



2nd Pentecost – 6.14.2020

Proper 6 / A

“Called To Be Jesus’ Dirty Dozen”

Genesis 18:1-15 & 21:1-7; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:23

Twelve.

Twelve is one of those rare numbers to which people in many cultures have for centuries attributed special significance. In the English language, we even have a special name for the number twelve – a dozen. More interestingly for us this morning, it is a very significant number in the Bible, used around 200 times. We might think about the twelve Minor Prophets of the Old Testament, Jacob’s twelve sons, the twelve tribes of Israel, twelve governors of Israel appointed by Solomon, and Revelation’s tree of life producing twelve fruits.

And, of course, Jesus’ twelve specially recruited disciples who become known by the special name, the twelve apostles.

When we review the resumes of these original primary followers of Jesus, they were an unusual and unremarkable group to be chosen, especially when we think about what they would be asked to do: to be Christ’s ambassadors and agents in the field. In some ways, we might consider them to be somewhat like the “dirty dozen” soldiers featured in a 1967 movie of the same name. Although it is over fifty years old, some of you may well remember the film, especially for its cast comprised of most of the male Hollywood stars of the day, many of whom are no longer with us: well-known names like Lee Marvin, Ernest Borgnine, Charles Bronson, Trini Lopez, Telly Savalas, Donald Sutherland. Based on a true story, it portrays

a special military operation on the eve of D-Day. The American high command orders an unorthodox officer with a huge attitude problem to select a twelve-man squad for a high-risk mission that carried a very high probability of failure, and the likely death of most of the combatants. Surprisingly, the officer did not go about recruiting the best soldiers in his outfit, but instead visits military prisons. Among those he chooses for the team are thieves and murderers, all of them with death sentences or very long prison terms. Despite all bets to the contrary, the commander molds them into an effective force to parachute behind enemy lines and wreak havoc for the German generals gathered at a rest house just before the Allied forces' invasion of Europe. As the film unfolds, the wisdom of the Major selecting this "dirty dozen" becomes clear as their criminal skills prove perfect for the demands of the risky mission. In the end, this highly unlikely, rag-tag band of brothers get the job done, and the high-risk suicide mission a huge success.

Of course, we can't condone or affirm the behavior of these criminals, but the story presents an interesting plot centered around a dozen men whom the world did not regard with honor or respectability. They seem ill-suited for such a critically important task. However, as the story shows, in the right situation, with a unique sort of guidance and goal, they became heroes in the midst of an unconventional assignment that demanded an unconventional solution.

Another unconventional leader, also living in an extraordinary era and in a nation under the oppression of a military occupation force, called together his own unusual dozen to take on the most momentous mission of all time. This story, which we hear in today's Gospel reading, is not about a "dirty" dozen, but about an equally unique and unorthodox one.

When Jesus picked out his team of twelve, he did not demand a set of qualifications most of us would expect. He didn't seem to care whether they had unusual spiritual insight or proven ability. He didn't seek the best and brightest, but the ordinary. He selected a group of mostly lackluster and untested blue-collar laborers, some of whom would be judged as failures by worldly standards. One was young and inexperienced. Some were unexceptional fishermen. Many grew up in the rocky, upland, backwater region of Galilee. One was a fanatical Jewish Nationalist. Several argued among themselves about who was the greatest disciple. Matthew was a despised tax collector. Peter denied even knowing Jesus when the chips were down. And then there was Judas – the turncoat and betrayer.

Apparently, Jesus wanted for his team, his dozen, people who were not looked on as being, in any way, special or elite. Instead, he chose twelve ordinary people with no particular qualifications or apparent skills for the work of transforming the world. Still, he trusted them to spread the Kingdom of God. In the end, he sent them out to do the very work he himself had been doing, and for them to continue that work after he was gone.

The mission on which Jesus sent his twelve was at least as risky and dangerous as that of the US Army's "dirty dozen" He described it as being sent out "like sheep into the midst of wolves." He warned them of the likelihood of their being arrested, flogged, and "dragged before governors and kings" as a result of accepting his call to mission. In the most frightening of the warnings to his dozen, he suggested that the field of spiritual battle would be one in which "brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death," and that most others, including family and friends, would hate them and disown them for following Jesus.

Perhaps Jesus knew better than to invite experienced leaders, or exceptional examples. He needed down-to-earth, vulnerable, and ordinary people – a kind of dozen who were representative of the general population, people who knew and understood others' pain and troubles and fears. Furthermore, who else would have had the courage or naivete – or the foolishness - to join such a band of brothers on such a dangerous mission?

The important lesson for today is that we Christians of the 21st century are the current "dozen" for Jesus. Of course, the dangers we face are seldom as dramatic as those faced by Jesus' apostles. Still, remaining faithful in following Jesus remains a formidable task in our society and the world. But there is hope for us, because we bear significant resemblance to those commonplace apostles, Jesus' first dozen.

In healthy and dynamic congregations, carrying out this work begins not with the clergy, but with groups of lay members who may not believe they have superlative qualifications, like Jesus' first dozen. But like the apostles, they rise to the occasion to meet the needs of people around them – whoever those people are, whatever those needs may be. Faced with the work of God, our ordinariness and commonality are not hindrances, unless we choose to make them our excuse for our inaction.

We may well ask: Who among Jesus' dozen was really suited to carry out God's work? And who among us is qualified to proclaim the Gospel to an unbelieving world? Who among us has the credentials that we should be chosen to share God's love in deed and action among those around us? Who, in any generation, is qualified to heal a broken world in Jesus' name? And yet, like the fictitious dirty dozen and Jesus' original dozen, we can - no, we must! - find the courage and the wherewithal to accept the command to follow Jesus into ministry for our own generation.

Who among us, for example, could have felt qualified to face an unprecedented challenge posed by the coronavirus – sequestered in our homes, physically separated from loved ones, friends, neighbors, and the Body of Christ? Nevertheless, in parish after parish - in community after community – time after time – seemingly unqualified people have risen to the occasion, accepted the hard mission that current events have set before us, and found new and innovative ways to provide a remarkable closeness filled with love.

Who among us feels qualified to address the racism – both hidden and blatant, personal and systemic – that events of the past weeks in our nation have laid bare once again? Who, and how, do we begin to answer the many questions that the Black Lives Matter movement set before us? Which one of us, or dozens of us, has the talents and power to effectively engage the desperately needed issue of police reform?

Who?, I ask you.

I don't' know.

But I am filled with hope and with promise that we can – we can, because we must! – meet this critical dual situation of worldwide pandemic and national emergency with openness, creativity, vulnerability, and honesty. I am certain that we can. I am certain that we will.

Why? First and foremost, because Christ calls us to work for the good of his people. And because, throughout Christian history, the first dozen apostles have been replaced by a never-ending series of other dozens who continued to be raised up and carry out the never-ending instructions of Jesus to go out among the people as his agents of love. Every one of us is empowered to do so, not because of our abilities or readiness, our talents or skills or intellect, but because of God's Holy Spirit that dwells within us.

The officer in the World War II drama and Jesus in the first century saw in their dozens a potential that the world ignored or overlooked, a potential and power those folks could not even see in themselves. But Jesus recognizes it. And Christ's Church recognizes this potential in baptism. By the nature of our baptisms and the powerful gift of the Holy Spirit, we have all been authorized and outfitted to be disciples in the same way as those first chosen twelve.

God's perspective, as revealed in Scripture, in history, and in our own experience is that what needs doing in the world requires ordinary people, like most of us. God's work requires the very experiences we have had at work, or at school, or at play, or raising a family, or being part of a community, or doing whatever is normal for us – all of which God can use to help us help others. God needs today's "dozen", and today's dozens of "dozens", to lay claim to and use a great variety of gifts and skills and experiences to carry out a task no less daunting than that portrayed in the movie – for Jesus' modern-day dozens are still about the continuing business of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to those who do not know our God, and for carrying out the imperatives of the Gospel - loving our neighbors as ourselves, working to bring about justice and peace, providing for those in need.

Jesus delighted in taking ordinary, everyday people – those who did not seem to possess great qualifications or credentials - and calling them and equipping them to become his disciples. He does the same for us. And the Holy Spirit makes available to us all we need to successfully accept that call and remain faithful to Jesus and his mission. Like that very first dozen, Jesus calls us and sends us out into the world to proclaim a word of salvation and grace, mercy and love to a world desperately longing for salvation – longing to be saved from itself and its sinful ways. In our own time, we are the ones now called to help heal a broken people. We are called – you and me – we are all being called to be Jesus' dirty dozen for this generation.

Let us resolve, this very day, to rise up and faithfully answer that call.

Amen.