
Barsabbas and Matthias: The Patron Saints of Elections

[Listen to the podcast.](#)

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Easter 7

*They proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, and Matthias.
Then they prayed, and they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias,
and he was added to the eleven apostles."
Acts 1:23, 26*

If Garrison Keillor were beginning this sermon right now, he might say, "It has not been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon."

As many of you know, the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta has been hosting an exhausting series of evening meetings this week, a week called "Walkabout Week."

On June 2, in two weeks, the diocese will convene for the special election of a new bishop for the diocese. Six candidates have been formally offered for election, and they are six very fine people. I say that a bit modestly, for, as you know, I am one of those six candidates.

As a way for parishioners and delegates to get to know the candidates, all six candidates came together this past week. We spent each night in the same hotel in downtown Atlanta, and we spent each day visiting a different part of the diocese.

On Monday, we were at Camp Mikell, way up in northeast Georgia, in Toccoa. On Tuesday, we were here at the Cathedral and at the diocesan offices. On Wednesday, we were at the delightful Church of the Holy Comforter, in east Atlanta. On Thursday, we were at Emmaus House, and on Friday, we were at Church of the Holy Cross, in Decatur.

The evenings were far more grueling. The main feature of Walkabout Week is a series of evening question and answer sessions. For three and half hours each night, always in a different church of the diocese, the candidates walked from room to room to room and answered open questions from visitors and delegates.

Many of you from the Cathedral were there, and I thank you so much for supporting this process. We were in Gainesville on Monday night, at St. Luke's Atlanta on Tuesday night, in Macon on Wednesday night, in Roswell on Thursday night, and in Rome on Friday night.

Each night, faithful members of the Diocese of Atlanta asked us questions. Many questions were excellent. People asked us about our vision for the diocese, about our prayer lives, about our strengths and weaknesses, about all sorts of things. Some of the questions were also bizarre, and I don't want to repeat them! We had to be prepared for anything.

It reminded me, a bit, of standing in the receiving line after each service here at the Cathedral. When many of you come up to me, and to the other priests, after the service, we have no idea what you are going to say. Sometimes it is, "nice sermon!"

but other times you are commenting on something which is the furthest thing from our minds. We have to think fast! (But you always say something good!)

All in all, this was grueling week, and the six candidates""plus our spouses""are exhausted. In fact, the spouses may have suffered the most. They had to listen to the same answers in 28 different sessions! It is an exhausting process.

Maybe the best question I received was this: "Do you know any better way to choose a bishop?" My answer was, "Yes, put all six candidates in the same room, and have them decide who among them should be the bishop!"

But this is our process. This is the process that the Episcopal Church uses these days to seek, discern, and elect a new bishop of the church.

It was not like this a generation ago, and it probably will not be like this in the next generation. Every generation, and every area of the church, every region and diocese and country, has its own process.

In many of the Anglican churches across the world, new bishops are chosen by the existing bishops. It is the bishops only who get together and decide among themselves who the next bishop of an area or diocese will be. They choose who will join them in the House of Bishops. In the Church of England, bishops are also appointed, but by special commissions, including the state officials; and it is ultimately the Queen who issues the call.

In The Episcopal Church, here in the United States, the procedure involves a much more democratic process, much like the secular political process of the United States. Laypeople and clergy elect and choose new bishops.

In today's first lesson, from the book of The Acts of the Apostles, we read of still another model: the earliest record of choosing apostolic leaders in the Christian Church. In this passage, the apostles are gathered in Jerusalem seeking to do the right thing for the continuation of their identity and ministry. For them, the primary need was clear. They needed a twelfth member of the apostolic ministry. They needed twelve apostles.

Jesus, it seems, had made sure the number was twelve. At least that is the record of a couple of the gospel evangelists. The gospels are a bit unclear as to the exact names of the twelve; the actual names differ in the gospels. But no matter.

According to Luke, the writer of Acts, the apostles needed a twelfth. So, first they chose the finalists. They chose two nominees from among all the people who had been with them from the beginning, nominees who would be authentic witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. They nominated Barsabbas and Matthias.

They prayed. Then, they simply chose lots.

This morning, I want to salute those two men, who were willing to let their names go forward in the search process: Barsabbas and Matthias. For me, these two saints are the patron saints of elections.

Like all nominees, they were willing to be public with their possibility. Each one knew, I am sure, that he might not be chosen. But they were honored. More importantly, they were willing to be vulnerable, to be exposed, to be critiqued and analyzed.

This is the key feature of public nomination; they were willing to be vulnerable. That is what the six candidates for election in the Diocese of Atlanta are doing. We are willing to be public, willing to make an offering of ourselves for the greater common good. That means sacrificing some privacy, letting people comment on us, letting people ask us all sorts of questions.

In fact, it means sacrificing a lot of privacy. We know that people are saying all sorts of things about us. Some of it is accurate and true and good. Some of it is downright inaccurate and misleading and even pernicious. But that is the way of human curiosity, human speculation, and it is certainly the way of human politics.

The six of us, the six candidates, and our spouses, all spent considerable time together this past week, and I think I can say

that we enjoyed each other. We like each other! God has worked in each of us to bring us to this point, and we share lots of things in common. It has been fun for us to be priests in the Episcopal Church.

Maybe the most important thing we share, even though we never said this exactly, is a willingness to lose. We share a willingness to lose.

People who offer themselves for election always know that there is a distinct possibility that we will lose the election. I believe that is an important offering to the church. The offering of loss. The offering that, yes, I might lose. And that will be okay.

For me, Barsabbas and Matthias, those first two nominees for apostolic leadership in the church, are the patron saints of elections. I suppose that they both knew they might not be chosen. But they let their names stand, anyway.

And the name of Barsabbas was not chosen. He, then, might be called the patron saint of losers. According to the record of history, he lost. Alas, this is the only time in the New Testament that his name is even mentioned. There is a small legend about what might have happened to him, but nothing of any substance. He lost, and nothing more is heard about him.

I salute Barsabbas this morning, about whom we know nothing more than that he lost the election. He is the patron saint of losers.

But, here's the thing. What about the winner, the man whose name was chosen? What about Matthias, whose name was chosen, by lot, who became the twelfth apostle? Is he, therefore, to be remembered as the patron saint of winners?

Well, it turns out that, alas, this is the only time in the New Testament that his name is even mentioned, too! With him, too, there is a small legend about what might have happened to him, but nothing of any substance. He actually won, and yet nothing more is heard about him.

Barsabbas lost, and nothing more is heard about him. Matthias won, and nothing more is heard about him, either. Whether they won or lost, nothing more was heard about them. They began an apostolic succession, but their lives were not remembered. Maybe, apostolic leadership is not about being remembered individually.

And it's not just apostolic leadership, but leadership of any kind. I salute all those who offer themselves for service, whether it is in the church, or elsewhere for the common good. You who run for election anywhere, you who want to be leaders, you who sacrifice your privacy for the greater good anywhere. Your willingness to lose is, actually, a good example to all of us. To follow in the steps of the apostles is to be willing to lose yourself. To be willing to lose is the best form of Christian leadership. Christian leadership is being willing to lose.

Apostolic leadership, then, witnesses to something beyond individual identity, beyond individual pride, beyond whether one wins or loses. Apostolic succession is about witnessing to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a pattern of life that guides the Christian Church from generation to generation.

Finally, in Christ, there are no winners or losers. There is only the Body of Christ, with its many faithful members. The words of the blessed apostle Paul are the words of a true leader: "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so, then, whether we live or whether we die; we are the Lord's." (Romans 14.7-8).

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*