

Sanctified and Sent

Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26 John 17: 6-19

This is the last Sunday of the Easter season, the time between Easter and Pentecost. It is a time for us, like the earliest followers of Jesus struggling to understand what to do in his absence, to look once again at what Jesus was all about, how he acted in his ministry, what teachings he upheld, what priorities he advanced; in essence, how follow him faithfully and do what he was doing.

Jesus did not leave a Manual of Operations or a Book of Order or even Robert's Rules of Order for them to follow. When you're part of a movement focused on a particular person, and that person is no longer there, that's often the beginning of the end of the movement. The Jesus followers could either suck it up and figure out how to continue, or they could go back to fishing (which some of them actually did for a while) and have amazing stories to tell their grandkids about this guy Jesus.

Jesus knew things would be difficult when he left them. He tried to provide some direction for them, expecting that things wouldn't go well in Jerusalem. Much of what's recorded in the gospels comes in resurrection appearances. Think the Great Commission in Matthew 28: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

Or in Luke 24, in the set-up for the coming of the Holy Spirit in Luke's volume 2, Acts: *Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.*

Mark's gospel is the exception since the best texts end with the women returning from the empty tomb and saying nothing to anyone.

John's gospel, the one believed to be of the latest composition, has extended Jesus monologues prior to his arrest that have lots to say, plus other comments in resurrection appearances. One of these extended monologues is his prayer in John 17. Jesus recognizes how the disciples had responded with faithful certainty toward Jesus and his claims, how they trusted him and his word. Jesus asks God to watch over his followers as Jesus makes the passage to fulfillment of his ministry and leaves this world.

Jesus is keenly aware that the world's powers have regarded him with hate and loathing because his identity, his being, and his ministry among all kinds of people with his disciples transcended the standards and expectations of this world and its claims. He

knew that such hatred and condemnation would transfer from Jesus to his disciples. His fears for his disciples were real. They were in for a very rough road now.

Make these disciples one with him and one with God, Jesus prays, seeking their blessing, protection, and sanctification. That last word, **sanctification** is important. It means setting them apart for holy, sacred purposes. They are not of the *world*, but of the **word**, and the world hates them for placing their loyalties outside the world. The followers of Jesus, their community of the new life promise, like their Lord and Savior, will have to transcend the grip of worldly powers in order to follow Jesus in his chosen way toward the Kingdom of God.

While these disciples may not be perfect, they have proven to be sufficiently faithful to inherit Jesus' ministry. Jesus prays for his own joy to be received by them as they continue on his way. To them, to us, the promise of Jesus' ministry will be entrusted.

His desire is for their unity together among themselves, in unity with Jesus, and with the sanctified purposes of Jesus' ministry. Their community together faces a broken world in need of healing, and longing for the hope of the new life promise. Being a group of saved individuals is not the point. Individually, they don't count for much. Together, united, their witness is for salvation in new life of all.

And together they will face a hostile world that likes things the way they are. If the world allows that some will suffer, then there is often a callous indifference to that suffering, or perhaps even as we do today, a willingness to blame those who suffer for making bad choices, for being bad people, for seeking handouts and being lazy good-for-nothings. Those are the terms that the world uses, and Jesus denies those terms their power and their validity.

Jesus doesn't make it easy, refusing conformity with the terms of the world to insist on conformity to the terms of the Kingdom, to brotherhood and sisterhood in the family of God, to work in compassionate ministry to bring new life to the despairing and deprived, to recognize the promise of life in every person and work toward its fulfillment as God desires. To be in rebellion against the world demands unity of heart and mind, spirit and purpose among the believers. The world wants things its way just as badly as God wants things in the Kingdom way. And the world will violently resist every attempt to bring change, every attempt to break from the world's chains and bring the Kingdom closer.

A key point in all of this is that salvation is really a **shared promise**, *not* an individual attribute. In that sharing, we see that it is also a shared relationship, a shared process, a shared vision, even a shared journey. The life of salvation is experienced in a community of shared witness and work, while individualistic salvation is almost contrary to the body of Christ.

When we turn to the reading from Acts, we find the earliest church community in a bit of a stew; their unity and their community had been broken by the betrayal of

Judas. The author, Luke, does not suggest an attitude of disruption among the disciples, but it has to have been there. Jesus had said his farewell in the preceding verses before his ascension, and the Holy Spirit has **not** yet arrived – Pentecost awaits (next week!). No Jesus *and* no Holy Spirit. The Twelve, those disciples closest to Jesus, now Eleven, seem to be at a loss for what to do exactly. They've been promised the Holy Spirit, but the weeks are dragging by and certain things seem to need attention.

Finally, Peter becomes an advocate for restoring the number of disciples (now apostles) in the inner circle of leadership to Twelve. Since Judas's betrayal and departure, they have been incomplete. The missing disciple was likely evident to all of them. In a sense, they were broken and needed to address their brokenness in some constructive way. Restoring the actual number to Twelve seems a good idea. That's the way it had been, and besides, it's biblical. It shows a foundational connection to the twelve sons of Jacob, and the twelve tribes of Israel, the numerical identity of the people of God. Twelve seems to be a good and even necessary number. Eleven doesn't have much going for it.

But how do you restore the number to twelve? There isn't any real tradition to follow. There's no Jesus *and* no Holy Spirit. The eleven had to make it up, figure it out. What a mess! What to do?

Peter argues for certain qualifications. The new member of the inner circle of Twelve must be a disciple who was with Jesus from the time of **John's** baptism and throughout the time of Jesus' ministry to his crucifixion and resurrection. I find it interesting that baptism by **John** was a prerequisite. That certainly makes the case for the strength of the John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth connection, even after both John and Jesus have departed earthly life.

Despite the many potential qualifications that could identify the next member of the group, Peter keeps them focused on Jesus and his ministry and their experience together. He expects a participant in their journey together, the shared journey with Jesus. In other words, the right individual was not a person of characteristics, skills, values, or resume. They were qualified only by having been a part of the shared journey. And the office was not defined as 'disciple' or even 'apostle;' the text says this person would be "a witness with us." Notice it is not a witness (solo), but a "witness with us" emphasizing the shared nature of their witness together.

They discover that two men fit the bill. This is a bit awkward since now it forces making a choice. How do you choose between two men who both meet the qualifications? Notice how nothing is easy, even the simplest decision. So they prayed about it. After they prayed about it, there were still two candidates and there was still a choice to be made.

Any neat, clean way to make the decision has not surfaced, so they cast lots, or drew straws, or flipped a coin, or did rock, paper, scissors, or rolled dice, or whatever, and Matthias emerged as the winner. Who said this shared journey together would be easy?

By sanctification, as we heard in John's gospel, the faithful who labor in Jesus' name are set apart for holy, sacred purposes, Kingdom purposes. They are not of the *world*, but of the **word**, and the world hates them for their loyalty to the Kingdom.

To effectively face the opposition of the world, the believers need unity in person and in spirit. The brokenness of the inner circle of leadership prevented them from moving forward in united witness. Restored, and then blessed by the Holy Spirit, they were sanctified and ready to be sent forth in witness to the promise of new life in Jesus, their Lord and Savior.

We can ask about how we're doing with this business of sanctification and being sent forth in witness. All of what we've said about the earliest followers of Jesus applies to today's followers of Jesus. Can we say of ourselves that we are **not** of the world, but of the *word*? Do we find that we are held in contempt for opposing the ways of the world? A truthful answer would admit that we're just fine in the world, quite comfortable and satisfied with it. We of today's church aren't held in any real contempt (although some think anyone critical is inciting a persecution – oh, please!). In fact, we're seen as the bellwethers of society and culture, of social order and stability. The most radical thing we might do is pray someplace where people don't usually pray. Woo-hoo! We accept most of what the world would have us believe; truly it's nonsense, but we repeat it like it's gospel.

For instance, we accept the world's definitions of scarcity, and deny God's abundant provision. Here is what we say. 'There isn't enough to go around.' 'It costs too much to do that.' 'People need to earn it.' We affirm the world's insistence of scarcity and repeat that creed with steadfast faithfulness.

Remember the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus told his disciples not to send the people away; he had the audacity to tell his disciples to feed them. The disciples asked how, pointing to the scarcity of what they had, a few measly loaves and fishes. Jesus had to sit them all down and show them, revealing basketsful of abundance that came from the simple act of sharing. That blew some minds that day, and for us it should blow off the world's continued insistence on scarcity today.

You see, unless we are sanctified – not of this world, but of the Lord's word – there isn't much that we're going to accomplish when we're sent. Jesus said we could do all that he did, and even more. But we expect miracles from above, believing ourselves too weak and powerless to do the miraculous.

Next week: the power of the Holy Spirit to transform every life with new life, and to reveal the Kingdom through faithful witnesses and their ministry.