

Sermon on Matthew 10:2-4, 03.06.2006 (Holy Communion Service before Confirmation)

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

1. Just Names?

Dear Congregation,

One may say: "O, these are just names. What is the point about preaching on this text?" – Now, give me ten minutes and I will tell you why.

Those are the names of Jesus' friends. We know a few of them by heart, I think: We know Peter; we may know John and James, Thomas, Judas, for sure.

Those people were - besides his own family - the closest people to Jesus, the ones he was together with on his way for more than a year. He got to know some of them at the Sea of Galilee, which was the Lake Ontario of Israel, a lake on which people like Peter, Andrew, John and James were fishermen. Others he met along the way, when Jesus left his hometown of Nazareth to become a preacher, a healer, a miracle worker, and those guys along with some women who are also named in the Gospels accompanied him to Jerusalem, where as we all know, Jesus was killed on the cross.

Shortly before that he was together with them celebrating the Passover. There he was sitting together with them, although he knew exactly that they would fail him as friends:

- Peter would deny knowing him;
- John and James were only concerned whether they would be the most important disciples and allowed to sit at the head of the table in Paradise closest to God and Jesus;
- Judas, we know that, he betrayed Jesus for money;
- Thomas will not believe that Jesus is resurrected from the dead;
- And finally: all of them disappear right after Jesus is captured out of fear they might face the same fate.

What kind of friends are those who on one hand boast that they are Jesus' best buddies and on the other hand do not seem to care at all in the time when their friend Jesus needed them the most.

There are two things we can learn from this:

a) Even the disciples were just ordinary people, people like you and me.

They were just ordinary people. People with ordinary occupations like fishermen, tax collectors, carpenters. They were people with strength and passion, with faith and enthusiasm, but also the lack thereof. Frightened, gutless, reluctant to do, what they were supposed to be doing.

Although I have to add that in the end, all of them, were later on leading a truly godly life, they were preaching and risking a lot, all of them, except John, who died in exile of old age, killed by the Roman persecutors.

b) These ordinary people were chosen by Jesus.

Jesus wanted them to be his friends. He once said them: ¹⁶"You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last"

What this means is, that Jesus wanted these people.

And with this he kind of follows a pattern which goes through the entire bible. God has always chosen people who would not have primarily been our choice:

- Adam and Eve, who shortly after they exist break the rules and lie to God,
 - Abraham, the Father of the nation of the Israelites, lies about being married,
 - Jacob cheats his brother out of his birthright to be the heir,
 - Joseph, who is an arrogant Mr. Know-it-all,
 - Moses, the big leader, loses easily his temper,
 - Joshua, who is insecure and chicken,
 - Saul, who is power-hungry
 - David, an adulterer, who sends the husband of the wife he loves to the front-line where he is killed,
- Take a look at the prophets:
- Jeremiah feels that he is too young,
 - Isaiah walks around naked in Jerusalem for three years
 - Hosea got married to a prostitute and gave his kids strange names (I guess at this point the confirmands would like to stay on for another year to learn the real interesting stories from the bible)
 - And last but not least Paul, who was a persecutor of the Christians.

2. Now the question is what has this to do with us?

a) We fit in – welcome to the club!

I hope that this gives us an understanding that there is hardly anything which could surprise God. His people are strange at times, and behave uncontrolled and emotional, sometimes selfish.

And we are not much different, aren't we? I do not say we are like some of those, hopefully, we have not killed anyone or plan to run around naked for three years. I simply say, whatever our story is, we fit in. We all have our shiny, polished surface and look good on the outside, but in reality we all have our dark sides, we all sin, we all have our problems, those which are willing to talk about, and those we are trying to keep for ourselves.

I do not mean this as this as a negative comment. I just think it helps us to see, that God's people never have been perfect. They all lack something, sometimes self-confidence, sometimes faithfulness, sometimes self-control, but they all have been chosen by God to do something good despite all their mistakes and all the things which went wrong in their lives. We have to understand, that God is on our side.

A beloved rabbi died and rose to heaven. There he was greeted with the hosts of angels singing and praising the rabbi for all his good works. "Please don't make such a fuss," the rabbi protested. "I was not as PERFECT as you make me seem." At that point the Lord God himself appeared in glory. "What's the problem, my child? You lived a near-PERFECT life on earth. You deserve all the honors we can give you." "No, my Lord," the rabbi protested. "I failed miserably with my daughter. You see, she became a Christian." "I understand," said God. "I had a similar problem myself."

God is not judgmental, he is loving. And for that exact same reason he chooses to have company with us.

b) God can change us!

But God also sees our potential. From all those people who are named in our sermon text we can learn that God can change people. The followers of Christ do not have to remain who they are, they have the tendency to grow and become more aware of what God wants from them.

See if Jesus would only have seen the failures of his friends, he might not have given them the most important task he could give anyone: To spread the good news of the Gospel and to make sure that people hear from the things Jesus did. He trusted them, appointed them; know that despite of all mistakes in the past, they could do it.

And tomorrow we take a look at the turning point: Pentecost. The day, from which on the apostles went out and did a great job. They gave everything to accomplish this task – even their lives. The only one who was not sentenced to death for his Christian convictions by the Roman Empire was the apostle John who died of old age somewhere in exile.

3. We remain his family – no matter what!

Dear congregation,

We are here, because Jesus sees the good in every one of us, and wants our company, not for his own sake, but for our sake.

Let me conclude with a word to the confirmands:

See, it is natural that after confirmation class the most everyone says: “Okay, that was enough for some time. Why should I bother to come to church and to get up early on the only day of the week where there might not be something going on.”

I understand that, because I did not do it differently when I was 14/15. But today, in retrospect, I am very happy that God has not given up on me, that he was still longing for me to eventually show up, to come to his table, like we will be doing tonight, when we celebrate the Holy Communion. That is, again, because Jesus wants us to be his friends, to be part of his family.

The names I have been reading to you from this passage of Matthew may only be names to many people, even those who know the bible. But in reality as he knew the names of his friends, he certainly knows our names as well. They have been written in his heart. The bible tells us, that Jesus is praying for every one of us in heaven. In the book of revelation he is described as someone who is constantly knocking at our door, pleading with us to let him come inside. He is talking about the door to our hearts.

On our program it reads: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” Wherever life is going to lead you, this will remain true.

One of you has chosen the text from Philippians 3:12: “*I have not reached my goal and I am not perfect...*” You commented on this verse, that this does not mean that one can be perfect all the time, but that faith can help to keep us from giving up.

We are God’s family; we belong to his body, no matter what. We may be having a hard time to change and sometimes we just might feel like giving up, also in terms of becoming or being a Christian. But if there is one thing I want you as confirmands, and actually every one of us to keep in mind, then it is this:

God will never give up on you. You are his chosen ones, you are his family. Amen.

And the Peace of God which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.