of processes in the Old Testament but as far as we know they were not common practices in the Church.

Certainly this might have been a way to streamline an otherwise complicated process. But there was actually more to it than that. This scenario from Acts is sometimes called the church's first crisis. The crisis was that Judas, once part of Jesus' inner circle of disciples, had betrayed Jesus and had died. (There are varying accounts of exactly how he died). At any rate, the leaders of the church felt that they needed to choose carefully someone to take his place among the twelve. We also have to remember that the early Church at this point was very much in a formative stage. There wasn't a lot of structure yet.

So Peter leads a meeting of believers – a rather large group that included people other than the disciples -- and guides this process.

One requirement was that this new disciple had to be someone who had accompanied the twelve during the time of Jesus' ministry – one who knew Jesus firsthand from his baptism and through his death, resurrection and ascension. The other was that this person become, with the other disciples, a witness to Jesus' resurrection. In other words, this will be someone

who knows that Jesus has risen from the dead and continues to bring life to the Church and will be able to share that conviction with others.

Two candidates are chosen – Barsabbas, known as Justus, and Matthias. And then the gathered group prays for God’s guidance—and follows that up with the process of casting lots, and Matthias is chosen. This is pretty much all we know about Matthias, because his name never comes up again.

But the important part of this, I think, is that this serious process of choosing a new member of the twelve is a prayerful, thoughtful one. They have a sense of what attributes are necessary to do this ministry. And they fervently ask God’s guidance as a choice is being made.

And in that way, there are some similarities with our own discernment process that will lead to calling someone to be our dean. Certainly this has been a deliberate process. There was a lot of information-gathering during the last year to learn more about this congregation and also to learn what qualities we see as most important in a person chosen to lead us forward.

Through this whole process we have prayed – often with prayers shaped by the chaplain for the process, Deacon Barbara Novak.

Sometimes people think of the process of calling a dean as a hiring process – and in some ways it has some of the same elements: identifying qualified candidates, interviews, resumes, salary negotiations and the like. But in other ways it is quite different.

We use the word ‘discernment’ as an over-arching way to describe the process. We ask God to help us ‘discern’ as a community who our next dean will be.

Discernment is a process of separating or sorting out – or choosing among good options. Sometimes we have those kinds of processes in our own lives when we ask God’s help (and

sometimes the help of others) to help us make a profound life choice -- having a family, moving to a new place, changing vocations and the like. We have discernment committees in congregations that help people figure out what ministry they might be called to live out. Most often it is people considering ordination as an option.

When I was in that process, some 35 years ago, my parish and I were asking God to help us sort out whether it would be better to stay in the Tri-Cities and in my newspaper job or to pursue a nagging sense that I was called to be a priest. It was also about what would be healthy for my family. It was complicated, but good work.

That kind of discernment is a little different than what congregations practice in choosing leaders, but both have the same root: and that is prayer.

For us, discernment is largely a process of holy listening. Of being attentive to the needs and gifts of the congregation to be served and being equally attentive to the voice of God. We assume that God is operating within our calling process and that God may even surprise us at times. Our open-hearted listening, guided by the Holy Spirit, informs our choices.

We're not going to cast lots. But our Chapter, our leadership group charged with making vital decisions such as calling a dean, is well-informed and diligent in prayer.

And we, too, are called to a prayerful openness as this process continues. Pray for our Chapter in the days and weeks ahead. And pray for those candidates who have offered their own gifts and talents to serve as our dean.

With God's help we will discern well.