

The Twelve Disciples. I reintroduced them last week. And I am sure you worked hard all week to learn this list. Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew (who is Nathaniel), Thomas, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus (who is Judas, the Son of James), Simon the Cananaean—the Zealot, and then of course, there is Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ. Matthias is added to replace Judas.

A few of you did talk with me about these men. We worked through the list at the Mary Martha Bible study this week. I would love us to know the Twelve—much like the 10 Commandments or books of the Bible.

But this is not for the sake of winning a trivia challenge. We commemorate their faith and faithfulness. These men followed Christ. They were sent by Christ to establish His Church in the world.

As John pictures the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven—and this is the Church, by the way—he sees these men and their proclamation as foundational. In Revelation 21, John describes their role, “And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

Our Gospel reading today presents the commissioning of the 12 Apostles. And here, the word *Apostle* is the right one. We often call them the Twelve Disciples, meaning that they were the first learners and followers of Jesus. Every other time they are mentioned as group in Matthew’s Gospel, they are Disciples. But here, they are Apostles. The word suggests that Jesus *sent them out*.

Now, again, let’s remember who they are—or rather—who they were—and what a motley crew. We talked about Matthew last week—a tax collector for the Roman government—a social outcast. There was one rather volatile fisherman, and his brother and two business partners. There were a couple of working-class guys from Galilee. There was a political extremist. They were a lot like us.

And even though these might not be the guys we would pick as the first representatives of the Christian faith, Jesus seems to know what He is doing.

And Jesus sends them out, specifically to the lost sheep of Israel—people surrounded by the Word of God—who were not really hearing it. People who were lost—like sheep without a shepherd. People who would sometimes oppose their message. And He sends them out to proclaim, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Jesus’ message of preparation for the Disciples includes a sober warning. Being His Disciples is no simple task. They will face opposition. St. Ignatius of Antioch—an actual disciple of St. John—says, “Our task is not one of producing persuasive propaganda; Christianity shows its greatness when it is hated by the world.” Disciples are light in a dark world—a world that loves the darkness.

The earlier context in Matthew expresses Jesus’ calling to discipleship with great depth. In Matthew 7, Jesus told His Disciples that “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” The true Disciple is the one who is known by Jesus—and who does the will of His Father.

In Matthew 8, Jesus spoke to others interested in following Him. But He said that following Him—being a Disciple—was no easy and comfortable calling. They should first count the cost. It requires putting Him ahead of home and family and community and comfort and entertainment—perhaps even having nowhere to lay their heads.

In Matthew 9—as we heard last week—Jesus responded to the Pharisees who objected to His association with “tax collectors and sinners.” He tells them that following Him is not an exercise in conventional piety. It is a radical reorientation to the mission of Jesus himself, “For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” Jesus was coming to die on the cross to save just such sinners as these.

And He even calls them to take up their own crosses and follow Him. Discipleship is setting aside your own desires for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Discipleship is death—and resurrection. Jesus sends His laborers into the harvest. And He warns them that they will encounter poverty, rejection, and persecution.

And so, discipleship is more than just getting up on Sunday morning and going to Church—as important as that is. The Kingdom of heaven is near—and it will demand everything of you. But some things are just worth the price.

And I want to let the implications of this passage sink in. Discipleship isn’t just for pastors. This passage expresses the expectations that Christ has for His whole Church. We are all sent out with a message of the kingdom. If you are a Christian, then there are things worth hearing in this text.

And I want to deal with just two. Jesus says, in our reading, “And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.”

Jesus continues to talk about the eternal consequences for those who reject the Word of God and the message of the kingdom. The whole world needs the salvation that His kingdom brings. To reject Christ—and those He has sent—to reject the Church—leaves their hearers with no cure for sin. Judgment day will not go well. There is no eternal life apart from Jesus Christ. In fact, there is no eternal life apart from repentance.

Now this idea of shaking the dust off your feet might seem a little strange for us. But there is some context here. Jesus knew His audience.

This is what Jewish people would do when they returned home after traveling in Gentile lands—non-Jewish lands. They would, in a sense, rid themselves of the spiritual contamination of the places that they had just been. This is a prophetic and symbolic action that showed the difference between those who were people of God and those who were not.

Jesus is saying that those who reject the peace of Christ that the Apostles will offer, reveal their spiritual depravity. And because of the great opportunity afforded through the preaching of the Apostles, it is as Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.”

This is serious stuff. But it is also a reminder to the Apostles. They are to have nothing to do with the ways of life of those who reject Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 5, St. Paul says, “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.” In

1 Corinthians 15, he says, “Bad company ruins good morals.” The Apostles are to stay true to the Word and works of Jesus Christ.

And my second point is related—and it might just add a little more explanation. When Jesus sends out the Apostles with the message of the kingdom of God, He says to them, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

We get the idea that we are to be more like sheep than wolves. And I guess we all know what wolves do. Wolves destroy and tear apart and consume. There is plenty of that in the world already—just turn on the news.

But such behavior doesn’t belong in the Church either. And that is not what the Christian life is about. Following Jesus requires more from us.

Jesus also tells them to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Now I don’t really like snakes—they have been a problem from the beginning. But I think St. Paul had this saying from Jesus in mind when he says in Romans 16, “I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.”

This means that we really know the ways of God. We know His Word. We regularly listen to His voice. We are skilled craftsmen—but with the Word of God. And we put His wisdom to practice. We think about the things of God as if they matter most. It is as the Psalmist says in Psalm 119, “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.”

And I like the way St. Paul says it in 2 Corinthians 10, “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.”

We reject the ways of the world. We don’t dwell on evil. We aren’t experts on wickedness. We don’t allow ungodliness and immorality as our primary form of entertainment. We are careful with what we read and watch and say. We reject false doctrine. We avoid ungodly living. We see how easily we are influenced, and how easily we can be drawn away from Christ.

Perhaps we can characterize being wise as serpents and innocent as doves as simply returning to our Baptisms. And this is something we need to dwell on every day. Here we were washed and sanctified and justified—as we talked about last week. This is why we Christians make the sign of the cross. It brings us right back to Holy Baptism.

Really, only Christ cleanses us from sin. We can only return to the place that He does it. So we remember our Baptisms. We come to His table, remembering that Jesus first washed feet, before He instituted the Sacrament. And most of all—we sit and listen and learn the ways of Christ. This is wisdom. And this is innocence.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand. The kingdom of God is near. That’s the message. And Jesus is the King. He will reign forever. His resurrection from the dead reveals that to us. We cannot respond to this message by sticking our heads in the sand. We cannot respond to this with indifference or rebellion. Instead, we respond by following Christ.

I want us to identify with the Twelve Disciples. These are our heroes—our role models—our examples. Instead of the athletes and celebrities and influencers—we choose role models for ourselves because they follow Christ.

This is why we are Celebrating the Saints this year. This is why I quote from someone like St. Ignatius of Antioch. This is why we get to know this list of Twelve Disciples. We benefit from their good confession—as eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry—and His resurrection. They point us to Christ—our one and only Savior and Lord.

And I want you to think of yourself as a disciple. This is your primary identity. It is something of first importance. More than your career—which can come and go. More than your hobbies, interests, distractions. We don’t live to be entertained. We live to follow Christ.

Discipleship is faith in Christ. It is to be a learner and follower of Christ. We read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest His Word. We conform our lives to the image of Christ—living with integrity, and kindness, and truth. And it is to be vocal about the faith.

It is as St. Peter says in 1 Peter 3, “But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”

Psalms 145, says it this way, “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.”

In Word and Sacrament, through faith, He is shaping you into His image. This is what He is doing as He sends His Twelve Disciples out as Apostles. And this is what He does for you—right here in the Divine Service—if you listen—if you don’t resist His Word. When you hear Christ—when you make His Word known—things start to happen. He changes the world. He changes you.

Your own discipleship, your own obedience in following Christ, might be difficult—it will bring opposition—it will cost you time and effort—it will cost you everything—but follow Him anyway.

His kingdom will last forever. He builds His Church on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets. Christ Himself is the cornerstone. Everything else is sand. And it will all get washed away. So, shake off the dust from your feet. Be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

And just to go through them one last time. Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew (who is Nathaniel), Thomas, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus (who is Judas, the Son of James), Simon the Cananaean—the Zealot, and then of course, there is Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ. Matthias is added to replace Judas.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*