

"HOW DO WE CHOOSE?"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
May 12, 1991

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### INTRODUCTION

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Is that a good method for choosing? Praying and then letting your Bible fall open to a page to give you guidance. Remember the man who followed this practice and his Bible fell open to the verse, "And Judas went and hanged himself". He tried again and this time it read, "Go thou and do likewise." Still not satisfied, he went back and tried it a third time and this time read, "And what thou doest - do quickly".

Is this a good method to follow? How do we choose? How do we make the right decision? And even more importantly, how do we know God's will for our lives?

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Well, first, they prayed. So far...so good. Then, they cast lots and Matthias won...and thus became the 12th disciple. Is this a good way to determine the will of God? Should we pray, then flip a coin or roll some dice, or draw straws?

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However, he was a tough, persevering young man. He hung in there till things got better and he was such a hard worker that he managed to earn back what he had lost and more. He had cash again and he decided to get out of the real estate business. He had a new decision to make - either invest in a new computer company with the funny name, APPLE, or invest in a Savings and Loan. He invested in the Savings and Loan...seemed safer, but he lost all his money again.

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A lot of people prefer to go through life being "fence straddlers"...a bit of this...a bit of that. However, sometimes it is important that a decision... any decision...be made. You can't postpone the great questions of life for ever...even though some would like to.

Top executives are paid some fantastic salaries primarily for their ability to make tough decisions. Tycoon T. Boone Pickens speaking at George Washington University this time last year said to the young people there:

"Be willing to make decisions. That's the most important quality in a good leader. Don't fall victim to what I call the 'ready aim-aim-aim-aim syndrome'. You must be willing to fire!"

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"I emphasize the point because the number one failing that I see in small and large organizations is the failure to do stuff...and an environment where we know nothing for sure, the best antidote is, to quote my dad who use to say, 'DON'T JUST STAND THERE. DO SOMETHING!'"

There are three reasons why even a suspect system like casting lots was better for the disciples than standing around "doing nothing". First of all, Christ had given them a world to save. And they needed to get at it. Secondly, they really could not make a bad decision. Both men had the right stuff, both were men of sold character. So often in life we fuss and fume over decisions that are important, but from all available evidence, are nearly equal in merits. We might as well go ahead and make a decision and get on with our lives!

But now, let's move on...to the final page and final point of this message.

THE LIFE OF FAITH DEMANDS ACTION

To me, the final reason is perhaps the most important of all. The life of faith demands action. There's very little faith involved in a constant analysis of a situation. Faith demands action and not casual drift.

It demands that we get moving. God spoke to Abraham and he got moving toward a land he knew not of. God spoke to Moses and he got moving toward Egypt and the might and power of the Pharaoh. God spoke to the disciples. It was important they get moving and so it is with our lives. Faith demands action.

There may be some one person sitting here this morning who has been putting off making an important decision. You've prayed about it. You've agonized about it. You've considered the options. You've recited your litany of "IFS". Now, maybe now it's the time to act...to move out on the promises of God.

But you say to yourself, "how do I know it's the right decision?" Maybe I should wait a bit longer...til things are more set in my life. Does it sound familiar to you. I can only say this to you. If you keep putting it off, you may never get around to doing it. Sometimes in life we have no way of knowing for sure if we're making the right decision at the right time, but if we ask ourselves if our decision is in the mind and spirit of Jesus and if we have prayed about it and asked God for a bit of His guidance, then we need to move ahead...forward and make the decision, trusting that the God who has loved us since we were conceived in our dear mother's womb will be with us and will take our decision and use it to our best good and the best good of those we love.

The more you reflect on this text, you come to see that this is not about decision making at all, but about trust. About trust! God probably smiled and shook His head when He saw the disciples down on their knees "casting lots"... but they were His people and He wasn't going to let their decision turn out bad, regardless of how they arrived at it. And so I'd like to believe it is with us, too.

The "Hounds of Heaven" on Tuesday evenings have been reading and talking together about Thomas Merton's No Man Is An Island. Father Thomas Merton wrote in his journal of the time he was going through a time of personal depression. Hear his words:

"My Lord God....I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end...nor do I really know myself. And the fact that I think I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe, dear Father, that the desire to please You does in fact please You, and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And so I believe that if I do this, You will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore, I will trust You always; though I may seem to be lost in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for You are with me and You will never leave me to face my peril alone".

CLOSING

So...what do you think? Were the eleven disciples right to cast their lots to choose their 12th comrade replacing Judas. They were gamers. I think we can say this: they were right to go ahead and make a decision, whatever the method. For remember, the life of faith is a life of action. (Don't just stand there...do something). And the life of faith is a life of trust that the God you and I worship will not allow us to make a decision that is unredeemable.

So, how should we make those important decisions, like who to marry...and should we take that new job...first, pray. Yes. Then weigh the various options. Then bring it all together. Act. With a bit of courage...remembering that courage is faith that has said its prayers. Make that decision and move forward trusting that the God who loves you and me will be with us every step of the way.

PRAYER

Our lives are not always easy, O God, and we ask for strength to meet those difficult things and to make those tough decisions that the days may bring to us. Help us to put the past behind us and to pour all our energies into the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes always steadfastly on Him who for us is the Way, the Truth and the Life. In the spirit of Christ we pray. Amen.

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