

Delegation

“God of grace and God of glory, /on thy people pour thy power; /crown thy ancient church’s story; /bring its bud to glorious flower. /Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, /for the facing of this hour, /for the facing of this hour.” I’ve probably mentioned a time or two that this is one of my favorite hymns, maybe my very favorite. There’s only a handful of hymns that we’ve sung together more frequently at Good Shepherd Baptist Church – the “gathering hymns,” “We Are the Church” and “Gather Us In;” one of the best of the late 60s “charismatic Catholic” songs, “They’ll Know We are Christians;” “Be Thou My Vision,” which appeals to my Celtic heritage (more on that in a few weeks); and Evangelical mainstays, “To God be the Glory” and “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” which was my dad’s favorite. One of the perks of being your pastor and having a tolerant and talented pianist like Pam Scalise is that I get to program pretty much whatever songs I think go best with my sermon.

But I’ve got some specific reasons for programming that hymn as well as the others this morning, over and above my personal love for it. Our passage from Mark 3 tells a couple of stories about how Jesus poured out his power on people who were facing a trying hour. And, perhaps more to the point, we have been and will be facing a trying hour in our own lives, as individuals and as Good Shepherd Baptist Church. As I mentioned in a short column in this week’s newsletter (and I hope you read it), this past Monday marked one year since we’ve been able to worship in person together. I think we’ve come through the past year remarkably well, thanks to the Holy Spirit which keeps us bound together in love and thanks to the human ingenuity, another gift from God, which developed platforms like Facebook Live and Zoom. And, as I also mentioned in that article, we can look forward to times that, as always, will carry both challenge and promise in the weeks, months, and years ahead. So, the words of the hymn are an appropriate prayer for us: “on thy people, pour thy power... grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour.”

But let’s start with those stories of Jesus pouring his power. Mark tells us that Jesus has been once again riling up the good religious folk of Capernaum by healing on the Sabbath. So outraged are the Pharisees by his actions, that they have begun to conspire with their old enemies, the Herodians, on how to destroy Jesus. But the common folk are drawn to this new teacher, who shows compassion on them, healing them despite any restrictions. So, as Mark writes, “a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumæa, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon.” At a time when transportation for these people almost always meant walking, people were coming from up to 170 miles away to hear Jesus or be healed by him. That’s an impressive commitment. And, although it’s not explicitly stated by Mark, it would seem likely that at least some of these, particularly those from “beyond the Jordan,” or “the region around Tyre and Sidon,” would be Gentiles. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus showed that he was, as John called him, “the light of the world.”

So, why did they come, these people from everywhere? Clearly, something about Jesus’ message attracted them but there was a more physical reason, too. Our New Revised Standard Version of Mark’s Gospel says, “he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him.” As occasionally happens, there is an interesting detail in the original Greek that the NRSV obscures. Listen to the King James Version of this verse: “For he had healed many; insomuch that they pressed upon him for to touch him, as many as had plagues.” The

Delegation

word translated by the Authorized Version as “plagues” can also be translated as “a scourge, a calamity, misfortune...” Clearly, not just those with medical complaints are coming to Jesus. Jesus healed all those who had come to him by pouring out his power upon them.

I’m going to skip over the verses about the unclean spirits and Jesus’ desired anonymity for now, other than to say it’s refreshing to see a leader of real power who doesn’t grab for every bit of credit offered. But what I do want us to look at is what comes next: the calling of the Twelve. It’s clear from this story and many others in the Gospels that Jesus needed some help. People were clamoring all the time to see him, to hear him, to be touched by him. Like Moses before him, Jesus needed to appoint some assistants and to delegate certain tasks to them. “He appointed twelve, ...to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons,” that is, to heal. Jesus poured out his power in a special way on those he called “apostles.” He needed them to represent him in special ways and they needed to share in his very essence in order to do so.

You might think that, with this sort of mandate and this sort of anointing, that the twelve chosen would be special beings, evolved humans with deep training for the task. Of course, they were no such thing. One of the recurring miracles in the Bible is that God generally chooses the last people that we would choose to advance God’s plan for humankind. Jacob Israel, as we’ve recently reviewed, was a con man, and his boys were not above murdering their brother. Joseph was a spoiled brat. Moses was a murdering fugitive with a speech impediment. The list goes on and on. Of the Twelve, we know that Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus, Peter denied him, and the rest abandoned him in his moment of crisis. Not exactly winning resume material.

Not only that, but we’re not even entirely sure who some of them were. There are four lists of the Twelve in the New Testament – in Mark, Matthew, Luke, and Acts – and none of the four are the same. Mostly, it’s just the order in which they are named, which probably just represents the tradition which had come down to the Gospel writer or, in the case of Luke and Acts, a point which the writer was making. But Mark and Matthew list an apostle named Thaddeus, who is nowhere to be found in either of the Lukan lists. Instead, there is a man called “Judas, son (or perhaps brother) of James.” Did Thaddeus drop out at some point to be replaced by this “other Judas?” Or was Thaddeus a nickname for Judas, son of James, which Mark and Matthew decided to use to further separate this apostle from his discredited namesake, Iscariot? There are plenty of theories, but no one knows.

You might say that Thaddeus, or “the other Judas,” is actually pretty representative of most of the apostles. The Twelve generally function as an anonymous group in the Gospels. We only know specific details about a few of them. Simon Peter, of course, is recognized as the leader of the Twelve and his character, brash and changeable, quite unlike his “Rock” nickname, is attested in a number of stories. We also know a good deal about his career as a missionary from the Acts of the Apostles and from Paul’s letters. We get a number of details about the sons of Zebedee, James and John, from the gospels and the Acts. Like Peter and his brother, Andrew, James and John are fishermen, but they seem to be more well-to-do, working for their father’s fleet, connected in some way to the family of the high priest. We remember that during Jesus’ life, their main concern seems to be which of them gets to sit next to him in the Kingdom. But ultimately, they are faithful – Acts records that James is executed by Herod Agrippa for his faith

Delegation

and John, tradition tells us, wrote the Gospel and the letters that bear his name, as well as the Revelation.

The Gospels also tell us snippets about the others: Andrew, who brought his brother Simon to Jesus; Bartholomew (if, indeed, he is the same man as Nathaniel, as tradition teaches) first scoffed at Jesus' Nazarene upbringing, then worshipped him; Thomas, the doubter; Matthew, the tax collector; Judas Iscariot, the treasurer who objected to the waste of perfume, then sold Jesus out. But after they are listed at the beginning of Acts, Luke tells only stories of Peter and John before switching his focus to the apostle who never saw Jesus, Paul. The Philip we hear about in Acts is not the Apostle, but rather one of the seven deacons appointed by the apostles to handle the distribution of charity.

There are, of course, non-Biblical legends which grew up around the names of the other apostles, but the sources are of varying quality and the stories often contradict each other. Did Andrew become a missionary to Greece or to Scotland? Or was he, as another legend claims, the founder of the city of Byzantium, later known as Constantinople and now as Istanbul? It delights me, by the way, that the silly song, "Istanbul (Not Constantinople)," was a hit for the Four Lads in the '50s and for They Might Be Giants in the '90s, but I digress... The tradition that Thomas evangelized India is strong enough that it has to be taken seriously, but stories about the other apostles seem random and even nonsensical. I preached some years ago on the conflicting stories about Simon the Zealot and Judas, son of James. I won't repeat that material today (although I can send it to anyone who's really interested) but, as I said then regarding Simon, "Since the Eastern Church says he traveled West and the Western Church says he traveled East, perhaps the truth is in yet a third tradition that says he stayed put and became the second Bishop of Jerusalem..."

My point is that those 12 men chosen by Jesus were just ordinary people taking part in an extraordinary adventure which had extraordinary results. There was nothing particularly special about them other than that they believed in Jesus, received the Holy Spirit, and followed their calling to do whatever it was that God had for them to do. My own suspicion is that (other than Peter, John, and Thomas) most of them probably settled back into the normality of life, telling the story of Jesus when and where they could, raising families, and dying in obscurity to all but those who knew and loved them. Not very impressive on a grand scale, perhaps, but certainly quiet lives of faith in which they blessed all those around them. The eighteenth-century English poet, Thomas Gray, published only 13 poems in his lifetime. He is most remembered for his "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," in which he might have been writing about men like Simon and Judas and Bartholomew and the rest: "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air."

But what have these ordinary people who may have achieved extraordinary things to do with us at Good Shepherd? I submit to you that they are our models, for like them we are ordinary people who have put our faith in Jesus and been touched by the Holy Spirit. Like them, we are called by Jesus to represent him in a difficult time and, like them, we need no special training or advantages to do what is needed, simply willing hearts to take on jobs suited to us and to be faithful in them.

Delegation

Let me unpack that a bit. Even as we mark the one-year point of our journey through the pandemic, we are beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel. Many of you are now vaccinated – as we continue to see the number of us who are protected grow, we can begin to make plans to resume our “in-person” worship services, classes, potlucks, and all the activities of our church we used to find “normal.” It may be that some will wish to continue to stay physically remote, joining us from their homes by Zoom or Facebook Live but it may also be that some who had absented themselves from our fellowship prior to the pandemic will be moved to come back once we gather physically again. Like the crowds that followed Jesus, Good Shepherd Baptist Church is becoming more and more a multicultural fellowship – both in the attendance at our primary services and the growing numbers who will come for meetings of Lynnwood International Fellowship or Iglesia Bautista el Buen Pastor. Just as in Jesus’ time, “as many as have plagues, calamities, misfortunes...” will welcome the renewed opportunity to come to a place where there is healing for their spirits.

For many of us, the pandemic has also obscured the rate at which our surroundings are changing. Lynnwood is adding residential dwellings at a breakneck speed. In addition to the apartment buildings in City Center Apartments, which added 347 units, and The Reserve at Lynnwood, which began life as a SHAG project, with 308 units, the remaining pockets of single-family zoned residences are being built out. Under construction or in planning are the housing portion of Lynnwood Place, also known as “the new Costco,” which will add 1,369 units, Avalon Alderwood, rising in place of the old Sears, adding 328 units, Kinect@Lynnwood, a seven-story building to be built on Alderwood Mall Boulevard, adding 239 units, the Alderwood “mixed-use” project, across Alderwood Mall Parkway from that old Sears development, adding 346 units in its proposed 18 stories, and Northline Village, to be built in the block where Grocery Outlet and many other businesses have recently closed, a multi-use development that will include another 1,369 units. That’s more than 4,300 new apartments, some of which will house families. According to this morning’s *Seattle Times*, 865 households moved from Seattle to Lynnwood in 2020. And the new light rail system, due to open in Lynnwood in three years, will bring more. This represents both a challenge and an opportunity for Good Shepherd.

As I’ve said before, not all of the newcomers will be looking for a church, but some will. And of those looking for a church, not all will be looking for a church like Good Shepherd, but some will. But even if only 1% of the residents of those new apartments, not to mention the new houses, were to come to Good Shepherd, would we be ready? For the past several weeks, I’ve run a notice in the weekly newsletter that Mike Carey is looking for a teacher or two to lead on-line Sunday School for the elementary school kids. No one has volunteered. How then will we welcome new young families to Good Shepherd? For that matter, as far as I know, no one has responded to the 60th Anniversary Committee’s request for former member contacts. Are we ready to welcome newcomers if we can’t welcome old friends? Next month, we’ll be forming our annual nominating committee. We’ll have open deacon positions and perhaps some open officer positions. But our Deacon of Adult Education job has been vacant for a couple of years now and our Deacon of Worship position has been unfilled since last September. I’m no Jesus or even Moses, but I know when I need help. If Dale Sutton calls you to ask you to serve on the Nominating Committee, say “yes.” If the Nominating Committee calls you and asks you to serve as a deacon or an officer, say “yes.”

Delegation

Friends, this message is not meant as a guilt trip. I'm simply trying in my own stumbling way to remind us all that following Jesus, being a part of the Body of Christ here on earth, comes with responsibilities. If we are going to continue to function as a community, if we are going to be faithful to our calling and to our own perceived mission to be "a supportive, open, growing Christian community that reaches out to all in a spirit of unconditional love," then we need to be ready to do some work. We don't have to travel to foreign lands. Chances are really good we're not going to have to suffer dreadful predations or death. As the old hymn says, "If you cannot preach like Peter, /if you cannot pray like Paul, /you can tell the love of Jesus /and say, 'He died for all.'" Your actions will speak louder than your words. Let those new folks come and let them find us busy preparing a place for them. We will be able to do it because Jesus has poured out his power on us. The symbols of that pouring out are at hand in the bread and the cup. We will sing and we will enjoy that symbolic feast together. Thanks be to God! Amen.