

Not #1?

Acts 1:21-26

[21] So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, [22] beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” [23] And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. [24] And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen [25] to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” [26] And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles. (ESV)

A young pastor in Eastern Montana, who had gained some local fame with a weekly radio program, was invited to speak to a church group in a neighboring town. He felt flattered by the invitation until he arrived at the hall where he was supposed to talk. He found out that he was the group’s second choice. Someone else had been asked first and turned them down. When he introduced the minister, the master of ceremonies jokingly referred to that fact. And then, trying to be funny, the MC pointed to a broken window pane on one wall of the building. In it, a piece of cardboard had been inserted to keep out the bad weather. “Our speaker tonight,” he said, “is kind of like that piece of cardboard in the window. He’s a substitute.”

The young pastor didn’t know quite how to take that. He decided that he would do his best, second choice or not. And he did. Like a boxer who had just been knocked down but not out, he gave a wonderful presentation. When he finished and sat down, the MC once again got up and made an even worse attempt to thank him. He said, “Reverend, we want you to know that you are no cardboard substitute – you are a real pane! Works for Intentional Interim Pastors, too!

We like and even admire people who rise above the situation and do well. We are influenced by the times and the people around us, by not only

rising to the challenge, but doing very well.

WE’RE #1 is the chant of all the fans, whenever the team is tops. Our culture gets all lathered up about being #1 -- but not #2. The sales reps want to be at the top of the sales lists. The department supervisor wants to be the plant manager. Many teachers want to be principal. Doctors want to be chief of staff.

We are all products of a competitive educational system, complete with grades and awards for achievement. We are structured to celebrate success. We are part of a culture than ranks and rewards us. We are highly conditioned to succeed, to be #1.

We have no quarrel with the pursuit of excellence. But the fact remains that not everyone can be #1. Only a few have the gifts, the skill, and the drive to be #1.

Gary Moore was a television game show personality in the 1950’s. He was rewarded for his many years of service on CBS by being made a vice president of the network. He was sort of bragging about it to a friend one, and the friend chuckled at his “promotion.” He told Gary that it was a meaningless title, and that most companies dish out vice presidencies like they pass out water bottles. When Gary Moore refused to believe that, his friend, who worked for the National Biscuit Company, told him that company even had a vice president in charge of fig newtons, and if Gary didn’t believe that, he could call Nabisco and check it out. So Gary did, and when the switchboard operator answered, he asked for the vice president in charge of fig newtons. She kindly responded, “Did you want the vice president for packaged fig newtons or bulk fig newtons?”

The world is full of vice presidents, and other number two people. There are tons of number two people, or those who ended up in a tie for it. Only a few get to be number 1.

We want to be people who contribute to success and are recognized for it. At the root of it all is more than just our egos. We want to know that life is more than a number or a rating. When one of the superstars in a professional sport gets traded, we often see a headline that says something like “All

Star gets traded with second string player.” Don’t you wonder what it feels like to be that unnamed player? Can you imagine his son or daughter proclaiming – “That’s my Dad – second string.” Most of us are going to take our places among the legions of the anonymous, and we know what it’s like to be quite forgettable characters.

The patron saint of second stringers might be the man named in our text, a man named Justus. After Judas took his own life, it was determined to replace him because the work was important and urgent. Two men were considered as his replacement. Justus and Matthias. Both men were qualified. Both had experience. Both had served faithfully and had been followers of Jesus. The 120 disciples present loved them both. They were very good men, godly men. But only one would be chosen. They were confident in how the choice would be made. First, they prayed.

“You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen [25] to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” They cast lots, and through the process, God indicated his choice.

But we can’t help but wonder how Justus felt. Qualified, experienced, gifted by God. 120 of his friends knew he had what it takes. But Matthias was chosen. How does it feel, Justus, – NOT to be #1?

If he felt hurt or past over, is there any healing for this hurt? Can anything good be said about Justus? Did he have a sense of worth? Of course he did, and he didn’t have to win a selection process to prove it. We are not justified before God because we are competitive and we prevail. We are justified before God by His grace alone. Our worth and dignity before God are not determined by promotions, awards, honors, raises, or ratings. Not even by the casting of lots. We have worth because we have become the children of God by faith, by baptism, by grace.

When Martin Luther got depressed or down on himself, or if heard about undeserved criticism, he would proclaim, “But I was baptized.” It was the way he put his identity and his worth back into

perspective. It is our trust in God that puts our serious worries to rest.

John the Baptist was at the height of his influence when Jesus stepped forward into his ministry. John’s influence decreased, and many of his followers left John for Jesus. Another kind of person might have become bitter. Not John. He said “He MUST increase, but I must decrease.” There was a person who had a solid sense of his worth, he confidently saw his place in God’s plan, even though it was not as #1.

The passing of time has a way of validating human worth. The criteria does not start with being competitive and surpassing others. The Apostle Paul and the emperor Nero pursued completely different paths of human activity in the first century after Christ, and by the world’s standards, Nero seemed to have everything and Paul got nothing except stonings, beatings, prison and a death sentence. Nero claimed divinity for himself, while Paul refused to do so, even though he met people who thought he should. At that time, Nero appeared to have the last word, yet no one today sees it that way. Countless people name their sons PAUL and their dogs NERO.

Do you feel like #2, or even much lower? It’s not so bad. It’s not so bad if you personally know #1, and you understand that he loved you so much, he died for you so that you can live together with him – FOREVER. Amen.

Philip Tesch
May 28, 2017
North Highlands, California