

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

June 18, 2023 – 3rd SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST/PROPER 6, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Jesus’ ‘Dirty Dozen’?*”

Old Testament	Exodus 19:2-8a	(God summons Moses to tell the people to obey His commands)
Psalter	Psalms 100	(Serve the Lord with gladness; His mercy is everlasting)
Epistle	Romans 5:1-8	(We are justified with God through faith)
Gospel	St. Matthew 9:35—10:8-23	(Jesus sends the disciples out to minister, and warns of persecution)

Twelve. Twelve is one of those rare numbers that has had special significance to people and cultures for thousands of years. We even have a unique designation for two times six—“a dozen.” In the Bible, twelve is mentioned around 187 times. Think about it: there are 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 the Book of Revelation’s tree of life producing twelve fruits, the leaves of which are for the healing of the nations. And, of course, Jesus’ twelve disciples. Eleven of the original went on to become the apostles, and they elected Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot as their twelfth (Acts 1:20-26).

Jesus’ primary followers were an unusual group, somewhat like the “dirty dozen” soldiers in a 1967 movie by the same name. ¹ Based on a true story and framed against World War II’s D-day invasion, it portrays a special military operation designed to eliminate high-ranking Nazi officers. The American high command ordered an unorthodox officer—Major John Reisman (played by Lee Marvin)—to select a twelve-man squad for a mission with a strong probability of failure and the likely death of most of the combatants. Surprisingly, the Major was not tasked with selecting the best soldiers in his outfit, but instead, pulling them from military prisons. Among those he chose were thieves, murderers, and scoundrels. The Major set them apart and forged them into an effective team. Later, the wisdom of his selecting the “dirty dozen” became clear as their criminal skills and bottled-up hatreds proved perfect for the demands of the risky mission. In the end, this highly unlikely, rag-tag band of brothers got the job done, and the audience cheered the demise of a dreaded enemy.

Of course, it would be inappropriate to affirm the behavior of criminals and social misfits, but the film presents an interesting plot about a dozen men whom the world did not regard with honor. They seemed ill-suited for such a critically important task. However, as the story shows, in the right situation, with unique guidance, they became heroes in the midst of an assignment that demanded an unconventional solution.

Another unconventional leader, in another extraordinary era, called together His own unremarkable dozen to take on the most momentous mission of all time. This story, told in today’s Gospel reading, is not about a “dirty” dozen, but about an equally unique and unorthodox one.

When Jesus picked out His twelve, He obviously did not demand a professional set of qualifications. He didn’t seem to care whether they had deep 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 workers, some of whom seemed failures by modern worldly standards. One was young and inexperienced. Some were mediocre fishermen. Many grew up in the rocky upland region of the Galilee—not exactly considered prime real estate, back then. One was a fanatical Jewish Nationalist. Several argued among themselves about who was the greatest. Matthew was a despised tax collector. Peter denied even knowing Jesus when the chips were down. And then there was Judas—who betrayed Jesus to His death.

It seems clear that Christ wanted for His “dozen” individuals who were not special in the eyes of the world, and He chose twelve ordinary men with no particular qualifications for transforming the world. Even so, He trusted them to spread the kingdom of God. Early on in their formation, He sent them out to do the very work He had been doing, and wanted them to continue carrying out that ministry after He was gone.

There’s one bit in the movie where the hardened convicts are giving Major Reisman a rough time about taking part in the mission. He spits back that they can “either sign up or be executed.” That exchange sort of struck me as a metaphor for the Christian life—we can either do what Jesus (*our* commanding officer) asks, or we will end up “executed,” that is to say, dead and in hell, which is eternal death.

But back to the mission on which Jesus sent His original twelve. It was at least as risky as that of the “dirty dozen.” He described it in familiar imagery as going out “like sheep into the midst of wolves,” and He warned them of the likelihood of their being whipped and “dragged before governors and kings” as a result of accepting His call to mission. In the most frightening of Jesus’ warnings to His twelve, He revealed that the coming 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 others would hate them for following Jesus. Yet, like the condemned men in the movie, Jesus’ disciples somehow understood that following Him was better than returning to the prison of sin and hopelessness in which they had been confined before He pulled them out.

Like Major Reisman, Jesus knew better than to invite experienced leaders or exceptional people. For His particular mission, He needed down-to-earth, vulnerable, ordinary persons—a dozen who could represent the general population and therefore understand their longings, fears, and pain.

The important lesson for us today is that we 21st-century Christians are Jesus’ current “dozen.” Of course, the dangers we face are seldom as life-threatening as those suffered by His first-century apostles. Nevertheless, remaining faithful in following Jesus remains a challenging task in 2023 when Christians are becoming more and more marginalized and targets of mockery. Yet there is hope because we bear a significant resemblance to the commonplace disciples Jesus chose.

In small and average-sized congregations such as ours, carrying out Christ’s work begins with groups of lay members who, like Jesus’ first twelve, may not believe they have superlative qualifications. But like the original disciples, with God’s help and the infilling of the Holy Spirit, they rise to meet the needs of others, whatever they may be—from outreach to Christian education, music to cemetery work. Our ordinariness is not a hindrance unless we choose to make it so.

Who among Jesus’ dozen was truly suited to carry out God’s work? And who among us is qualified to proclaim the Gospel to an unbelieving world and share God’s love in action with those around us? Who, in any generation, is qualified to heal a broken world in Jesus’ name? And yet, like the movie’s “dirty dozen” and Jesus’ original dozen, we, too, can find the courage and the wherewithal to obey orders and follow *our* Commander into the fray.

The officer in the World War II drama and Jesus in the first century saw in their hand-picked dozens a potential those people could not see in themselves. Even as early as our baptism, the Church affirms our capacity and talent for ministry. By the nature of our baptism and the faith we profess—or that was professed on our behalf—each of us has been called and authorized to be a disciple of Christ in the same way as those first dozen. God believes that what needs doing in His world requires ordinary people—just like us. He looks for the experiences we have at the office, or at school, or at play, or raising a family, or living out our retirement, doing whatever is normal for us—all of which He can use so that we can minister to others in Jesus’ Name.

The Lord needs today’s “dozen”—that means us here at St. John’s, Compass—to deploy a great variety of our God-given gifts, skills, and experiences to carry out a mission no less daunting than that portrayed in the 1967 movie: the ongoing ministry of proclaiming the Good News to those who don’t know Christ, and carrying out the imperatives of the Gospel—loving our neighbors as ourselves, working for justice and peace, and providing for those in need.

Jesus delighted in taking ordinary, everyday men and women, those who did not possess great qualifications or impressive credentials, and calling them to be His disciples. He does the same for us. And once we obey the call, His Holy Spirit makes available to us all that we need to be successful in remaining faithful to Christ and His mission. He sends us out to proclaim forgiveness and hope to a dying world, healing and help to broken people, and to offer kindness and provisions to the poor and oppressed. Jesus sends us out as His very own “dirty dozen” for *this* generation. Are *you* ready to sign up?

Let us pray: Dear Lord, we thank You that You came among us as an ordinary baby, so that You might become one of us. And, because You love us and have saved our souls, we are empowered and enabled to become one with You. Out of the fullness of Your grace, equip us for the mission and ministry to which You have called us—today, and until You call us home. In Jesus’ Name we pray. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. Ken Kesselus, “Twelve,” 14 June 2020, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org) <<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/twelve-pentecost-2-a-june-14-2020/>> 9 June 2023. Used with permission.