

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY,

JANUARY 14, 2018

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

When one preaches every week, it's difficult to come up with an appropriate anecdote or joke to further the story. This week I came across a good riddle that relates to the call of the disciples in the *Gospel of John*: how do we know Peter was a rich fisherman? By his net income!¹ Ah, yes, we are at the start of the ministry of Jesus in both the Gospels of *Mark* and *John* which is where we learn who was called and when. It is a little difficult to master as each gospel writer has a different list of names. We think to ourselves, how can this be? How can something so important as who were the disciples of Jesus vary so greatly? Perhaps you were unaware that there were differences in the lists of who were called. Allow me to offer the latest scholarship on the subject. The one thing all the gospels agree upon is that the fisherman Andrew, one of the original disciples of John the Baptist, was among the first that Jesus called. That is also why the new liturgical year begins on November 30, because it is the feast day of St. Andrew. Hence, the first Sunday of Advent is always the Sunday closest to that day. As Andrew is the first called, it is only natural that his brother, Peter, be the second on the list. One would think given Peter's status in the larger church (he is the bishop of Rome or the Pope in the Roman Catholic tradition) would grant him the number one spot, but it doesn't. He is known by several names in the lists, such as Simon Peter or Cephas (his Greek name). They were called the sons of John; Peter, for instance, was referred to as Simon bar Jonah. *The First and Second Letter of Peter* in the New Testament bear his name, though it is doubtful that he actually wrote them (they were probably authored by someone who was part of his church).

Next in the *Gospel of John* Philip and Nathanael are called. We know little of Philip except he was from the same town, Bethsaida, as Andrew and Peter, so he must have known them or worked with them. He introduces Nathanael to the larger group; Nathanael's name does not appear in the other gospels, but his place on the lists coincides with the Apostle Bartholomew, so the Roman Catholic and other churches claim he is one and the same. This is not the first confusion of names of the disciples and apostles, such as with the names John, James, and Jude, but more on that later.

Next or at the top of most lists are the sons of Zebedee, James (often known as James the Greater, so as to not confuse him with the other disciples, James, son of Alphaeus and with James, the Brother of our Lord and author of the *Epistle of James*), and John. The Church Fathers considered him the same person as John the Evangelist, John of Patmos, John the Elder and the Beloved Disciple, although modern theologians and scholars have not formed a

consensus on the relative identities of these men. The traditions of most Christian denominations have held that John the Apostle is the author of several books of the New Testament,ⁱⁱ(namely *The Gospel of John*; *First, Second and Third John*; and *The Revelation to John*).

Then there is Thomas, whose name means “the twin.” Just whose twin was he? Many early church fathers and quite a few modern-day scholars claim he was the twin brother of Jesus. He certainly seems to be the author of the apocryphal book *The Gospel of Thomas*, which is now considered a main source for the work of the gospel writers. Though his name appears in most lists, his prominence among the disciples comes from his doubting unbelief in the stories of the *Gospel of John*.

Next are Simon and Jude, whose names do not appear in all the lists. They were said to have been the brothers of Jesus, which the Roman Catholic Church doctrine cannot allow if Mary were an ever-Virgin. Jude is so named by *Luke* and *Acts*. *Matthew* and *Mark* call him Thaddeus. He is not mentioned elsewhere in the *Gospels*, except of course where all the apostles are mentioned. Scholars hold that he is not the author of the *Letter of Jude*. Actually, Jude had the same name as Judas, the Iscariot. Evidently because of the disgrace of that name, it was shortened to “Jude” in English.

Simon is mentioned on all four gospel lists of the apostles. On two of them he is called “the Zealot.” The Zealots were a Jewish sect that represented an extreme of Jewish nationalism.ⁱⁱⁱ

Following Simon and Jude we have Matthew (or Levi) the tax collector, often associated with the evangelist writer of *The Gospel of Matthew*. He is found on the lists with James, son of Alphaeus, known as St. James the Less (or the Younger) and according to some traditions was his brother.

Finally we have the infamous Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, the treasurer of the group and the betrayer of Jesus.

All that is to say if you were asked to name who the disciples of Jesus were, you’d have to respond “according to whom?” or “according to which Gospel,” or “which church.” Each denomination has a differing tradition. You’d also have to be able to distinguish between the 12 and other disciples (Nicodemus, Mary and Martha of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, Lazarus, etc.) and those who were decidedly apostles but not disciples (Paul, Silvanus, Timothy, Silas, Mark, Luke, etc.). The terms “disciple” and “apostle,” though often used interchangeably in biblical studies are not the same. A disciple is someone who follows the discipline of a particular leader or faith. An apostle is one who is sent out into the world to spread the faith. So, Judas Iscariot, for instance, was a disciple of Jesus, but not an apostle, as he committed suicide before the recommissioning of the disciples as apostles, where Matthias was elected to take his place.

It may be sufficient to state that what it meant to be a disciple then is as difficult as what it means to be a disciple now, and we have history on our side, which should make things easier!

Now that we've come to understand the call of the disciples better, let's see if we can break down the message that Jesus uses following his encounter with them. First, Nathanael asks about Nazareth, can anything good come from there? It may sound a bit snarky, but it's probably just a friendly rivalry between men from two different locations with competing pride about their home towns. And his comment has a biblical historical foundation. Nazareth was part of the tribe of Zebulun, which Isaiah berates (in Chapter 9, v. 1 of his part of the Old Testament), as a contemptuous land. It seems the reputation stuck, but it was unfounded as Jesus did some of his greatest miracles there as Isaiah predicts, that God will make it glorious. This is a little humor snuck into the text which we lose being outsiders.

The humor continues with a little tete-a-tete between Nathanael and Jesus, each making a superlative claim about the other. Jesus says Nathanael is a man with no deceit, a great honor to be said to or by anyone. Nathanael returns the favor in a familiar formulaic way that reminds one of the words between Thomas and Jesus later on in the gospel. Nathanael names Jesus rabbi, son of God, king of Israel, all honorifics but requiring both some supernatural insights and a great amount of faith for someone he has never met. This is the kind of response Jesus elicited from folks he encountered. There was something about him, something in the way he spoke and the manner in which he behaved that those whom he came into contact with knew exactly who he was and what he could do for them. This is what Philip experienced only minutes before when he met Jesus. And Jesus, calling these disciples, calling out who they were and were to be, receives a response, a counter-calling, if you will, that names and plants their faith in him. It becomes a spiritual contract between them, and the bond is strong enough that it gets them to follow him and remain faithful to him despite all the temptations to the contrary. And Jesus then promises "even greater things than these," such as the wedding miracle at Cana in Galilee that occurs in just a few verses to follow.

In addition, all who were witnessing this exchange, thanks to what has been revealed in Philip's and Nathanael's faith statements about Jesus as the Messiah will now see "heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." This undoubtedly recalled for the listeners the story of Jacob's ladder wherein Jacob, though fleeing from his brother, Esau, is encouraged by his faith in God to believe in the covenant made to him, a promise of land and property, and generations of progeny to live on it. Jesus is promising those gathered that the covenant God made long ago with the people is being fulfilled in him, and that the signs and miracles he would show them would be evidence of God's promise. And the comings and goings of the angels upon Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God to humankind,^{iv} more than we could have asked for or imagined. God makes the Divine Presence available to us, a gift we often say we covet, that Immanuel, i.e., "God with us," come true.

And that is how this story ends, or at least this portion of it. But it is not, we know, the end of the story. I recall once long ago hearing a lector finish reading the lessons for the day with a final "Here ends the gospel!" "Heaven forbid," people gasped! Hopefully that is never true, that

there is always more good news around the corner and in every reading of Scripture. That is the gift of the Living Word of God - - that it always offers something new and alive that we can grasp and that makes us whole. And this is why it is so important that we read, listen and discern the words of Scripture on Sundays, if not at any other time of our lives, because there is always a clue therein, always a helpline, often a cue as to where to take things or when to go. Sometimes it takes reading between the lines like it did today, but there is always a message for those who are searching for it.

I think the greatest message about the call of the disciples is that it was not about their response as much as it was about Jesus' response. We'd all like to think that should Jesus present himself to the congregation next week and ask us to get up and follow him there'd be a least a few who'd be moved to do so. But what we might not be prepared for is the way Jesus responds to us having given us permission to call him into our lives. I doubt many of us are ready for what that would mean. For most of us it would mean having to put our money where our mouth is, to use the old refrain, or in other words, to put up or shut up. Simply put, we won't recognize God's call to us if we are not willing to let God in when we call, and to keep the promise made in God's covenant with us, to be with us, always. There's no way to swim through the muddy waters without a clear vision. Pray for a clean vista and for ears to hear God's call.

As we gather this morning to install our own leaders for the coming year, I pondered Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s message to *his* disciples and apostles. There were many good and insightful things he left for them, and perhaps since we could not be his *disciples* we can carry out and carry forth some of his words as *apostles* for moral growth and justice in an often unjust world. As we celebrate his birthday this weekend and tomorrow, let us consider a few of his thoughts for just a moment now. Among other things, he wrote about refusing to stay silent in the face of injustice, actions we are hearing a lot about these days, in reflections such as:

1. "The hottest place in Hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict."
2. "Every person must decide whether they will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness."
3. "Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."
4. "If a person has not discovered something that they will die for, they are not fit to live."
5. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."
6. "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"
7. "The ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where they stand at times of challenge and controversy."
8. "The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But... the good Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"

9. "An individual has not started living until they can rise above the narrow confines of their individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."
10. "They who passively accept evil are as much involved in it as they who help to perpetrate it. They who accept evil without protesting against it are really cooperating with it."
11. "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."
12. "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will."
13. "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."
14. "The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people."
15. "There comes a time when silence is betrayal."

And my favorite, "We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now."^v

As Disciples of Christ and apostles of the gospel, I wish you good speed and fair weather as we engage one another and the world with our deeds and actions in the name of God.

Amen.

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<http://www.bible-study-online.juliantrubin.com/biblejokes/jesusapostlesjokes.html>

ⁱⁱhttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_the_Apostle

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saints-simon-and-jude/>

^{iv} <https://www.sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/john-143-51/>

^v <https://www.inc.com/bill-murphy-jr/17-inspirational-quotes-by-martin-luther-king-jr-about-speaking-up-when-it-matters.html>