



Moving Forward



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
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The Seventh Sunday in Easter
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When the NFL season starts this fall, the reigning champions will be without their star quarterback. It was announced this week that Tom Brady, of the Super Bowl-winning New England Patriots, has been suspended for the first four games of the upcoming regular season for his part in what's become known as "deflategate." That's the controversy over underinflated footballs in January's AFC championship game between the Patriots and the Indianapolis Colts. The Patriots won the game – a win that propelled them to the Super Bowl. An investigation found Brady was, quote, "generally aware that Patriots employees were letting air out of game balls," something that might've given the Patriots quarterback an unfair advantage.

When it comes to the Patriots, most people either love 'em or hate 'em. There's not a lot of middle ground with this team. That's also true of their quarterback Tom Brady, who regardless of whether you love him or can't stand him, is regarded as one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time. He's a pretty impressive figure.

So, I wasn't surprised when I received a call earlier this week from Ann, a seminary friend from Massachusetts. Ann is one of those people who LOVES the Patriots and adores Tom Brady. I used to go to Ann's house for Super Bowl parties during seminary. Not only did she have an incredible amount of Pats' paraphernalia – jerseys, footballs, and other merchandise – Ann also had Patriot themed hors d'oeuvres! She is a diehard Pats fan. So I wasn't surprised when she called that our conversation soon turned to how saddened she was by deflategate and how disappointed she was with Tom Brady and the role he played in the scandal.

Ann told me she felt like she had been betrayed by a friend. Granted, Ann does not know Tom Brady personally, but she's come to admire him over the years. Her sense of disappointment and betrayal was palpable. To her, Tom Brady was a sort of role model. He was a leader, someone others looked up to and admired.

Tom Brady is not the first person in a leadership position to have betrayed the trust instilled in them by their fans or constituents. He's only the most recent in a long

line of people to have fallen short of expectations. Because, well, we're all human. We tend to set high standards for ourselves and others. And sometimes others, and we too, are incapable of achieving these standards. When a trusted leader surprises us and falls short of our expectations, it hurts, even if we do not know them personally. Tom Brady's betrayal of trust affects my friend Ann in a peripheral way. But what about when we are hurt by someone in a personal way?

When we are hurt by someone we know personally, someone we have a relationship with, the cut is even deeper. Perhaps you've had someone in your life that has fallen short of your expectations. Maybe a coworker or friend has betrayed your trust? Or maybe a loved one unexpectedly failed to live up to your hopes. We all fall short of expectations at times. Despite our best attempts, no one is perfect. We all fall short in ways that are small and sometimes in ways that are big. Our communal confession, which we state together every Sunday, when we're not in the Easter season, puts it like this, "we have sinned against you (you being God) and against one another." We all mess up.

That being said, when we experience personal betrayal, it still hurts. The emotional aftermath following a radical betrayal of trust can include a wide range of emotions, including anger, grief, confusion, loss of confidence in one's judgment, or enduring suspicion of other people's reliability.

I don't know how you respond to betrayal, but when I feel hurt by someone I trust, it can be tempting for me to shut down emotionally. When this happens, I run the risk of getting stuck in a place of regret. I tend to wallow in that feeling for a while. And so, when I read our first reading from Acts, I began to wonder if Jesus' disciples might have felt similar feelings after learning about Judas' betrayal of trust and his death.

It seems clear that Judas' betrayal of Jesus left a deep wound in the early Christian community. Judas was "one of the twelve." Powerful opponents might have called for Jesus' execution, Pilate might have sentenced him to death, Roman soldiers might have nailed him to the cross, but they were outsiders. Judas was an insider. He shared in the preaching, teaching and healing ministry Jesus commissioned the disciples for. He was their friend and confidant. It is safe to assume that their friends' betrayal and death affected the remaining eleven disciples to the core.

How did they get past it? How did this resurrection community birth new life from the pain of Judas' loss? Our reading from Acts this morning sheds some light on

the matter. We hear a story of Peter, one of the twelve, helping the community to regroup, naming the pain of betrayal, and seeking a way forward. The story ends with a new leader counted among the twelve to share in the ministry of witnessing to the resurrection.

At first read, this may seem like the disciples are simply replacing Judas, but I think there's more to learn from the process the disciples go through in this story than its outcome. What we hear taking place in this story, is a focus first on the practice of listening and discerning through prayer. Second, we hear the disciples rely upon people of rich experience and deep integrity. In this case, Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. And third, they trust in God to provide an answer. They don't shut down. They don't get lost in regret. The disciples pray, seek input, and take action. The scars left by Judas, no doubt, still remained with the disciples, but they did not rule the disciples' actions, nor hinder the ministry they were called to. When faced with painful memories, the disciples' course of action is prayer, discernment, conversation, and action.

If you are struggling with personal pain, if you have been let down by someone, or simply don't understand why someone else has hurt you, perhaps some reflection on the disciples' grieving and moving forward process may be helpful. We all fall short at times. We sin against God and one another time and time again. But we are people of resurrection and reconciliation. God, in the Risen Christ, calls us to new life and forward movement. May the disciples' actions be an example to us of how a Christian community and individuals move forward. And may it remind us that God will always, always, make a way for people of resurrection to rise.

Amen.