

*Clara Lyford*

I am awful at making decisions. It's not that I stress out about what to pick, it's more like I feel that all my choices could be good options. Picking out socks in the morning is rough. And don't even get me started on choosing a college. So when I saw in the reading today that the disciples cast lots to choose who would be their 12th member, I thought, "That's a pretty great idea! Maybe I should start carrying some dice around with me to roll when I need to make a decision!"

It feels like in my life, I'm constantly being asked to make decisions. Especially as a senior in high school, I've had to make choices that will impact the rest of my life. But despite what all the college mail tells me, my (and your) life's trajectory will probably be mostly influenced by a thousand random events, a thousand rolls of the dice.

The summer before my freshman year of high school, my parents told me I had to choose a sport to do. It was COVID, we were in online school, and they wanted me to have an outlet where I could meet new people. I considered my options, and after some deliberation, and some eenie meenie miney mo, I chose cross country. I had never run before, and I didn't know anyone on the team, but I showed up to practice the first day, saw that I was one of only two girls, and decided to make the most of it. Four years later, I've made some of my closest friends through running, and next year I'm going to continue my track career as a pole vaulter in college.

Picking cross country was an extremely random choice - I could have just as easily picked volleyball, soccer, or tennis, but taking that path, and embracing it has had a huge influence on the trajectory of my life so far. Trusting in chance is a way to practice faith. There is only so much control we have over our lives, and allowing myself to let go and trust that God will move through any type of choice is freeing.

However there are things that can't be left up to randomness. I've learned that I need to trust my feelings when making decisions. Kind of like Marie Condo asking "what brings you joy?" when cleaning out your house, connecting to your spirituality and asking yourself what makes you feel whole is helpful in making decisions. Finding a space where I feel grounded to do this has always been helpful for me.

I've always felt my spirituality the strongest when I'm backpacking. Being multiple days hike away from civilization and the internet, and carrying everything I need to take care of myself on my back makes me feel grounded and my wholest self in a way that feels like the closest thing to God's presence. St. Paul's is another place I feel this, because I'm surrounded by a community of people who I've known my whole life. I'm sure you guys also have a space like this, where you feel like you want to be the best version of yourself. Being in these spaces helps me make my best decisions, because I feel comfortable and grounded, and when I'm trying to make a big choice, going to either one of these places is helpful.

While letting randomness take the reins sometimes can lead to amazing things, I've also learned that, no matter how much I may want to, I cannot just leave it up to chance with every decision. The

apostles make this clear through their actions too - although they cast lots to choose the 12th disciple, the other 11 are chosen carefully, and those intentional decisions shape their lives' trajectory just as much as the random choices.

One of the hardest decisions to make as a teenager is how to spend my time. I've always loved to stay busy, and I get involved in a lot of things, which means, especially as I've gotten older, I often overbook myself. I often have to make decisions on which things I need to skip, and which are things that I want to prioritize. The things I choose to put my time and effort into mean a lot to me, and St Paul's, especially the choir program, has always been an intentionally large part of my life.

Committing time and effort to the things you love, whether that's activities, people, God, or even your sleep is a decision you have to make. To me, this type of intentional decision is just as much an act of faith as trusting that leaving things up to fate will end well.

As I get ready to go to college next year, I'm realizing now that St. Paul's has been a space where I can feel like my wholest self and contemplate my hardest decisions. From the joining choir with Dr. Nelson when I was five, (which was not my decision) to giving me a space where I can contemplate my hardest decisions now, I'm so grateful for what this community has given me. As I start to move on next year, I'll be looking for my next space where I can channel my spirituality and roll my dice!

*Linnea Koops*

Good morning. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Linnea Koops, and I will be the first to admit that I am a diehard rule follower. I have been since my childhood. "Ask forgiveness rather than permission" is not a practice that I follow—although I'm working on it. Sometimes I even read the terms and conditions. And it's very easy to read what's outlined in today's reading from First John—and, for that matter, most of Scripture—as a set of rules that need to be followed. They may be rules, but they're not rules as we've been taught to perceive them. This isn't just, "Don't run with scissors" or "don't talk when the teacher is talking", but a rule that shapes a community. It's not a, "Because I said so", but a "Because this is the right way to live." In our passage from 1st John, we get a glimpse at the formation of an early Christian community, in what is now Turkey. The early church faced persecution and internal disagreements, and John was writing to them to remind them of what united them—what *really* mattered, the testimony of God, and their belief in the eternal life granted by God. John doesn't say that building a healthy, vibrant community is easy work. Instead, he reminds these early believers of the principles that their community is founded on. The community isn't strong because of any one individual, but because of their shared strength and their shared beliefs. Communities aren't built on their own; community building is intentional and purposeful.

Much of Scripture can be read as a recipe for community-building. The tenets of resource usage as described in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, where farmers were instructed not to harvest the edges of their fields, ensured that the marginalized members of the community would not be forgotten. In Acts, we see how the disciples shared everything that they have, abandoning their attachment to their possessions to create a community founded instead in generosity and love. The

instructions found in Scripture can certainly read like messages to individuals, commandments to you and you alone, but the truth is that much of these instructions are speaking to a *community* of faith—a group of people gathered together to support each other and live a God-shaped life. It is impossible to be a Christian alone. Communities seeking to display and live into God’s love aren’t perfect, and still fall short. Still, we support each other, make each other more resilient, and hold each other accountable. In a time when such an emphasis is placed on individual merit, choosing instead to live in community is an act of resistance.

I’ve been very fortunate to find such an affirming and welcoming community at St. Paul’s. Singing Evensongs with the choirs, learning about the different shades of Scripture interpretation in youth group, talking with my intergenerational spirituality group “Centered”, and getting to help teach the kids in Godly Play, all have helped me see what a vibrant community has formed at St. Paul’s. And, drawing from this passage, I wonder what we can do as a community seeking to live out God’s love in all facets of our lives to further strengthen our community, because a static community is not a thriving community. How can we welcome the “other”, resist division while celebrating our diversity, and ground ourselves in the truths that unite us—our knowledge of a loving God and our belief in eternal life, just as Christians around the world have been doing for thousands of years? As I prepare to step away from this community and immerse myself in a new one, I hope that we all can renew our commitment to strengthening this community, holding each other accountable and supporting each other on this journey.