

Sept 29 – Supporting Cast

Mark 3:13-19

We have just finished spending several weeks talking about Peter, the faithful but flawed disciple. He was part of Jesus' inner band, along with the brothers James and John. Though these three names are mentioned often we know really very little about any of them. We also hear frequently the name Judas and know he was the treasurer for the group. But that is all we know about him except for his betrayal. The rest of the twelve we know virtually nothing. We are not even sure who they were! There was Andrew who we know was Peter's brother and his claim to fame was introducing Peter to Jesus. Then there was Thomas who we only know as the doubter. Philip was named in The Acts of the Apostles as one of those to take care of the widows and he later baptized the Ethiopian eunuch. There was James, not the brother of John, who has been called the son of Alphaeus, the younger or the less. Are these all different names for the same person or different men named James? We don't know. Then it gets even more confusing. In some gospel lists we have Bartholomew named as a disciple and in others Nathaniel. Are they the same person? We have Matthew and Levi. Again, are they the same man with two names like Paul and Saul? We have Jude in some lists and Thaddaeus in others. Then there is another Simon sometimes called the Zealot. What this shows us is that the disciples, later Apostles, of Jesus were not as fixed of a group as we might imagine. After the resurrection it seems that, for a brief time, it was important to have 12 Apostles. Matthias was named to replace Judas. Yet, from the beginning, more claimed the title Apostle than the 12 named in a list in Acts. And, we know that there were many women who were working at sharing the Gospel and some of them were named, at least by their local faith communities, as Apostles!

*“Say hello to Andronicus and **Junia**, my relatives and my fellow prisoners. They are prominent among the apostles”. Romans 16:7*

When you think about it, I am amazed at how little we really know about these men and women who were so important to the growth of the early church.

By now you are probably wondering where I am headed today. When you go to a live theatrical performance, in the program you have the stars listed by name and the

role they are in. At the end there is usually a list of all the rest often under the title: supporting cast, or in this playbill, “ensemble.” At first glance, it would seem that they are unimportant. Yet, without them the play would not happen. This is how I see the list of disciples. We have spent weeks talking about Peter. The other two important disciples are James and John. Then we have Judas the betrayer because every good story needs a villain. After them, we have those whom we could label “the supporting cast.” However, they were significant to the spread of the faith. Tradition says Andrew carried the gospel to what is now Scotland, Thomas to India and James the Less to Persia. These are only guesses based on legends from those areas.

About a hundred years after the Gospels were written Justin Martyr wrote: “From Jerusalem, men, twelve in number, went out into the world; and although unlearned and without talent of speech, they have, through the power of God, made the whole race of men to understand that they have been sent out by Christ to teach the word of God to all.”

Before being with Jesus, they were mostly fisherman, like people who run a small mom and pop business. They would have had some education as most children went to synagogue school for a time where they were taught to read a bit of the scriptures. Almost all the apostles came from one small state, no larger than many counties in America. This reminds us that the first followers were hardly a cosmopolitan group. If we accept traditions, we believe that many of them became world travelers. They took Jesus’ command to go into all the world. What seems to be their core commonality was that they were seekers. They were already on the quest for truth when Jesus came into their lives. Five of them were followers of John the Baptist. Simon the Zealot was also a seeker by a less-predictable route of revolution. They may have all fled from Jesus in the garden but after the resurrection, legend tells us, that they all died a martyr’s death, except John, who died an old man after spending many years imprisoned on Patmos.

When Jesus departed, he told them to be his witnesses and somehow they did it. These provincial men who had measured their world by the Sea of Galilee moved out and out and out. They are the very embodiment of Jesus’ parables. They are the mustard seed, the bit of leaven. Except for legends and traditions, we know little about

what the apostles did after the death and resurrection of our Lord. Yet it is likely that even the most obscure worked miracles of faith and conversion wherever they may have been. The Gospel exploded across the known world and it would have only been able to happen if these men and those that were touched by their words shared the good news. It reminds us that we might have stars like Peter but no play is successful without a supporting cast. Jesus picked these men, not because of their gifts of speech, or because they came from many parts of the world, or because they had wealth. He picked them because he saw that they were seekers, were willing to learn and had what it would take to go and do what he asked.

When I think of the supporting cast of disciples, many who we know nothing about except a name and some of those names are questionable, it makes me realize again how important I am to Jesus, even to this day. I am called to do my part. What I am asked to do may not be recognized or commented upon by others. A hundred years from now I may be nothing but a name and a picture on some church wall. Yet things are less effective if I do not show up. What I do matters! This is true for all of us.

We are called to seek. This was what was key for them to be useful to Jesus. They had to have an open and searching heart. Are there places where you have shut down and don't want to hear a call to serve, to change, to be open? Be challenged by these people who were continually stretched by Jesus to grow. Think about it, if the legend of Thomas is correct, this barely literate Galilean who had never traveled, as far as we know, farther than Jerusalem before the death of Jesus, ends up traveling clear to India. He did not know the language, the customs or anything else. Yet he was open to God and this seeking heart led him all his life.

Even more, I hear the story of the supporting cast as being a reminder that we are called to show up and do our part. Just showing up does not always seem that important. And when we show up we need to be willing to work in the background.

Too often I find people willing to serve if they are in charge, or if they are recognized. Sometimes they put conditions on their service. I will do this if... Or they volunteer to do something but if anything else comes up or they just don't feel like it, they call last minute and beg off. They don't see what they are doing as that important,

after all, anyone can do it. This is the most challenging aspect of working with volunteers. We need to see how important our service is. If we are in a choir we need to be at practice, if not for ourselves, for the other people. If we say we are going to be in a Bible Study, we should make it a high priority because the leader has prepared for the class and we can learn or help others by being there. If we volunteer, even if we see our part as relatively small others, we need to do it because are counting on us and will have to pick up the pieces if we are not there.

Much of our work for God is unspectacular. Yet, without it there will not be success for us and the kingdom. We are the supporting cast and we should take pride in that designation. We might be the names at the bottom of the program but we are important. We are necessary and God knows it and we need to own it.