

“Disciples”
I Samuel 3:1-10, Matthew 4:18-22
November 10, 2019

“Church is for sinners.” That’s one of the more recent excuses I’ve heard for not attending Sunday services. Jesus himself said something of the same when He stated that He had come to save those who were lost. Or, as He put it in one of the gospels, “Those who are well need no physician; but those who are sick, do.” I wonder if my unchurched acquaintance realized that he was in 100% agreement with a Savior of whom he insisted he had no need.

This guy wasn’t alone, of course. The idea that church is for sinners made my paternal grandmother more than a bit uncomfortable. How else could one explain her reluctance to attend services more than a couple of times a year, if that? Besides, from a very early age I - as her “favorite grandson” (she had no other grandchildren at all, mind you) - I was showing signs of spending “too much time” in church. But since my parents kept mum about it, my grandmother wasn’t going to interfere.

But whether you think of church-goers as “sinners” or “sick” (that was the term Jesus used) or something else, we can’t escape it: Christians are, for the most part, rather ordinary. We have shortcomings, failures, difficulties. There’s very little we can point to that would show we’re superior to others ... and if we did, that would only serve as confirmation that we were overwhelmed by a sense of foolish pride - that’s one of the seven deadly sins, by the way.

The twelve disciples were just ordinary people, too. Of all the individuals written about in the Bible, we know perhaps the least about these Twelve. By contrast, think of Moses: we know about his birth, where he grew up, what he talked like, who his in-laws were, what important positions he held, and so on. Moving to the New Testament, think of John the Baptist: we know what kind of clothes he wore, what he ate, how he met his end. But what about the twelve disciples?

Of Peter and John we know the most; of James, a little less. Of Andrew and Bartholomew, almost nothing. Some of the twelve disciples are so obscure that the gospels can't even agree as to what their names were. Matthew lists someone by the name of Lebbaeus, and that's the last we hear of him. We know that Philip spoke to an Ethiopian; Matthew himself used to be a tax collector; Judas was a villain. But beyond that, the Bible is almost silent about the Twelve except for the fact that they were the inner circle of disciples of Jesus of Nazareth.

In scripture, they have little importance separate from Christ Himself. Just about anything they do or anything that happens to them we know about not because of themselves, but because of Jesus. They were very, very ordinary people.

And yet, even Protestants - who put little stock in titles like "saint," refer to Luke as Saint Luke, to Mark as Saint Mark. We all recognize them as having a distinctive status, even if it's only because they are ordinary people who found their greatness in Christ.

And so Jesus said to James and John, who were mending their nets, "Follow me, and I will show you how to fish for men's souls." They must have asked themselves wonderingly, "With a net?" Well, yes, only in this case the net is the fine-meshed love of God that will not let the smallest soul slip through.

As the Apostle Paul would ask in a later generation, "Who is sufficient for these things?" Can ordinary people cast the net of divine love so that not one soul will be lost? God wants, indeed God needs, people who will listen to the call, for God has something very important to say, and his words need to become incarnate within us, and through our actions.

Indeed, disciples are under orders, no longer seeking their own ends. And the truth that life is not some kind of holiday for our exclusive enjoyment, that the creation is not here to serve us, and that we are owed something merely because we are who we are, suddenly leads to the realization that it's not all about US. Life is a campaign, an

expedition, in which we will prove ourselves not through our own resources, but in how faithful we are to following the divine imperative.

There are many jobs to be done, many tasks to fulfill. And as many different kinds of assignments there are that need to be completed, God needs different people. People who can do ordinary things extraordinarily well, in extraordinary ways.

How different were the twelve disciples, one from another? One was named Simon the Canaanite. Luke calls him Simon the Zealot. Beyond that, scripture is silent about this man. But from history we know a lot about the people called Zealots. They were sworn enemies of the public order, leading revolution against Roman rule, challenging the local Jewish aristocracy, resisting the decadent bureaucracy that was sucking the lifeblood of the people. Simon the Zealot was working right alongside Matthew, one of those very bureaucrats who had leached off the poor, who had served the aristocracy, and who had been a willing tool of Roman repression.

Normally, if you were to put Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector in the same room together, you would have a combination worse than dynamite plus an ignited fuse. Matthew represented all that Simon was sworn to overthrow. On the other hand, Simon represented to Matthew the repulsive and vulgar element of society that was beneath contempt. And yet, in Christ these two people found a common ground. In Jesus, the two could work for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Don't imagine that the disciples, left to themselves, would have called each other, would have banded together on their own, for any other reason. I'm not so sure any of us here would have wanted to sit in the same pew as either of those two. Under normal circumstances, it just would not have made sense.

But being a disciple of Jesus takes what is normal and everyday, and then transforms it in the Spirit of God. It allows us to see what is good in those whom we would otherwise reject as unacceptable. It allows us to make common ground with people we otherwise would never give the time of day.

Yes, the disciples were a motley crew. And yet Jesus must have had reason enough for calling these particular fishermen to work with a physician and various public enemies: it wasn't as if these were the only followers Jesus had - thousands came to Christ for teaching, comfort, physical healing, spiritual support. Why these twelve? Perhaps we'll never know. They certainly made their mistakes in their way. James, for example, was opposed to allowing any non-Jews to become Christians. Peter found himself being called "Satan" by Christ Himself. In modern English, the words "doubt" and "Thomas" go together, and "Judas" all by itself means "traitor."

But Jesus called them together. When they kept their eyes on their Master, they found a common purpose in Him. When they lost sight of their Lord and the coming Kingdom, their common discipleship dissolved in human divisiveness and earthly concerns. As we grow this congregation together, let us not make the same mistakes. And let us not draw to ourselves people who are already just like us, or so focus on our differences that our community of faith becomes unworkable.

Let us open our doors, our minds, and our hearts so that we might make true the words of scripture, that "Whosoever will, may come."

Let us pray: