

A DISCIPLE BAND

Jesus has been busy since He came out of the wilderness. His life has changed dramatically. Instead of the normal days of carpentry, neighbors, friends and family, work and worship, suddenly He is the focal point of a new movement. His days are full of confrontation, and conversation. He has a message, and some are enthralled by it, others are puzzled, and many are rather fiercely antagonistic. Along the way, He heals people – sometimes in one way, sometimes in another. And right in the middle of this busy, busy time – as was frequently true of Jesus – He goes off to pray. *“From time to time he would withdraw to remote places for prayer.”* (Luke 5:16 NEB)

This time, Jesus has gone off to some mountain in the vicinity. I suspect Mount Tabor, just because that would be dramatic, but there are plenty of other places nearer the Sea of Galilee (Mount Arbel, for instance). This time, Jesus prays all night. What is troubling Him? What is at stake? Some of us think forty days and nights should be enough prayer to last a lifetime. But He is at it again. What is going on?

We do not have to wait very long to find out. *“When day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles.”* Most of you know that a *disciple* is a learner, a pupil – someone under the discipline of the Master or Teacher. An *apostle* is a messenger – “he that is sent out.” In this case, an ambassador of the Basileia – the Kingdom and its Gospel.

Some of you are happy to rejoice at Pentecost and to call it the “birthday of the church.” I certainly do agree with that. But if Pentecost is the birthday, then this quiet, unsung moment is the inception of the Christian church. Jesus spends all night in prayer, talking things over with God. Moses had gone up the mountain and had come back with Ten Commandments; Jesus goes up the mountain and comes back with Twelve Apostles. In many ways, that symbolizes and defines the difference between these two great leaders and the movements – the two great world religions – they launched.

We have no idea how many disciples (followers) Jesus has at this point. Probably hundreds and growing every day. From these disciples, He chooses twelve apostles – twelve to be the inner core; twelve to be the

insiders who will train and learn from Him and carry on His mission. (So much for ridiculous comments that Jesus was not exclusive. All quality of life depends upon exclusivity. Has anyone here ever gotten married?!)

The twelve who are chosen do not understand yet what is happening. That is, they do not comprehend the magnitude of it. It is too soon. There are too many dimensions that have yet to unfold. Though Jesus sees the connections with all that has gone before and constantly highlights them, still there is so much that is new in what He sees and does that no one else is following it all. But that doesn't matter. They are trying to cooperate – to go along with whatever it is Jesus is seeing and shaping and doing. And they will keep seeing it more and more clearly as events unfold. For the moment, all they know is that they have been chosen. They live with Him, go about with Him, learn from Him. That is their full-time occupation now. His ministry spreads and keeps going deeper, and the twelve have become apprentice apostles.

These twelve are to be the foundation of the new twelve tribes of Israel – what will come to be called “the Christian church.” They will be shocked as the ministry goes on. They will be devastated and fear for their lives, and even lose one of their number, when Jesus is killed. Much of their awakening and transformation will come after the crucifixion. Sometimes we have to lose everything to gain what truly matters. That, along with many other things which Jesus taught them, does not really come clear until they remember it looking back through the lens of the crucifixion and resurrection. Of course, the Holy Spirit of the Resurrected Jesus will help them for the rest of their lives. Well, it's not always what we would call “help” – all but one of them dies a martyr's death. The world gets incredibly angry, and incredibly cruel, toward people who carry a message of love: a love that is not “people-pleasing” – a love that is willing and eager to trust and proclaim the LOVE of God.

It is interesting that yet again today, there are scholars trying to tell us that Jesus did not really intend to create “the church.” They say Jesus had no sense of special identity and never intended to start a movement of followers – never mind a new world religion. It is beyond belief, they say, that Jesus was genius enough to be thinking so big or so far ahead. On the other hand, I think it is more absurd to imagine that a group of His followers were the geniuses who dreamed it up, and so quickly and compellingly after His death. But each to his or her own surmises, I suppose.

In any case, I suspect that those of us who are serious followers today want to pay attention to what Jesus was doing and how He went about it. Jesus chose a disciple band. His purpose in this world could not be accomplished without that – it could not move forward apart from that. Choosing the twelve was the beginning of the church.

Thousands of people, for thousands of years, have talked about the crucifixion and about the resurrection, and they have found faith, hope, mercy, grace. Their lives have changed and they have discovered new life, new values, and new reasons for living – new dimensions to it all that they had not even known existed. And some of us are among that number. Absolutely none of them, nor any of us, would ever have heard about any of it if it had not been for the twelve. (In my scheme of things, the Holy Spirit chose Paul to replace Judas, though we don't have time to go into it here.) If Jesus saves by His death and resurrection, He also saves because He chose the twelve. The night He spent on that mountain was one of the great turning points in human history. God in Jesus Christ said to the world on that night: This is not just about us – it is not just about me and God. We are not doing this *to* you, and we are not doing this *at* you – like you can just sit around and passively watch. You have to be part of it, get into the story, carry it, be its messengers – *or it will be for you as if it never existed*. To not carry the message of God's love will be the same as never having known it.

The truth is, Jesus bet everything on the power of friendship. Other great leaders have depended on military might or economic power, founded schools, learned to appeal to the masses, or had political clout. Jesus depended on none of these things. Jesus bet it all on twelve friends. If you are a Christian and you do not live in and out of a small group of true friends who are followers of His WAY, what are you doing? Who do you think you are following?

Jesus had the Gospel (the good news – the message of God's love), and Jesus *was* the Gospel. He embodied the message He carried. It became more and more amazing as He went. But after He was murdered, who carried His message? News that is not carried is no news at all, no matter how incredible its content. And this news cannot be carried as sheer information. This news can only be carried by a band of believers who have taken it unto themselves, and into themselves. You can write about it or talk about it, to some degree. But it goes bad quickly, or turns

toward other purposes, unless you take it into yourself. This message has to be carried on the inside, or the outside quickly atrophies.

Jesus not only died and rose again, He also chose the twelve – or we would never have known about any of it. One without the other is useless. Do one without the other and nothing will ever come of it. Do you think the Roman Empire was trying to carry the news of His death and resurrection? Choosing the twelve is one of the great, unsung miracles of human history.

Jesus chose the twelve and trained them – taught them, talked with them, loved them, scolded them, argued with them, forgave them, commissioned them, sent them out. He never got anywhere near finished with their training before His time on earth ran out. But it was enough, as one of His parables suggested – enough for the seed to take root and begin to grow. And it is growing still. But Jesus does not coerce. It will cease to grow, and will even wither away, if no one finds it worth their time and life to carry it.

Jesus saves by His death and resurrection. He also saves by calling the church into being. The fifth commitment is the commitment to BE the church. (Not just to GO to church; that's pathetic. To BE the church.) The missing piece for many modern Christians is that the church always has two parts, or dimensions. It is the larger body – all the followers in general. But that quickly goes generic unless there are also DISCIPLE BANDS within the larger group. True “church” is not possible except in the company of people who really know you and care about you. That means people you really know and care about too. If you love everybody, you love nobody. Even the Son of God had to narrow it to twelve to get it real. And the main reason so many drift away from the church is because generic love – love in general – is a contradiction in terms. Or if you want it really clear: Generic love – love in general – is a lie. Would you even walk across the street to get love from somebody who loves everybody? Neither would I! It means nothing.

Lots of you are way ahead of me on this and have fully comprehended such things for years. But people new to the Path, or who are still contemplating becoming followers, are sometimes surprised or even offended by anything “institutional.” Of course! When we are just getting excited about the spiritual life, we do not like it to be mixed up with – sullied by – physical, pragmatic realities. It is such a disappointment when people go from contemplating the burning bush to sitting around with their calendars trying to decide when to have the next committee meeting.

Even Jesus is grouchy for a while when He comes off the Mount of Transfiguration and walks back into the humdrum problems of everyday miracles and ministry.

But the fact is, if we want to help Jesus with His mission, we have to be part of it – part of His church. Love is a concept, an idea, a vision – family is an institution. But love does not last for very long in any way that matters or makes a difference if it does not go to work in the real world – and that is institution.

Institute: to initiate, begin; to establish, organize,
set in operation.

Institution: a relationship or behavior **of importance**
in the life of a community or society.

“I don’t like institutional religion” means “I don’t want any religious principles to be set in operation; I don’t want it to make any difference in the real world – especially not in *my* life.” Of course. No mystery there. We have all felt that way from time to time. Being “spiritual” is easy; we were made that way – designed and created by God. But turning will and life over to God is a whole different matter. That is never easy for us humans. But that is also what makes a difference. You can be as spiritual as you like – all day long, every day – and it will never make any difference.

Christianity is a concept, an idea, a vision – church is an institution. But Christianity is mere fleeting sentiment if it does not get embodied in a faith family – a church. Cyprian wrote: “He cannot have God for his Father who has not the church for his mother.” Augustine, referring to Cyprian’s comment, added: “No salvation exists outside the church.” Augustine was not talking about a building with a steeple. He was talking about a people – the *ecclesia*. Nobody was more of a loner than Augustine, but he knew there was no salvation outside the faith family. We are desperately in need of Jesus, but Jesus knows we also need each other. So He formed the church. And the church depends on and is made up of disciple bands. Without the larger church, the disciple bands go self-centered and disintegrate. Without the disciple bands, the larger church goes empty and meaningless.

You would never know I was raised Quaker, since Quakers don't have a high regard for talking. Like every community, though, the Quakers have stories to illustrate their truth. A Quaker farmer heard noises downstairs in the middle of the night. He quietly got up, picked up his shotgun (even Quakers hunted for food), went to the head of the stairs, and waited. When the shuffling noises got to the bottom of the stairs, he flicked on the light and, sure enough, there was a burglar with sack in hand, creeping along. "Friend," said the farmer, "I would not harm thee for the world, but thee are standing where I am about to shoot." But this is not a sermon about preaching ...

Here is the story for today, and it is about an actual incident. It also concerns a Quaker farmer. This one lived in Pennsylvania. He was an elder in the church, and one of the pillars of the congregation. One day, the Meeting decided against things he really cared about, and the pastor (Hicksite Quakers have pastors) had also voted against him. The next Sunday, the farmer was not at Meeting – something that was unheard of. About mid-week, toward evening, the pastor showed up at the farmer's house. The farmer opened the door, and the tension and animosity were thick in the air. But not a word was spoken. The farmer shrugged and stepped aside, and the pastor went in. They sat down in front of the fire and did not say a word.

After ten or fifteen minutes, the pastor got up, stepped to the fire, took a pair of tongs and, with them, drew a large, red-hot coal out of the fire and set it on the hearth. Then he sat down again. The two men sat in silence, watching the glowing coal, until it turned cold and black. Then the pastor got up again and, with the tongs, set the coal back into the fire. He sat down again. Soon the coal was glowing as red and hot as it had before. Then the pastor got up and left. Still no word had been spoken. The next Sunday, and ever after, the farmer was back in church.

Do you think this is a commercial? Do you imagine that Cyprian and Augustine were trying to offend other religions? If there were time, perhaps it would help to remind you of the rebelliousness and anguish of Augustine's own path to Christ. At the moment, however, I will only say that Cyprian and Augustine were trying to tell it straight. Nobody can walk the Christian Life alone. The Gospel cannot be honored in isolation. The message of God's love dies unless we carry it as a community of faith, not just as lone rangers. (Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto.)

Jesus calls us into His church – into the disciple band, into the fellowship of believers. And the church (the *ecclesia* – the people – the people of Jesus) is the visible representative of the truth and the movement that Jesus began. Of course it reeks of imperfections. Of course it needs constant renewal. Of course all of us who are part of it wish it could be a truer and better witness for our Lord, even as we wish we ourselves could be truer and better followers. But the fact is, as long as we are the church and dedicate ourselves to its purpose, however imperfectly, the message and movement of Jesus Christ survive upon the earth.

Now, suppose that you yourself, as an individual, are totally converted, totally in love with God, totally immersed in the teachings of Jesus, but you do not like organizations and cannot stand the institutional church. So you will do your best to live an exemplary Christian Life, but you will never worship with others, study with others, work in concert with others on any purpose or project. By the end of your life, will you have helped or hindered Jesus' purposes?

In addition, suppose for a moment that all the other Christians in the world suddenly agreed with you and wanted nothing to do with being the church – none of them ever again worshipped with each other, studied together, cooperated in any projects or purposes. How long would any remnant of Christianity remain upon the earth? It would all be gone in two generations, except for the museums. Does anyone honestly suppose that it honors Jesus to live in such a way that Jesus' name and His message and His purpose would cease to exist – would no longer be known upon the earth? Had those before us thought this way, there would be no Bible. Who would have translated or printed it? Who would have suggested that any of the writings were worth preserving in the first place? There would be no church schools or places to gather and learn about any of it. In short, we would never have heard about any of it, if people before us had not *been* the church – had not carried the message in their own faith families.

Wherever two or three are gathered in His name, that *is* the church. Then the only question is: Will we try to be a helpful and effective church? It's like opening Pandora's Box. Next thing you know, several families are having fun talking together and praying together, the kids are getting to know each other, and pretty soon not everybody can fit into the living room, so we end up building Community Church, Congregational. Then what if the roof leaks? Or we want a new courtyard? Pretty soon we have

committees because nobody has figured out a better way to take care of such things.

Now, I know at least as well as anybody here that if the committees run for very long without continual spiritual renewal, pretty soon we run programs and fix roofs and forget all about why we were doing it all in the first place. That is the Achilles' Heel of any institution, and Satan loves to play on it. So it is hard. But after all, what do you expect from an orphanage? It is still true that if we love Jesus, we will *be* the church. We will do that the best way we can, and it will never be good enough. Yet it may still be the most important thing we ever do here. And I mean including and despite all the fights, disappointments, mistakes, and hurt feelings – and sometimes even because of them.

This next is my own private opinion, but you may find it useful. The early church tended to be small disciple bands, starting with Jesus and the twelve. Likewise, the churches we hear about in the New Testament were mostly house churches, small bands of disciples gathering together. As Christendom grew and became prominent and acceptable, the experience of being the church was often greatly diluted. Being an unknown individual in a sea of two or three thousand worshippers can have its moments, but psychologically, it is not very different from being alone.

I would suggest that as followers in our time, we should take the hint from Jesus and, as part of our commitment to be His church, we should get ourselves into a disciple band – a group of somewhere near twelve people who are our Christian “support group” – people with whom we study, pray, and share on a regular basis. To my mind and in my experience, that is the core of the church. Apart from such disciple bands, I do not believe the church stays the church for very long.

In any case, the fifth commitment is the commitment to be the church of Jesus Christ. I strongly urge you, within that commitment, to make yourself a promise that, one way or another, you will get yourself into a disciple band.