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## The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 24, 2021

### Jesus Calls His Followers to Seek the Lost

Jesus came to our world to reunite God and his creatures. He offered his innocent life and death as payment for sin so that we might live with God forever. Jesus also came to our world to commission and prepare his followers to spread the good news of the forgiveness of sins to others.

#### First Reading

**Jonah 3:1-5**

*The Lord called a reluctant prophet to proclaim good news.*

#### Second Reading

**2 Corinthians 5:14-20**

*Christ's ambassadors call us to faith.*

#### Gospel

**Mark 1:14-20**

*Jesus called his disciple to fish for people.*

#### Sermon

**Mark 1:14-20**

Introduction: So where there 12 disciples or 12 apostles? The number isn't the issue. There were 12. We learned about five of them last week: John, Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael. Eventually there were seven more. Two named James, two named Judas, a Matthew, a Thaddeus, and a Thomas. That's 12. So were they disciples or apostles? The Bible calls them both disciples and apostles and so do we when we talk about them. Sometimes it doesn't make any difference, but sometimes it does. It makes a difference today.

The words are pretty much the same for most of us. But the words are really different. A disciple is a student or a pupil, but not like a college student who sits in a classroom. A disciple is a student who attaches himself to a specific teacher and buys into what the teacher teaches. You could say that the civil rights leader John Lewis who died this past year was a disciple of Martin Luther King. The 12 men we're talking about were certainly disciples. They heard what Jesus taught, they walked with him and they talked with him and they followed him. An apostle is different. The word apostle comes from a Greek word that means "to send out," so an apostle is a person who is sent out. Someone commissions him or designates him to carry out a certain task. Apostle is like our word ambassador or envoy. The 12 men we're talking about were also apostles. Jesus commissioned them in a formal way to proclaim his good news to people. The Twelve were disciples first and then they became apostles. Jesus invited them to be disciples and then he sent them as his apostles.

There are more than 12 people here today, but the number isn't important. The titles are. So are we disciples or are we apostles or are we both disciples and apostles? Somebody is thinking right now: Who cares! We're all in this together. But the question is important because it helps us understand how we work together in the church.

The Gospel for today from Mark chapter 1 begins to explain to us the difference between a disciple and an apostle. The whole story isn't here; there's more of the story in the other readings. But even all three readings don't tell us everything. So today is a start, and we'll learn—and for some this will be a review—that:

**Disciples and Apostles Proclaim the Good News Together**

1. Let's get the time-line straight. At about age 30 Jesus traveled from Nazareth way up north to the Jordan River way down south and was baptized by John. From there he went straight into the desert to battle with Satan. He came back to the Jordan and that's where he met the first five. We talked about them last Sunday. Then he went home to Galilee with his followers in tow. He took them along to a wedding where he changed water into wine. At Passover time he went south to Jerusalem, then he came home, back to Jerusalem for another festival, then back home again. These followers saw and heard plenty and the long walks up and down the countryside gave them all kinds of time to learn from their teacher. They were committed disciples.

But not all the time. When they were home, they went back to work, back to the boats, back to nets. I mean they had to support themselves. That's where they are in today's Gospel and that's where Jesus found them. **As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.** Now everything changed. **I will send you out,** Jesus said. And so they began the journey from being disciples and students to being apostles with a mission. Jesus commissioned them to share his mission. **He went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is here. Repent and believe the good news."** They fished for fish with nets. They would fish for people with the gospel.

The path from being a disciple to an apostle, from being a student to a sent-out man, hasn't changed much over the centuries. A person learns to know Jesus, maybe in bedtime stories or Sunday School lessons, maybe from a friend or a classmate, maybe from a post on Facebook or a blog on the internet. The Holy Spirit works and faith begins to grow. Knowledge deepens, experiences encourage, commitment intensifies, and the walk with Jesus becomes closer each day. The disciple is at Jesus' side. At some point—and the point is usually impossible to identify—there comes a sense of wanting to do more. There is a little voice that says, **Here am I—send me.** In our church that means intensive training and reasonable qualifications. It means being ready to make ministry a priority, being ready to serve others before self, being ready to go to places they have never gone before. When others see their willingness and assess their gifts, they commission them, they appoint them, and they call them just as Jesus called fishermen to fish for people. And this is how disciples become apostles.

**The time has come; the kingdom of heaven is here. Repent and believe the good news.** This was Jesus' message. Jonah understood the message and he proclaimed it to the people in Nineveh. What happened? **The Ninevites believed God** and repented of their sins. St. Paul spoke the same message. **We are Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** And this is the message we hear from the apostles who have been sent to us. Those apostles show us our sin. What they show us hurts us, it angers us, and we don't like to hear it, but we need to hear it. Sinners who don't think they're sinners never repent and never believe the good news. Do our sins shame us, do they scare us, do they condemn us? Of course, they do. Who of us would deny that! Jesus sends us apostles who show us a Savior who became human for us, who became poor for us, who became sin for us that we might be forgiven and be right with God. These ambassadors lead us into the kingdom where Jesus rules and guides and comforts and strengthens and promises. Would any of you want to be without Jesus? Would any of you want to live life in this confused world without Jesus? Would any of you want to fight temptation or deal with trouble or face death without Jesus? O my, no! Then get down on your knees and thank Jesus for the good news he proclaims to you through disciples he has called to be apostles.

2. Actually, getting on your knees and giving thanks probably isn't the best way for disciples to work with apostles. When the 12 apostles went out, the disciples listened to what the apostles said. Already in the days after Pentecost Jesus' followers **devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.** The believers in Berea **received Paul's message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what he said was true.** Those called to serve you work hard to proclaim the gospel and you all need to think about working harder to hear what they say in worship and Bible Classes. Covid concerns keep people away from church, and we respect their concerns. But these concerns can become an excuse to stay away from the proclamation of the good news. We all have to examine our own minds and hearts on this issue because disciples and apostles work together best when they are in the Word together.

We sang this morning, "If you cannot speak like angels, if you cannot preach like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus, you can say he died for all." The apostles can't always go where the disciples can go. They can't go to your workplace or your school, they can't chat with your friends and relatives, they can't talk on the phone with your kids, not as easily as you can. And nothing they could say would be as effective as you saying: "Why don't you come to church with me tomorrow?" Remember Philip? We talked about him last week. He wasn't an apostle, not in last week's Gospel, but he spoke the good news to his friend Nathanael. When Nathanael hesitated, Philip said, **Come and see.** You can do that, too. Don't preach or pester. Love and listen and invite. That's how disciples and apostles proclaim the good news together.

Proclaiming the good news never works if it becomes a one man show. The pastor can't do everything by himself and he can't do anything without people. In any congregation the disciples need to share their wisdom and perspective, they need to put their time and talents to work, they need to bring offerings that pay for what they want to do. I've heard that church members don't like money sermons, and I agree that people should never be guilted or threatened or shamed. But I also think that followers of Jesus want to be reminded that gospel ministry works best when disciples and apostles work together to proclaim the good news.

They started out as 12 disciples and Jesus turned them into 12 apostles. He called them to follow and listen and learn as disciples. Then he sent them to travel and witness and win souls as apostles. Today's Gospel is really about how Jesus moves disciples to become apostles. But the story suggests more. It also helps us to see how disciples and apostles work together to proclaim the gospel. Take it all in, friends. Consider it carefully. There's work to do for disciples and apostles. **The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near.** Amen.