

“The Apostles: Unlikely Leaders”

Matthew 28:16-20

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

June 7, 2020

Last Sunday, a few hours after we worshiped together, the basement nursery in the education annex of St. John’s Episcopal Church was damaged by fire, during a demonstration calling for racial equity and police reform. Nefarious elements in the overwhelmingly peaceful public protest had committed sporadic vandalism around Washington D. C, including at the church.

On Monday, Danny and I drove through Friendship Heights, Tenleytown, and Georgetown, in order to volunteer our help cleaning up victimized businesses. Plenty of plywood covered storefronts that had been plate glass. We stopped at St. John’s, whose sanctuary I have often visited, across the street from Lafayette Square. An interim assistant pastor expressed thanks for our offer to help, but other volunteers had already accomplished what could be done in the nursery without skilled workers.

By that evening, St. John’s Episcopal Church was even more prominently featured in news reports. The President of the United States had positioned himself with other officials in front of the church, on the very sidewalk where I had visited with the interim assistant pastor. While Danny and I had been equipped with brooms, dustpans, rakes, shovels and gloves, the President was equipped with a Bible. In an act of blatant blasphemy, the President held the Bible aloft in awkward proof of the reason the founders of our nation insisted upon the separation of church and state. To enable this self-serving photo-op, police, military authorities, and secret service had forcefully cleared the Square of peaceful but unsuspecting citizens who were exercising the constitutional right of free speech.

Mariann Budde, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese, later described the scene:

“My major outrage was the abuse of sacred symbols and sacred texts. There was no acknowledgement of grief, no acknowledgement of wounds. There was no attempt to heal. The Bible calls us to our highest aspirations, and he used it as a prop.”

That is the same Bible that calls us, as followers of Jesus Christ, to higher aspirations. The words Jesus spoke to eleven of the disciples, even the doubters, gathered in Galilee at his direction, after resurrection from death, speak to us, even the doubters, today: *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

Among the eleven, were the brothers Simon and Andrew. They were fishing with a net in Lake Galilee, when Jesus called to them: *“Come with me, and I will teach you to catch people.”*

Unlikely leaders.

Also among the eleven, were the brothers James and John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, getting their nets ready, when Jesus called them similarly: *“Come with me.”*

Unlikely leaders.

Also among the eleven, was Matthew. He was in his office, minding his business, which was collecting taxes. Jesus said to him, like he had to the others, *“Follow me.”* Matthew got up, and invited Jesus to a meal at his house.

Unlikely leader.

Not among the eleven, according to the scriptural accounts, was Mary Magdalene. But I choose to believe that was either an unfortunate oversight, or a consequence of the prescriptive gender practices of the time. Mary, from the town of Magdala, was loyal to Jesus from the moment he healed her of evil spirits. And she wasn't the only woman who joined up with Jesus. There was Joanna, married

to an officer in Herod's court. And Susanna, who gave her own resources to support Jesus's ministry. In so many words, Jesus said to each of them: *"Follow me."* And each of those women did, though their names are not as frequently mentioned nor their discipleship as often recognized.

In so many words, Jesus once called out to me: *"Come...follow me!"* It was my freshman year of college, at the University of Cincinnati, after an evening of hazing with my pledge class at the fraternity house. Jesus had been whispering to me for some time, but that night I heard it loud and clear:

"Come...follow me!"

Unlikely leader.

I heard his words again a few years later, just as a reminder, while passing military troops poised on the perimeter of a protest against war: *"Come...follow me."*

I heard his words again, a few years later, just as a reminder, spurring my quick departure in the midst of a haircut, from a Midwestern barbershop fouled with racist talk: *"Come...follow me."*

I heard his words again several years later, just as a reminder, in a chance meeting with a mother and her kids on a city street: *"Come...follow me."*

Unlikely leader!

When did Jesus once call out to you? Were you in junior high or high school? Were you in college? Were you in your first or second job? Were you in a new relationship? Were you in a failing relationship? Were you in a happy time? Were you in a sad time? *"Come...follow me."*

Unlikely leaders!

What were you doing when Jesus found you? Fixing nets? Collecting taxes? Fighting evil spirits? Teaching kids? Serving your country? Serving customers? Immersed at the office? Practicing

medicine? Making music? Making friends? Raising a family? *“Come...follow me. I will make you fishers of people!”*

Unlikely leaders!

That description comes from a cover article in National Geographic Magazine, entitled “The Journey of the Apostles.” Let’s recall them again. Simon Peter invited Gentiles to join the early church, and his journey took him to death in Rome. His brother Andrew journeyed to preach in Greece, meeting his death there on an X-shaped cross now called a “St. Andrew’s Cross”. James may have journeyed to Spain, but was beheaded in Jerusalem. His brother John, who worked with Peter in Jerusalem, wrote a Gospel, three letters, and the Book of Revelation, and ultimately journeyed to Ephesus in present-day Turkey, where he died. Matthew, who at the request of the early church organizers wrote the most expansive story of Jesus’s ministry, is said to have been speared to death. Mary Magdalene, who stayed by Jesus through his crucifixion, is believed by tradition to have journeyed to France, where an order of nuns venerate her name and her sainthood.

Unlikely leaders, all. Each one responded when Jesus said: *“Come...follow me.”*

Also not among the eleven, was Paul of Tarsus, who in fact had been a Jesus persecutor. Yet, when the time came on the road to Damascus, Paul likewise responded to Jesus’s invitation: *“Come...follow me.”* Paul, now Saul, the unlikely leader, issued a plea to the church in Corinth that seems only fitting for the Christians of Hyattstown today: *“Put things in order...agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.”*

When did Jesus once call out to you? What were you doing when Jesus found you?

Unlikely leaders! Ours is the same Bible!