

How the Twelve that Should Not Have Been, Became the Twelve We Are Called to Be

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Based upon Matt. 10:1-8; John 1:35-51

If I asked you to rattle off a list of the Twelve disciples, do you think you could do it? Raise your hand if you think you could. It's sort of a trick question because there is no definitive list of "the Twelve" in Scripture. All four of the canonical gospels say that Jesus called disciples to follow him. All four say that among Jesus' followers there was a group which came to be known as "the Twelve." They are called the Twelve "disciples" in the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and then later the Twelve "apostles" after Jesus sent them out to do ministry in his name (because apostle means "one who is sent"). Everyone agrees that among the Twelve were Simon, called Peter, and his brother Andrew, James and John Zebedee, who were also brothers, Philip, Matthew, Thomas, and Judas Iscariot. *Matthew, Mark, and Luke* agree that there was another Simon, whom they refer to as "the Zealot," or "the Cananaean," another James, son of Alphaeus, and someone named Bartholomew. But the rest is where it starts to get fuzzy. *Matthew and Mark* say the twelfth disciple was Thaddeus, also known as Lebbaeus. *Luke and John* mention another Judas, sometimes called Judas son of James to distinguish him from Jesus' betrayer; and John, who never included a full list of disciples in his gospel, says there was also a disciple named Nathanael, whom the Synoptic gospels never mention. Who were these people, and what can we learn from them?

When it comes to Nathanael, many theories abound. Some say that Nathanael must have been the one called Bartholomew in the Synoptics because his name always comes after Philip's on the lists, and his call experience, as we just heard, comes after Philip's in *John*. Bartholomew is really more of a last name than a first name. It meant, "son of Tholomew." So, it is conceivable that Nathanael was that son. But a seminary professor, Dr. Charles Hill, also makes a persuasive argument that Nathanael was actually James, son of Alphaeus.¹ The argument is too complicated to explain now; but the gist of it is that James is a cognate of Jacob in Hebrew, and today's text about Nathanael is filled with word play and allusions to the original Jacob narrative. So perhaps Nathanael was really James, but was called Nathanael because of his faithfulness. (Nathanael means gift from God.) When Jesus seemed to recognize this, Nathanael believed.² Still other scholars argue that there is no need to do this kind of matching with the Synoptics. We just need to accept that Nathanael was never one of the Twelve. John does not really care about the Twelve in his gospel. He focuses on individual disciples far more than on the symbolism of the group as a whole; and we know that there were many other followers of Jesus in addition to the Twelve.

For example, there were a number of women, who were often Jesus' patrons, including four Mary's: his mother, the mother of James and Joseph, the sister of Martha from Bethany, and Mary Magdalene. At various times they traveled with Jesus and the disciples, alone with Martha, Salome, Suzanna, and Joanna. In addition to the women and the Twelve, Jesus' followers also

¹ Hill, C.E., "The Identity of John's Nathanael" in JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, 67 (1997), 45-61.

² *Ibid.*

included Lazarus and Cleopas, at some point, Jesus' two brothers James and Jude, and after Judas Iscariot's death, Matthias. Jesus had a pack of followers, enough that at one point in his ministry he could send out 70 to do work in his name. As far as we know, the only reason Jesus called Twelve specifically was so that he would have a quorum, and therefore could teach as a rabbi (Jewish law requires ten men), and because twelve was such a symbolic number in Judaism going back to the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Jesus was symbolically beginning a new covenant with a new Twelve. After Pentecost, the Twelve were joined by hundreds more who were touched by the Holy Spirit. They were also joined by Paul, who was neither a Pentecost convert, nor counted among the Twelve, yet transformed the Church. So, we mustn't get so focused on the significance of the Twelve that we dismiss the value of those who were not counted among them. Some denominations still do this, by excluding women from leadership because the Twelve were male. Our tradition would consider that poor biblical hermeneutics, given how many served Jesus before and after the Resurrection.

But all that being said, I do think that we can learn something important about God and ourselves from paying attention to the people Jesus chose, not just to follow him around, but also to be the face of his ministry after he was gone. Although all of the Twelve were male, their gender was one of the only things they had in common with each other. They were actually a quite eclectic bunch, which included men from opposite sides of a number of different spectrums. And they were just ordinary guys, not the kinds of experts that most of us would seek out if we had to accomplish a really important task in a very short time period. They never should have been able to do what he needed them to do.

Today's text from *John* highlights the diversity of the Twelve by immediately juxtaposing the call of the fishermen disciples with the call of the scholarly disciples. Andrew, whom all the gospel writers agree was the first to follow Jesus, was a Galilean fisherman. This means that he was not well educated, and probably couldn't read. But he was a man of faith, who was living as a disciple of John the Baptist. According to today's text, after John told him that Jesus was the Messiah, Andrew quickly found his brother Peter, who like him was also a fisherman, so that they could follow Jesus together. After that, we don't hear much about Andrew, but we do hear a lot about Peter. Peter was the passionate, impetuous one, who more often than not had his foot in his mouth. He loved Jesus and was faithful enough for Jesus to choose him to be "the rock" on which the church would be built. But his nickname "Rocky" also fit him well because his faithfulness was inconsistent. He believed in Jesus enough to step out onto the sea to meet him, but not enough to stay afloat; and he betrayed Jesus right after he said he never would.

According to *John*, there was another disciple with Andrew when he saw Jesus. John doesn't name him, which suggests that he might have been implying that he was that man. *John* also doesn't say that he ran off to get his own brother James, but we know that at some point that happened. James and John Zebedee were also fishermen; they worked for their father, as did Andrew and Peter. This leaves open the possibility that James and John had higher social status than Andrew and Peter, especially if their father was a successful businessman, which also might explain why later James and John wanted the best seats next to Jesus in Paradise. They were competitive and used to being at the top of their class. Jesus called them both "Sons of Boanerges," which means "Sons of Thunder." Whether this means they were loud personalities

or simply big guys who made their presence known we don't know. But loud or not, there is reason to believe that they too were faithful disciples of John the Baptist before following Jesus, which may be why he made them part of his inner circle.

While the fishermen were spreading the word to their brothers, Jesus called Philip. We know much less about him than the others. He lived in the same town as the four. He may have been a Hellenized Jew because his name is Greek instead of Hebrew, and because later when some Greeks come to seek out Jesus they approach Philip first. (John 12:20-21). Philip was a practical person. After Jesus tells the disciples to feed the 5000, Philip is the one who points out that that would take a huge sum of money they didn't have. (John 6:7). Tradition also paints him as a better educated man than the fishermen, probably in part because of his association with Nathanael.

Nathanael was possibly the best-educated of the Twelve. Tradition holds that he was a student or scribe because Jesus tells him that he "saw" him "sitting under a fig tree," which is a Jewish idiom for studying the Torah and praying. We know from today's story that Nathanael was also a skeptic because he knew there were no Scripture lessons about the Messiah coming from Nazareth, which in his day was a poor town with only about 200-400 people in it. Nathanael came from Cana, and was a righteous man, "in whom there was no guile."

If we stop right there before considering the other disciples, already we can see that Jesus had an interesting gang to manage. How do you imagine the righteous, single, rabbinical student who could quote chapter and verse, and was skeptical of anything that was not spelled out in Scripture, would have interacted with Peter, the impetuous, illiterate married man who smelled of fish? It's hard to imagine these men having a whole lot to talk about. But then again, they were probably best friends compared to Simon the Zealot and Matthew. These guys were at totally opposite sides of the political spectrum of their day. Simon, who according to one tradition was the bridegroom at the wedding of Cana, was allied with the Jews who wanted to overthrow the Roman government by force. Judas Iscariot most likely was a Zealot too. In contrast, Matthew the tax collector, (who may also have been called Levi), worked for the very oppressors the others wanted to overthrow and profited from their over-taxation of the people. He may have been the wealthiest of the Twelve. Imagine the late-night debates they must have had!

And what about Judas Iscariot? According to *John*, he was in charge of the disciples' finances, and was a thief, pocketing as much for himself as he put in the purse. (John 12:6). If this was true, do you think that Philip, the budget conscious, was thrilled to work with him? Maybe he was as thrilled as Thomas, the scientist of the pack, who needed empirical evidence in order to believe the Resurrection, was with Andrew the evangelist, who left everything on the reference of a man who lived in the wilderness and ate bugs, or with Peter and John, who saw the supernatural side of Jesus no one else saw.³

³ For more on the Twelve disciples, see MacArthur, John, *Twelve Ordinary Men: How the Master Shaped His Disciples for Greatness, and What He Wants to Do with You* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2002); *The Twelve Disciples: The Life and Ministry of Jesus' 12 Disciples*, (pamphlet) (Rose Publishing, LLC, 2004).

If you look at the list and try to see the disciples categorically, instead of as the revered apostles that they became, the Twelve start to look better suited to be a good cast for a *Gilligan's Island* remake than the perfect task force to launch a new world order on behalf of God Incarnate. Thus poet U.A. Fanthorpe calls them “Keystone Cops” in her brilliant poem, *Getting It Across*. Written in Jesus’ voice, the poem, which I’ve edited for length, reads:

This is the hard thing.
Not being God, the Son of Man,
—I was born for that part—
But patiently incising on these yokel faces,
Mystified, bored and mortal,
The vital mnemonics they never remember....

They know my unknowable parables as well
As each other’s shaggy dog stories.
I say! I say! I say! There was this Samaritan,
This Philistine and this Roman...or
What did the high priest say
To the belly dancer? All they need
Is the cue for laughs. My sheep and goats,
Virgins, pigs, fig trees, loaves and lepers
Confuse them. Fishing, whether for fish or men,
Has unfitted them for analogy.

Yet these are my mouths. Through *them only*
Can I speak with Augustine, Aquinas, Martin, Paul
Regius Professors of Divinity,
And you, and you...

I envy Moses, who could choose
The diuturnity of stone for waymarks
Between man and Me. He broke the tablets,
Of course. I too know the easy messages
Are the ones not worth transmitting;
But he could at least carve...

I alone must write on flesh. Not even
The congenial face of my Baptist cousin,
My crooked affinity Judas, who understands,
Men who would give me accurately to the unborn
As if I were something simple, like bread.
But Pete, with his headband stuffed with fishhooks,
His gift for rushing in where angels wouldn’t,
Tom, for whom metaphor is anathema,
And James and John, who want the room at the top—
These numskulls are my medium. I called them.

I am tattooing God on their makeshift lives.
My Keystone Cops of disciples, always,
Running absurdly away, or lying ineptly,
Cutting off ears and falling into the water,
These Sancho Panzas must tread my Quixote life,
Dying ridiculous and undignified,
Flayed and stoned and crucified upside down.
They are the dear, the human, the dense, for whom
My message is. That might, had I not touched them,
Have died decent respectable upright deaths in bed.⁴

There's an old legend that after Jesus died, rose, and ascended into heaven, the angel Gabriel asked him how everything went. "It went well," Jesus said. "I accomplished all that I set out to do." "But who is going to spread the good news now that you are up here?" Gabriel asked. "My disciples," Jesus answered. "I picked a team just for that purpose." Gabriel looked down at earth and the disciples and said, "Um... what's your plan B?"⁵ But Jesus didn't have a plan B. He picked a team that was hard for him to work with and whose different gifts and affinities inevitably caused conflict and confusion in the group. He picked a team that we never would have picked, but his plan worked. Notwithstanding their squabbles, those disciples, because of their differences, were able to spread the good news everywhere in different ways. Tradition says James Zebedee made it to Spain and became bishop there. It says that Andrew made it all the way to Russia. History puts Philip in what is now the Ukraine, Thomas in India, Matthew in Ethiopia, and Simon the Zealot in Persia. Their differences may have caused heated conversations at times, but they also allowed many more people to hear and believe the Gospel than if Jesus had chosen a homogenized group of easy-to-work-with mini-me's.

We must never lose sight of this as we try to journey and serve faithfully through this age in which so many, both in and outside the church view diversity as a problem. The disciples were the living embodiment of last week's lesson on the beloved. By picking them, Jesus demonstrated that all kinds are beloved to God. By sending them, he counted on the fact that their differences would enable them to convey in a whole variety of ways, that others were beloved too. Thomas could speak to people's doubts. Nathanael could cite Scriptural precedent. Peter could move forward with courage while Philip journeyed with studied caution. Matthew could speak to conservatives. Simon could speak to liberals and radicals. Jesus believed in all of them; and they did what he thought they could. He believes in us the same way.

Did God choose you because you are a skeptic or because you know the Bible so well, or because you know what it's like to sweat for a daily wage? Did God chose you because you're good with money or because you have big dreams? God only knows; I don't. But we would do well to trust God's judgment more than our own. Do not let anyone convince you, therefore, that

⁴ As quoted in Loder, Ted, The Haunt of Grace: Responses to the Mystery of God's Presence (Philadelphia: Innisfree Press, Inc., 2002), 35-36.

⁵ One version of this legend is available at <http://www.goodshepherdchurchtown.ie/2014/06/i-have-no-other-plan-it-must-work-a-beautiful-old-story-tells-of-how-jesus-after-his-ascension-into-heaven-was-surrounded-by-the-holy-angels-who-began-to-enquire-about-his-work-on-earth-jesu/>. I was unable to find where it originated.

the differences in the Church and the world are contrary to the will of God. Do not feel that the only way we can achieve God's peace is by hiding or eliminating them. We are God's chosen medium— all of us. Let us celebrate our diversity and learn from one another, for there is no plan B. There is only us, the disciples whom Jesus loved, and called to love the world in his name. Amen.