

Called by Name: The Other Guys, Unity, and Diversity

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Mark 3:13-19, Luke 6:12-16, John 14:22-27, Acts 1:12-14

Today our sermon series on the 12 disciples continues with a look at the three who are the least well-known. I'm speaking of James, known as the son of Alphaeus (or in Christian tradition as the Lesser); Judas, known as the son of James, (or as not Iscariot, or as Thaddeus); and Simon the Zealot (or the Cananean). Our scripture for this morning features three different lists of the disciples and one brief scene from the Gospel of John. Hear now God's word, first in Mark 3:13

Jesus went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus, and Simon the Cananean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Listen to Luke's version of the same scene and note the differences.

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

In the next passage, Jesus is giving his disciples his last lecture in the Upper Room on the night before his betrayal. We enter mid-lecture in John 14:22

They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.' Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?' Jesus answered him, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

'I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

Our final reading is from the book of Acts, after Jesus ascends to heaven. It's another list of the disciples, in slightly different order, but the three are near the end again. Notice what they are doing and with whom.

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of

Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

One of my favorite episodes of *Taxi*, the sitcom that aired in the late 70's and early 80's, is the one where Judd Hirsch who plays the cab driver named Alex, is robbed at gunpoint by a rider. Coming out of that experience safe but traumatized, Alex is understandably a little nervous about going back out on another shift. When he finally does, you see Alex pass by person after person hailing his taxi, because he's not convinced that any of them are a good risk. Finally, he stops and picks up a man who is wearing a priest's collar. The priest gets in the cab, and the cabbie turns and asks him, "Okay, Father, name me the twelve disciples. Name them for me! Now!" The priest gets the big ones—Peter and James and John and Andrew and Thomas—and then he slows down. He names ten of them, and struggles to get an 11th, but he can't come up with the 12th. So, the cabbie, afraid he might be an impostor, orders the priest out of the taxi.

I'll bet, if I asked you to name all twelve, you'd have a tough time. Even after having heard the list three times over. The ones we'd get stuck on are the ones on whom I'm focusing today. Simon, the Zealot (or the Canaanean), James the son of Alphaeus, and Judas the son of James (who is also known as Thaddeus). They are grouped together near the end in every list, right before Judas Iscariot. They're in the cast, and on stage, but between the three of them they have one line in the Gospels.

Simon was known as the Zealot or the Canaanean because he was part of a revolutionary party that sought the overthrow of their Roman occupiers and reclaiming of the land. The political and military entity that became known as the Zealots hated both the Romans and the Jewish aristocracy, whom they believed colluded with Rome. Simon—an anti-government Zealot—was part of the 12, but so was Matthew, a tax collector who worked for Rome. Can you imagine the conversations the two of **them** might have had on the road?

James the son of Alphaeus was identified as being his father's son—or as the Lesser of the two James. Was that because he was shorter? When I was in seminary, there was a Big Aaron and a Little Aaron. I was the big one. Maybe James was known as the Lesser simply because he was less well-known. What must that have been like, to be known mostly as the other James, the quiet one?

And then there's Judas Thaddeus. Good old "not Iscariot." The one who wasn't the betrayer. Well, great for him, but what else do we know the less famous Judas for? Only for being the one who asks Jesus, "How are you going to reveal yourself **to us** and not the world?"

It's the kind of question that someone who cherished having at least a little insider status might ask. You might not be center stage, you might not be in the limelight like Peter and the sons of Thunder, but as one of the Twelve you're still an insider compared to everyone else. At least you get **some benefits**, right? A little something for being in the club. So you ask Jesus: *How are you going to reveal yourself to us and not the world?*

Notice. What Jesus says in response removes the "us". Jesus doesn't say, "Here's how I'm going to reveal myself to **you** exclusively." Instead he replies, "**Those who love me** will keep my word and my Father will love **them** and we will come and make a home with **them**. Following him is not an "us versus them" proposition. Seeing Jesus revealed is not a matter of exclusive status, it is about **keeping his word**, which is living in love for all people and, remembering that it is not about **us**, **unless us is** big enough to include whoever we might consider to be **them**.

Perhaps that's a message that Jesus was trying to get across by choosing the twelve he picked. They were, within certain constraints, a fairly diverse lot for a group of first century Galilean Jews. Starting with four fishermen, Jesus then added a logistics guy like Philip, a wealthy tax-collector who made his fortune by colluding with the Romans like Matthew and a man who would have been considered a terrorist like Simon the Zealot. The twelve featured a man who had his doubts like Thomas, another who seemed overconfident most of the time like Peter, and a betrayer like Judas. There were those who were out front and those who worked behind the scenes and got none of the ink and few of the accolades.

Famous James and lesser James; Simon the Rock on whom the church would be built and Simon the one whose zeal burned hot against the government; Judas Iscariot and Judas not-Iscariot. Maybe Jesus picked such different people not just to make a point about drawing the circle wide, but because he understood there's value in having different personalities and perspectives in a group.

It's enough to make you think of a modern-day congregation. Even in a relatively homogenous, mostly European-American and financially well off bunch like we are here at Immanuel, we are not all the same—thanks be to God! As the Apostle Paul told the Corinthians: "There are different gifts, but it is the same Spirit who gives them; different types of service, but the same Lord who is served, and different activities, but the same God who activates all of them in everyone for the common good."

In any church of any size, there are all sorts of personalities, and different perspectives on any number of things, including political parties and policies. There are extroverts and introverts, thinkers and feelers, those who rely predominantly on what they sense and others who operate on intuition, people out front and people behind the scenes and we're all lumped together. From that creative tension wonderful things can happen, but how do you hold it together?

Well, I think our passages from John and Acts today give us a clue. In John, when Judas son of James, otherwise known as Thaddeus, tries to create an atmosphere of exclusivity—Jesus tears that down by saying, essentially, "You want to experience God, Jesus, the Spirit? You guys want to see me revealed? Keep my word. Anyone who learns to love, practices love which finds expression in justice and mercy and kindness and hospitality, will find that God and I have made our home in them."

If that's what holds us together, if that's what it means to see Jesus revealed in community and the world, then there is room for a lot of diversity.

I have a colleague, Brian Merritt, who has perhaps the strongest commitment to social justice and working with people on the margins that I've ever known anyone to possess. He came up with the following advertisement inviting people into modern day discipleship and reminding us all of how wide the circle can be:

Calling out to all: elderly widows, residents of trailer parks, nerve gnarled vets, depressed caregivers, overworked mothers, respected city workers, underpaid cashiers, refugees, lonely businessmen, mentally scrambled survivors, line cooks, over the counter pill abusers, dishwashers, abusers, abused, daddy issue men, radical feminists, codependents, grieving, content, craving one more fix, single mothers, the cancer riddled, truckers, sex workers, faithless pastors, rich entrepreneurs, shady politicians, soldiers, antifa, neo-Nazis, shut-ins, racists, poets, professors, mansion builders, painters, immigrants, crossing guards, panhandlers, infirm, firm...

Jesus is calling you! You are the Church! Jesus wants you to represent him, and we need you to know Christ. No good works required for salvation, good works inevitable!

Of course, following Jesus creates a transformation in all who are drawn into the circle.

Then there's the passage from the book of Acts. Jesus has just ascended to heaven. Pentecost hasn't happened yet. And the disciples—except for Judas Iscariot—are all gathered together in the upper room constantly *devoting themselves to prayer*. But they are not alone—there are some women there with them, of course, because the circle would not be wide enough without women. So welcome to the club, Virginia (*in the morning service, we baptized little Virginia Gail Long*).

What holds us together? Well, in addition to understanding how wide the circle is drawn, what holds us together is prayer. Praying constantly, praying in company, seeking communion with and discernment from God. What holds us together is the trust that there is something more out there than just us and our own good ideas and intuitions, someone who wants more for us and from us than just our selfishness.

I am reminded of that every time I visit someone in the hospital or recuperating at home, or conduct a memorial service, or officiate at a wedding, or stand up here in front of you all on a Sunday morning. What holds us together is our common commitment to following Jesus. What holds us together is prayer and being people of prayer.

What holds us together is love. In Jesus' name.