

The Dirty Dozens

A sermon preached by the Rev. Virginia A. Fifield
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Matthew 9:35-38; 10:1-8

Today we're going to talk about the *Dirty Dozens*--who they all are and what they do. But to begin, I need to share some theological reflections on Matthew's point of view.

First of all, Matthew tells us that Jesus' ministry was a "wholistic" one—a three-fold ministry to the whole person: to the mind through **teaching**, to the heart through **preaching**, and to the body through **healing**.

Next he implies that in the same way that Jesus looked out over the crowd with heartbreaking compassion to see their hurt, confusion and aimlessness—like sheep without a shepherd; and, since each one of us is also an inseparable unit of *body, mind* and *spirit*, we're to exercise this same three-fold ministry of compassion and **caring** with and for one another.

Third, with all the things he said and did, Jesus was clearly trying to make a point about the focus of both his own mission and that of his followers. After claiming his need for laborers to bring about a harvest with the central focus of **caring for those in need**, we hear him give the disciples even more instructions: "*to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers.*" This is the **core** of Jesus' mission. And in these particular verses, he wants it to begin and done close to home—not to be targeting Gentiles or even half-breed Samaritans, but only for the "*lost sheep of the house of Israel*" (10.6)

So what's the point of this story? New Testament scholarship has discerned that the context of Matthew's gospel is against the backdrop of having to share in the experience of **persecution**—of hostility and rejection of Jesus' mission.

Matthew's version of Jesus says: "**Expect persecution**", "*It won't be so easy carrying out the mission I have for you. But it's urgent! So don't dawdle, because the end of all time is coming.*" "**Mission** is a challenge, expect persecution, so let's get to it, church! It's urgent!"

And the church, see, if it's to **be** the church, has to be all about **mission**. So says Karl Barth, one of Christianity's most famous theologians of the last century, who said that: "*The church is either a missionary church or it's no church at all!*"

Okay, so **mission** is important, but what **is** it really? The first reaction of most of us Christians is to immediately think in terms of **foreign** missions like Africa, Asia or South America.

But Matthew's saying **no**—mission isn't about "traipsing off" to foreign lands. Instead it's about Jesus' core-message of **caring for others**, starting "**right here, right now, where we're at!**"

Again, it's why he has Jesus keep telling us, "*Don't start off by traveling to some far-off place to convert unbelievers. And don't try to be dramatic by tackling some public enemy. (But) Go to the lost, the confused right here in the neighborhood. Tell 'em that the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons.*" Of course Jesus wasn't preclude a witness to the Gentiles, was simply seeing it as happening in the course of his mission to the Hebrews.

The real missionaries, see, aren't just in Africa, Asia and South America, but they're also "here"—right here, in this very room, "***on the premises, with a purpose!***". (Gil Hanke)

What Jesus is saying is that **mission** begins and is an out-growth of what's happening in here, "***where you're at***", right now, in your heart, as you sit here, gazing at one another over all these rows of pews, where we can see each other's face.

The implication of all this **is**—despite the fact that we all have questionable qualifications, (as did those first disciples), Jesus **still** calls out after us, to be his disciples. And as an act of pure grace, he gives us **ordinary**, ill-equipped people, the authority to represent him and all that he ever stood for, and do some **extra-ordinary** things. And we're to **start** by taking **notice** of the people around us—right here, right now, "on the premises, with a purpose" (as Gil Hanke would say). Well, so—let's do!

So first, if you're comfortable with it, let's try this: without being too obvious, or having to stare at any one person, try taking a slow panoramic view of all the folks here in the sanctuary; and then, in your mind's eye, allow yourself to **focus** in on some one or two persons whom you know, who may be in need of compassion, and are hungry for God's love and truth. Go head—let yourself do this because you **care** . . . I'll wait a moment or two for you to get focused.

Okay, now ask yourself this question—but let's do it this way: after me, repeat each section of the question-- "***With the Holy Spirit working through me, how can I help bring help bring God's light and comfort into this***

person's life-situation? Is there a way, directly or indirectly, that you may be able to reach out to and “connect with” this person as a simple act of caring for them? Say, with a prayer, a touch, hug, a note or phone call?) Knowing the details of their life's circumstances doesn't matter as much as does the fact that you care, and that because you care, you're willing to stick your neck out, and somehow become a light of God's love in their lives. And if you're worried about having the qualifications or ability for doing such a thing, hold on a minute, because I've got news for you!

But first, I have to tell you how today's scripture lesson affected me—what it did to me: It reminded me of one of my most favorite movies, which I got to see again over Memorial Day weekend: it's called ***The Dirty Dozen***, first produced in 1967. You may remember it, about a special military operation that supposedly happened during WW II. Usually I'm not big on war movies, but this one's had special meaning and appeal to me over the years, and I'll tell you why.

It's about an American officer, a Major Reisman, played by Lee Marvin, who has an attitude problem, but who also had a long history of getting things done. He's told to prepare for a dangerous mission behind enemy lines on the eve of D-Day, to free some American prisoners from Nazi imprisonment. But in order to do this, he chose not to use the best soldiers he could get, (as like the SEALs, who rooted out Bin Ladin). Because, for one thing, he was told that there was about a 90% chance that his mission would fail. And figuring that the Army wouldn't want to risk any of its really good soldiers for a mission like that, he went to an American prison where the really bad soldiers—men who'd run afoul of the military justice system, and were being held for life sentences or pending execution. Among them were thieves, murderers, and a variety of reprobates who'd come up the hard way in life, and who'd continued their evil ways in the Army—hence, were in jail!

As the story unfolds, and the men are involved in carrying out the mission, we begin to see the wisdom of the Major's choice to use his “**dirty dozen**”. Many of them had skills that they'd used most all their lives, which would prove to be perfect for the demands of this risky mission—like how to pick locks, which was especially helpful in prison; another was good with his fists; all of 'em were good at lying, cheating and concealment and all the other kinds of sneaky tactics you can think of—which were exactly the skills needed to pull off the job ahead of them.

One of the appeals of the “***Dirty Dozen***” is that it's about people whom the world regarded as rather inept—if not downright worthless. And yet, in the right situation, with the right sort of guidance and encouragement, they could become heroes, turn their lives around and become successful human beings. I think that

was the appeal of the film for me at a very difficult period in my early twenties, when I was still dealing with my parents' divorce, and I'd begun to see and feel myself as being just as inept, worthless and unloved as did those soldiers—until several years later, when I met and came under the guidance of Dr. Virginia McBlair, a college professor of mine at San Diego State University, who took time and an interest in me, and with whom, through many hours of therapy, gave me another chance at life; to say nothing of the success of a college degree and my two advanced degrees at the Claremont School of Theology—leading to the fulfillment of my Calling as a pastor, still doing what I love to do! Who'd a thought!

And then to top it off, here in today's gospel, comes another sort of “dirty dozen”—a rather **remarkable** dozen in their **un**-remarkability, yet also chosen, “cleaned up” (so to speak), and guided by another wise leader. Because unlike Major Reisman, who delights in broadcasting the qualifications of his reprobates, when Jesus picks **his** “12”, sending them out to preach in the field, to do all the very same things that he'd been doing, Matthew doesn't mention a word about qualifications! You'd think he'd've at least mentioned that Jesus chose these guys **because** of their background experience, or their great potential, or their unusual spiritual insight.

But no—we only get their names. Maybe this is just the way Jesus does things, and is meant to say more about the nature of Jesus than about the special nature of these first disciples. It's almost as if the gospel bends over backwards to assure us that none of these people were special in any way.

But maybe that's what makes Jesus' choices even more special: it's to these 12 ordinary everyday people, with **no** particular qualifications, that he decides to introduce to the kingdom—sending 'em out on a very tough, risky and not very pleasant mission. And maybe knowing very well what his mission was up against, (as did Major Reisman realize his), Jesus knew better than to choose pure, pious, “spiritual” people. Maybe he chose these everyday, tough, realistic, **ordinary** people on purpose—because the task he'd sent them out to do, was so **ex**-traordinary. I don't know.

But I **do** know that right now, that as I look out over the dozens and dozens of your beautiful faces, I'm looking at the same group of people with the same qualifications—or lack there of, to be Jesus' disciples! And when you look into each other's faces, with our dozens of backgrounds, past experiences or present attributes, **who** among us is really suited to proclaim the gospel to an **un**believing world in Jesus' name? The Gospel says **we** are! We're the contemporary “dirty dozens”!

We may not feel qualified But by the gift of God's **grace**, still, we've been given the authority to **be** and do his work. Maybe **he** sees in us more potential than **we** see in ourselves. Maybe **he** thinks that what needs doing in the world **requires** some people like you 'n me who've experienced a little worldly wisdom. Maybe **he** can take the experiences and relationships that you've had in your work, or at school, in your marriage or life partner-ship, your family or experiences in your retirement years, and use them to help others.

I want to finish with one more thought—actually a vivid memory of having met with a group of elementary children, during which we were having a discussion on this very Matthew text on Jesus' calling of the 12. I re-member pointing out to them how these disciples were very ordinary everyday people; and how Peter was impetuous and shortsighted, constantly making mistakes; that Matthew himself was a disreputable tax collector, and how, when the going-got-tough, Judas betraying Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

So I asked the group, ***"From the people he chose, what does this tell you about Jesus?"*** They sat there in silence for quite a little while. Then one of the boys decided to answer the question, and he said, ***"I guess it shows us that Jesus was a lousy judge of character!"***

Indeed! (I thought to myself). Which leads back to Jesus reminding us that mission is not about traipsing off to foreign lands, but about beginning right here "where you're at"; and back to the invitation—if you were comfortable with it, to allow yourself to connect with some-one here today who may be in need of compassion, who is hungry for God's and truth.

Have you thought of a way, with the Holy Spirit working through you, that you might be able to somehow bring God's light and comfort into this person's life—simply because you care . . . ?

Let me suggest that the invitation is still there . . . So what will you do with it today—perhaps right here, right now, ***"where you're at"***, ***"because you care"*** with the Spirit of God working through you . . . ? How will you want to share the compassion and mercy of God, feed the hungry, heal the sick?

To help us answer the question, please join me in the response as its printed in the bulletin, and then we'll sing!

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