

You Talkin' to Me?

Bonnie Beiswenger

June 25, 2023

Have you ever wondered what it would have been like to be one of Jesus's disciples—to have been his constant companion for those three years? I have tried to imagine what it would be like, and several words come to mind: uprooting (for sure), perplexing, intimidating, unnerving—mesmerizing, exciting, inspirational—and often quite *scary*!

Scripture doesn't tell us much about the personal lives of those twelve men, but I did glean a bit about them in my research:

1. Most were fishermen or farmers.
2. There were two sets of brothers, and several of them were work companions.
3. Peter was the only one who was married.
4. Most were illiterate, except for Matthew, the tax collector; John; and possibly Nathaniel, who might have been of royal birth.
5. Several had previously been followers of John the Baptist and were avid Zealots.
6. All of them except John, who lived to a ripe old age, died violent deaths—crucified, beheaded, stoned to death, speared, and flailed alive.
7. All except Judas went on, after Christ's death, to preach and heal throughout Asia, Africa, the Mediterranean, and even what is now England.

It is truly amazing that this unlikely band of followers went forth and accomplished exactly what Jesus asks of them in today's scripture passage. They took his message throughout the world (no small task back in those times), confronted the opposition that Christ had warned them about, and stuck to their mission until—for all but one of them—a bitter and horrific end.

They were the commonest of the common. Jesus chose ordinary, unrefined people to become his apostles. He purposely passed over the Temple elitists, aristocrats, and trained religious and philosophical thinkers of Alexandria. Why? Why entrust the entire future of his mission here on earth to those twelve humble men? But that seems to be the way it works in God's kingdom—always upside down. The humble are raised, and the proud are laid low.

We have so much in common with the original twelve. They were ordinary and so are we, and therefore we've much to learn from their example. If we put ourselves in their sandals, how would we have reacted to Jesus's call? Just imagine the reaction of these men when Jesus approached them at their jobs and asked them to leave behind their families and homes, quit their jobs, and follow him into his ministry. Using my imagination again, I think maybe it went like this.

Jesus invites them to join his ministry.

They respond, “What? You talkin’ to me?”

Jesus calmly nods his head in assent.

“Rabbi, you must be joking. I’m just a fisherman. Fishing is the only thing I know how to do!”

Jesus says, “Okay, then I’ll make you a fisher of men!”

“What are you talkin’ about? That don’t even make sense. Fishin’ for men?”

Jesus smiles and says, “Follow me and you will see.”

“Look, Rabbi, I know John baptized you—I was there—and he seems to think you’re special. So I’d like to help. But really, I am *not* leadership material. I can’t read or write and, as you can hear, I don’t even talk so good. Plus I’m flat broke!”

Nevertheless, they all followed Jesus for three years, most of the time clueless about what he was doing, and then went on to carry out his mission in a most miraculous manner. Somewhere along the way, these twelve went from being passive disciples to becoming active apostles.

We often use these two terms interchangeably, but they are really quite different. In the original Greek, *disciple* means follower, student, or learner. *Apostle* means one who has been sent, a delegate with full authority, a messenger. The original twelve graduated from being disciples (learners, followers) to being apostles, delegates sent with full authority to bring Christ’s message to the world.

So, have *we* graduated from being disciples to being apostles? Or do we, too, say to Jesus, “You talking to *me*? You surely can’t be talking to *us* here at Centre Street. Your disciples were trained by you, but we’re still learning. And Jesus, our budget is low and we don’t even have a pastor now. The timing is all wrong.”

I don’t have to imagine Christ’s response to that. We *know* that it is *not* enough to be passive disciples—not enough to just attend a weekly service, donate money to the church and charity, say our prayers, and call it done. That’s safe—and it sure doesn’t upset our lives too much. But Christ has always been so into upsetting the apples in our carts!

Active apostleship requires more of us. In today’s scripture, Jesus gives the twelve their marching orders, and he tells them to start right where they live. They weren’t yet ready to take the road to Gentile lands, so he tells them to proclaim the presence of God’s kingdom in their

own backyards—to cleanse the lepers, heal the sick, and cast out devils. *And* he warns them, “Oh, by the way, you will be persecuted in the process.”

As individuals and as a church, here in our own backyard of Washington County, what’s an apostle to do?

- Heal the lepers? The lepers of our society are the misfits—the unwanted immigrant, transgender teen, homeless vet, and abandoned elder.
- Cast out demons? The demons of despair, addiction, loneliness, worthlessness, and poverty.
- Heal the sick? Those struggling to pay for medicine, travel to doctor appointments, care for aging parents, and get affordable childcare.

And what of Jesus’s command to reflect the presence of God’s kingdom now? In our increasingly secular society, and where Christian nationalism is not seen as an oxymoron. In a culture war where Christianity is being prostituted to promote political objectives and infested with fear of “other.” In such a culture, does an apostle remain passively silent? Do we fear the criticism that may come our way if we speak out?

Oh, there is much to be done, the workers are few, and the Master is pressing us on. The task indeed seems daunting, but as Rabbi Tarfon said back in 1500, “It is not required that you finish the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

So where to start? As individuals, it will take many different pathways. But for starters, let us not be timid about speaking up if we see or hear something hateful, unjust, or discriminatory. We can express our values in a respectful, thoughtful manner. It might fall on deaf ears, but it also might plant a seed. To quote Thomas Jefferson, “All it takes for tyranny to take hold is for people of good conscience to remain silent.”

If writing is your thing, consider writing an opinion to the editor of a local paper on a community issue you feel should be addressed.

Get to know the “others” in need in our community. Volunteer at the food pantry, the hospital, a nursing home, a shelter. Nothing breaks down barriers like personal contact.

Be aware of legislation that affects the quality of our lives, and let your legislators hear from you.

As a church body, let’s not be held back just because we are going through a transformative change or because the greater institutional structure is crumbling. Rather, let’s believe with all our hearts that the Holy Spirit is leading us on a new adventure into the future. Jesus entrusted

the future of his entire ministry to twelve very common men—and with the Holy Spirit, look what they accomplished. He trusts us to carry on too.

If I use my imagination again, I wonder what could happen when the food pantry moves out and our vestry gets restored? Could we invite the community to share a monthly supper with us, or maybe a movie night, or how about a Sacred Harp song session? Christ was all about hospitality. He knew that good things happen when people get to know each other.

Might we provide a space for lonely seniors to gather for coffee, donuts, and an activity once a week? For some reason, there is no senior center in Machias as there is in neighboring towns. That is so sad.

The Just Action Committee has already established contact with several other local churches, to begin collaborating on social justice programs. Stay tuned—and get involved!

I realize that our church has done a great deal in the past—sponsoring the Food Pantry, being a voice for the LGBTQ+ community, assisting migrants. That’s all well and good, but let’s not drop the ball now, just because we are going through a major transition. And let’s not allow the business of our personal lives to take precedence over our individual calling either.

We are apostles, the sent ones, with God’s full authority to let his kingdom be known here on earth. Yes, it is a daunting challenge, and yes, it’s gonna cost us, and yes, we’ll likely stumble along the way. But as Brian McLaren says, “We make the road by walking” one step at a time.

And we must keep reminding ourselves of one very important thing—that we are not alone. The spark of the Holy Spirit lives on in each and every one of us, and that spark will surely guide us, as it once did the disciples. Like the song says,

It only takes a spark to get the fire going . . .
That’s how it is with God’s love.
Once you experience it,
You spread that love to everyone.
You *want* to pass it on.