



**Pentecost 2**  
**Proper 6 (A)**

**Twelve**

**[RCL]: Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7); Psalm 116:1, 10-17; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8 (9-23)**

Twelve.

Twelve is one of those rare numbers to which people have for centuries attributed special significance. We give a special name for twelve – a dozen. More interestingly for us, it is a very significant number in the Bible, used around 187 times. Think about 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 Revelation’s tree of life producing twelve fruits.

And, of course, the twelve disciples become apostles.

Jesus’ primary followers were an unusual group, somewhat like the “dirty dozen” soldiers in a 1967 movie of the same name. Based on a true story and framed against the World War II D-day invasion, it portrays a special military operation designed to kill high-ranking Nazi officers. The American high command ordered an unorthodox officer to select a twelve-man squad for a mission with a very high probability of failure and the likely death of most of the combatants. Surprisingly, the officer did not go after the best soldiers in his outfit but instead visited military prisons. Among those he chose were thieves, murderers, and scoundrels. The commander took them apart and molded them into an effective team. Later, the wisdom of his selecting this “dirty dozen” became clear as their criminal skills 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 not be appropriate to affirm the behavior of criminals, but the story 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 goes, in the right situation, with a unique sort of guidance, they became heroes in the midst of an assignment that demanded an unconventional solution.

Another unconventional leader, in a more 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 substantial set of qualifications. He didn't seem to care whether they had unusual 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 commoners, some of whom seemed failures by modern worldly standards. One was young and inexperienced. Some were unexceptional fishermen. Many grew up in the rocky upland region of Galilee. One was a fanatical Jewish Nationalist. Several argued among themselves about who was the greatest disciple. Matthew was a despised tax collector. Peter denied even knowing Jesus when the chips were down. And then there was Judas – the betrayer.

It is hard to avoid concluding that Jesus wanted, for his dozen, people who were not special. He picked twelve ordinary people with no particular qualifications for transforming the world. Still, he trusted them to spread the kingdom of God. He sent them out to do the very work he had been doing and for them to continue after he was gone.

The mission on which Jesus sent his twelve 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.” He warned them of the likelihood of their being flogged and “dragged before governors and kings” as a result of accepting Jesus’ call to mission. In the most frightening of Jesus’ warnings to his dozen, he suggested that the field of 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.

Perhaps Jesus knew better than to invite experienced leaders or exceptional examples. He needed down-to-earth, vulnerable, and ordinary people – a kind of dozen who were representative of the general population and understood their pain and fears. Furthermore, who else would have had the courage or naivete - or the foolishness - to join such a band of brothers on such a dangerous mission?

The important lesson for today is that we Christians of the 21st century *are* the current “dozen” for Jesus. Of course, the dangers we face are seldom as dramatic as those faced by Jesus’ apostles. Still, remaining faithful in following Jesus remains a formidable task. But there is hope because we bear significant resemblance to the commonplace apostles.

In most small and average-sized congregations, carrying out this work begins with groups of lay members who may not believe they have superlative qualifications, like Jesus’ first dozen. But like the apostles, they can rise to the occasion to meet the needs of people, whatever they may be. Our ordinariness is not a hindrance unless we choose to make it so.

Who among Jesus’ dozen was really 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 among those around us? Who, in any generation, is qualified to heal a broken world in Jesus’ name? And yet, like the fictitious dirty dozen

and Jesus' original dozen, we can find the courage and the wherewithal to accept the command to follow Jesus into ministry for this generation.

Who among us, for example, could have felt qualified to face an unprecedented challenge posed by the coronavirus – sequestered in our homes at a time of physical separation of the Body of Christ? Nevertheless, in parish after parish and community after community – time after time – “unqualified” and untrained people rose to the occasion and accepted the hard mission to provide a remarkable closeness filled with love.

But maybe we should have expected this development because throughout Christian history, the dozen apostles have been replaced by a never-ending series of other dozens who continued to carry out the never-ending instructions of Jesus to go out among the people as his agents of love. Every one of us is empowered to do so, not because of our abilities or readiness, but because of the Holy Spirit.

The officer in the World War II drama and Jesus in the first century saw in their dozens a potential those folks could not see in themselves. The church recognizes this in baptism. By the nature of our baptisms, we have been authorized to be disciples in the same way as those first dozen.

God's perspective is that what needs doing in the world requires ordinary people, like most of us. God's work requires the very experiences we have had at work, or at school, or at play or raising a family, or doing whatever is normal for us – all of which we can use to help others. God needs today's “dozen” to utilize a great variety of gifts and skills and experiences to carry out a task no less daunting than that portrayed in the movie - the continuing business of proclaiming the good news to those who do not know God and for carrying out the imperatives of the Gospel - loving our neighbors as ourselves, bringing about justice and peace, providing for those in need.

Jesus delighted in taking ordinary, everyday people – those who did not seem to possess great qualifications or credentials - and calling them to become his disciples. He does the same for us. And the Holy Spirit makes available to us all we need to be successful as we remain faithful to Jesus and his mission. He sends us out into the world proclaiming a word of salvation to a dying world, helping heal a broken people - being Jesus' dirty dozen for this generation.

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