



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Easter 7

June 1, 2025

Numbered Among Us

Acts 1:12–26

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴ All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, ¹⁶ "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." ¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. ¹⁹ And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰ "For it is written in the Book of Psalms,

" 'May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it';

and

" 'Let another take his office.' "

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.

Our earliest Lutheran forefathers had great confidence in the "living and abiding Word of God" (1 Pe. 1:23). So confident were they in the unfailing power of God's Word that these men confessed before kings and princes their belief that God's Word does its good



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work no matter what. God's Word does its work even when wicked and unbelieving men preach it and administer the sacraments. Our Lutheran forefathers boldly proclaimed,

We know that the Word and the sacraments are efficacious [that is, powerful and faith-producing] even when wicked men administer them (Apology VII.19).

This was Luther's own personal confession as well, as he stated in his Large Catechism:

Even though a knave should administer it, it is the true sacrament (that is, Christ's body and blood) just as truly as when one uses it most worthily. For it is not founded on the holiness of men but on the Word of God (Large Catechism, The Sacrament of the Altar.15).

Several decades later, the second generation of Lutherans confirmed and repeated this confession that God's Word and sacraments remain powerful and beneficial for you, even if your pastor or preacher should only pretend to be a believer but not himself believe:

Even though a rascal receives or gives the sacrament, it is the true sacrament (that is, Christ's body and blood) just as much as when one does so in the most worthy manner, for the sacrament is not based on the holiness of men but on the Word of God (Formula of Concord, SD VII.24).

Our Lutheran forefathers repeatedly made this good confession because there were many Christians in many congregations who had great fears about their salvation. For many years, these Christians had listened to the preaching of men whom they later discovered did not even know what they were talking about when it came to God's Word of forgiveness and life. These Christians had spent their lives receiving Holy Communion from men whom they later learned did not even believe in Holy Communion; they brought their children to be baptized by men who were, at the very core, deniers of Baptism. These Christians wanted to know, was it all for nothing? In answer to their fears, our Lutheran forefathers declared, No!

We know that the Word and Sacraments are efficacious [that is, powerful and faith-producing] even when wicked men administer them (Apology VII.19).

Imagine the great terror Christians in the Early Church felt when they learned that Judas Iscariot had betrayed Jesus. Aside from their sorrow over this man's act, think also of the fear and trembling that had occurred to these earliest Christians in the Church. Not



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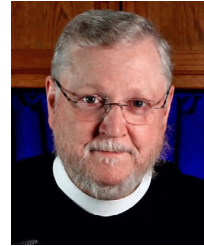
only had Judas caused the arrest and crucifixion of their dear Lord; not only was this "son of destruction" (John 17:12) personally lost and condemned; but Judas had baptized people (John 4:1) and had preached that "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mat. 10:5-7). Forget the fact Judas may well have gone to hell. What about those people who had received Baptism at his hand? Was their Baptism rendered powerless by Judas' unbelief? What about those who believed Judas when he preached the kingdom of God? Had they believed for nothing? Was their faith in vain?

St. Peter answers such fears in today's First Reading. His word of assurance follows the same line as that of our Lutheran forefathers. Peter declares concerning Judas the Betrayer, "He was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." That is to say, Judas Iscariot had been given the office of an apostle – "he had his share in this ministry" – and God's Word faithfully did its work through Judas' office. Peter does not invalidate any of Judas' apostolic acts, but he recognizes and declares even after Judas' terrible death that Judas had preached and baptized according to the Word of God. "He was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry."

A lot of debate has taken place over the centuries as to whether Judas was ever even a Christian. Some people say that he never was, but that he was a pretender and a hypocrite from day one. Others see the possibility that he might once have been a Christian, but then later fell from the faith into unbelief. Peter's point in today's text takes these concerns about Judas' personal faith completely off the table. It truly doesn't matter whether Judas ever was a believer or not. Why? Because Judas "was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry."

I find it a bit surprising that so many of our fellow Christians are quick to encourage their pastors to throw away the liturgy for other worship forms. I also find it surprising that so many of my fellow pastors go ahead and do that. Do they forget who's supposed to be leading the congregation's worship? Or do they sympathize with those who want to replace the ancient liturgy with homemade worship forms? Beloved, we owe our allegiance to the collective wisdom of the Church of all ages, not to some current trend which never accomplishes what we think it will. What we owe to the generations that come after us is to hand down to them the historic liturgy that actually connects them to the Church of all ages, which, according to recent research, is precisely what younger "seekers" are looking for. Every Christian – for his own sake and for the sake of his fellow saints – ought to insist that his pastor follow the liturgy faithfully, complete with its form of Absolution and its Service of the Sacrament. These forms ought not to be changed at anyone's whim and design so that you may always be assured that you will unfailingly hear God's Word of forgiveness and eternal life, even if your pastor or other leaders should turn out to be unbelievers.

Why? Because even if Judas was an unbeliever, he baptized under the authority of Jesus (John 4:1) and according to the pattern Jesus had given him. Even if Judas was an



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unbeliever, he nevertheless proclaimed the words that Jesus Himself had instructed him to preach: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mat. 10:5-7). In the same way, if your pastor or other church leaders should someday prove to have been fake Christians and unbelievers, the powerful and life-giving Word of God will have remained in your midst nonetheless.

We know that the Word and Sacraments are efficacious [that is, powerful and faith-producing] even when wicked men administer them (Apology VII.19).

This is a good thing for you, dear Christian. Today's reading from the Book of Acts proclaims to you the joyous news that your forgiveness, your salvation, your righteousness and holiness do not depend upon anything other than the powerful, life-giving Word of God.

Now, just to be clear, I *do* believe in the forgiveness of sins. The one point of today's sermon is that this forgiveness of sins is fully yours and it comes to you through the Absolution (John 20:21-22) whether I personally believe it or not.

We know that the Word and Sacraments are efficacious [that is, powerful and faith-producing] even when wicked men administer them (Apology VII.19).

I also believe in the true body and blood of our Lord, given and poured out both for you and for me (Mat. 26:26-28). The one point of today's sermon is that even if I should fall from the faith as Judas fell, you receive no less of Christ from an unbeliever than you do from the holiest of all pastors or bishops.

Even though a rascal receives or gives the sacrament, it is the true sacrament (that is, Christ's body and blood) just as much as when one does so in the most worthy manner, for the sacrament is not based on the holiness of men but on the Word of God (Formula of Concord, SD VII.24).

Dear Christian friends, I say these things to you for your certainty, that you may believe and that nothing at all – not even your pastor – shall disturb your faith. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen