



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Thirteenth

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 16, 2021

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

Based on Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us what we should do. Amen.

Ride the elevator up to the top floor of any tall building in Manhattan and chances are you'll discover something rather curious. As you keep ascending from one floor to another, you'll most likely proceed directly from the floor labeled twelve to the floor labeled fourteen. Floor thirteen, you'll discover, officially doesn't exist. A 2015 survey of residential buildings in Manhattan examined 629 buildings with thirteen or more floors. Of these 629 buildings, only 55, or fewer than 9%, labeled one of their floors with the number thirteen.¹ In some buildings with no clearly identified floor thirteen, the real 13th floor is misleadingly labeled 14; in others, the 13th floor is simply closed off to the public and used for mechanical purposes.

Developers seem to believe that no one wants to live on the thirteenth floor, and they have a solid basis for making such an assumption. We Americans do not like the number thirteen. In fact, the fear of the number thirteen is so entrenched in modern Western societies like ours that the condition has a formal name: triskaidekaphobia.² The even more specific fear of Friday the 13th has its own name: paraskevidekatriphobia—a tongue twister if there ever was one.³

No one really knows how these fears developed: several theories exist, most of which are unsupported by concrete evidence. But it's possible that aversions to the number thirteen might have something to do with positive connotations of the number twelve. Twelve symbolizes completeness, at least in most Western contexts: there are twelve months in the year and twelve hours in a single rotation around the clock. The key numerical unit of the dozen signifies twelve of any one thing. It may be that the number thirteen messes with the sense of satisfaction we associate with the number twelve; perhaps thirteen de-centers us, jolting us out of the feelings of wholeness and comfort that the number twelve engenders.⁴

In the Hebrew Bible, the nation of Israel is divided into twelve tribes, named after the twelve sons of Jacob. In the New Testament, of course, Jesus chooses twelve apostles to become leaders within his growing movement, and, later on in the Gospels, Jesus makes the connection between the twelve apostles and the twelve tribes of Israel explicit. "You will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel," he tells the apostles gathered around him at the Last Supper.⁵

¹ Zachary Solomon, "The Truth Behind the 13th Floor: How Superstition Impacts Real Estate," <https://streeteasy.com/blog/why-no-13th-floor-in-many-buildings/>.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triskaidekaphobia>.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friday_the_13th.

⁴ Sean Hutchinson, "Why is Friday the 13th Considered Unlucky?" <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/52696/why-friday-13th-considered-unlucky>.

⁵ Luke 22:30. See also Matthew 19:28.

A problem arises, however, when one of the Twelve—a man by the name of Judas Iscariot—betrays Jesus on the final night of Jesus' life. The exact details differ depending on the particular account you follow, but the Gospels agree that, by turning his back on Jesus, Judas forfeits any chance he might have previously had to remain a leader in the Christian Church. In the absence of Judas, the nascent Church faces a leadership void. There are supposed to be twelve apostles: one for each of the tribes of Israel. Eleven apostles just won't cut it.

Shortly after Jesus' ascension, the apostle Peter assembles a hundred and twenty of the earliest Christians to select a thirteenth apostle—one to fill the slot that Judas had left open. As a disciple named Matthias learns that he has been nominated and then chosen to become this apostle, he probably feels pretty pleased with himself: blessed to have been given this opportunity, honored to have been picked over so many others. Matthias has just been elevated into the highest club that exists within the hierarchy of the early Christian church. Naturally, Matthias doesn't care about such petty things like status or power—after all, Jesus warned him to pay such things little mind—but Matthias can't deny that Apostleship is a big deal.

Still, even as he gratefully basks in his newfound glory, Matthias likely feels at least a twinge of resentment. Let's be honest: no one wants to be the thirteenth of anything. Compared to the other Apostles, Matthias is an afterthought, an add-on, the extra bagel thrown in because there's still room in the bag. According to the author of Acts, Matthias had faithfully followed Jesus from the earliest stage of his ministry, his baptism at the river Jordan. If you're a careful reader of the Gospels, you know that means Matthias was committed to the Christian Way before some of the Apostles had even met Jesus. Yet Matthias was passed over; Jesus chose those twelve other rascals for positions of honor instead of him.

For months, maybe years, Matthias watched from the periphery as Jesus designated Peter as the Rock on which he would build his Church and doted on the one disciple whom he loved, as Jesus chided James and John and invited Thomas to touch his wounded side. Matthias never got that kind of personal attention from his Christ. Matthias was never written into a memorable story in the Gospels. He stayed out of the spotlight, in the shadows. He was an extra in the crowd. To add insult to injury, one of the apostles whom Jesus selected instead of Matthias ended up precipitating Jesus' downfall. Our Savior didn't even think Matthias was as worthy as the one who would become the great betrayer.

Then, when it came time for the early Christians to determine Judas' replacement, they didn't pick Matthias for his merit. They cast lots to decide between him and another candidate. Matthias ultimately became an apostle because of pure chance.

We make a mistake, though, if we minimize the value of Matthias' contribution to the Christian cause. While Matthias may have come late to the party of apostleship, he is in some ways its most important guest. Without Apostle 13, the Twelve wouldn't have been the Twelve. One of the tribes of Israel would have gone without a judge; one of the thrones in heaven would have stayed empty; the Twelve would have remained incomplete. Matthias is not a superfluous addition to an otherwise self-sustaining group; he is essential, an absolutely integral part of the whole team.

Perhaps, in his steadfast patience, in his willingness to step back and let others take the lead, and in his readiness to accept the call when it is offered to him, Matthias has something to teach us about the true nature of Christian leadership. Matthias doesn't let his ambitions run wild; he doesn't try to shove his face in front of the boss at every possible opportunity; he doesn't aim to hog the limelight or the control. Matthias is content to simply show up, to support the leadership of others, to be part of the crowd. When Matthias is asked to take on more responsibility, however, he accepts. Matthias doesn't seek out the moment, but he is prepared when the moment seeks out him.

A few weeks ago, a member of our Saturday morning discussion group reminded me of a poem I came to love in college. It's a sonnet by the seventeenth century English poet John Milton, best known for his epic *Paradise Lost*. Legend has it that Milton wrote the sonnet after becoming blind as he wrestled with his diminishing ability to work in the ways he once had. The first half of the poem articulates Milton's fear that God might chide him for not using his talents to the fullest. In the second half of the poem, Milton realizes that he doesn't need to do or accomplish anything in order to please God. A personification of Patience enters into the poem to remind Milton that God does not need his effort or the fruit of his talents in order to survive. God will be just fine. Patience points out that thousands of people are tirelessly working for God all over the world around the clock. However, work is not the only way in which one can serve God, Patience explains, before adding this famous phrase: "they also serve who only stand and wait."⁶

We hear about Matthias on Sunday morning just once every three years, and he appears in the Bible only in the verses we read earlier. Matthias' ministry, however, was as important to the Church as Peter's or Paul's. The Church needs a sturdy rock on which to build; the Church needs a brilliant visionary to push things forward; and the Church needs a faithful disciple who completes the circle, who makes things whole. You don't have to be the star of the show in order to make a difference. You don't have to call the shots in order to change things for the better. You don't have to tirelessly labor in order to transform the world. You just have to show up. God will do the rest.

Amen.

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⁶ John Milton, "Sonnet 19: When I consider how my life is spent," <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44750/sonnet-19-when-i-consider-how-my-light-is-spent>.