

Commissioning of the Twelve

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God does not always operate in ways we might consider appropriate. God does not always call into service the most gifted or talented, the smartest or the best-trained. Sometimes, the call to serve the Lord comes to a person who is otherwise unprepared. Consider Amos, the 8th century BCE prophet, about whose call we hear in today's first reading. The appropriate choice on the part of God would have been to call someone who already belonged to "a company of prophets," that is, a person specially trained in the art of discerning the will of God in the concrete circumstances of life. Instead, God's unpredictable choice was this shepherd, this dresser of sycamores. Amos was no prophet; he was an outdoorsman, someone whose experience was with plants and animals. Yet God called him out of his homeland of Judah, and sent him north to Israel to preach in the name of the Lord against social injustice. The outdoorsman was transformed. Some 2750 years later, we still ponder his words: "Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land! ...The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: never will I forget a thing they have done!" (Amos 8:4, 7).

Similarly, Jesus' choice of the Twelve was not based on their intelligence, their courage, or their social connections. Some were fishermen (Mark 1:16-20), at least one was a tax-collector (Mark 2:13-14), and the others were apparently natives of the small towns and villages of the Galilee. They were uneducated, and illiterate (Acts 4:13). During the course of Jesus' ministry, they were slow to comprehend what Jesus sought to teach them (Mark 6:52; 7:18; 8:17-21; 9:32). After he was arrested, they fled for fear of their lives (Mark 14:50). They were neither bright nor brave.

And yet, Jesus sends them forth to do the work that he has been doing, as we read in today's selection from Mark's gospel. He gives them authority over unclean spirits, so that they can free people the way that Jesus has freed people; they are expected to heal the sick, just as Jesus had healed people who were ill; they are to preach the need for repentance, just as Jesus had preached. And they are to do the work of the Lord in the manner in which Jesus has been doing it – by walking from place to place, by living

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in poverty and accepting gratefully the kindness of their hosts. Mark does not tell us their thoughts as they were sent out. Were they overwhelmed by the immensity of the task? Were they conscious of their lack of training? Were they intimidated by the prospect of walking from one end of the country to the other?

We will never know what the Twelve were thinking as they ventured forth upon this mission trip. But over the ensuing 2000 years, followers of Jesus have seen in this sending forth of the Twelve a kind of paradigm for their own experience of being called to undertake a mission. In obedience to that call, some Christians have left their homes, like the Twelve, and ventured across deserts and seas to bring the good news to a waiting world. Think of Francis Xavier, or Matteo Ricci, or Rose Philippine Duchesne. These heroic missionaries endured unimaginable hardships for the sake of their mission, and we justifiably celebrate their accomplishments on their feast days. Other Christians, like the prophet Amos, have sought to bring justice to weary and downtrodden people who need comfort in the name of the Lord. Think of Thomas More, or Vincent de Paul, or Oscar Romero. These heroic figures often lost their lives for the sake of their mission, and we honor them on their feast days. Still other Christians have heard the call to live in poverty and simplicity in imitation of Jesus himself. Think of Francis of Assisi, or Dominic Guzman, or Ignatius of Loyola. These heroic figures founded religious communities like the Franciscans or the Dominicans or the Jesuits, and we celebrate their accomplishments on their feast days.

But there is another set of followers of Jesus about whom we rarely learn from studying Church History, nor are their accomplishments marked by feast days in the Church's liturgical calendar. This group of Christians seek to imitate Jesus by caring for the sick. These are the people of Catholic health care. My friends in Catholic health care have received a call from the Lord, like the Twelve did, to embark upon a journey, the purpose of which is to bring the healing ministry of Jesus to those who need it. There are, of course, some differences between contemporary America and first century Galilee. Today, health care givers drive their cars, or take the train, or hop the bus to work – as opposed to trudging for miles along a dusty path. Today, they dispense antibiotics, analgesics, and proton pump inhibitors – as opposed to anointing people with oil. Today, they carry wallets with credit cards, debit cards, and cash – as opposed to the empty coin purses of the Twelve. But, like the Twelve, Catholic health care providers have been given an audacious mission – to bring the healing ministry of Jesus to those who need it. And, like the Twelve, anyone who is similarly called can feel overwhelmed by the immensity of the task that lies ahead. Shouldn't God have chosen

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someone else? Someone smarter? Someone holier? Someone more patient?
Someone more kind?

Maybe God should have. But God didn't. The author of the Letter to the Ephesians, whose thoughts we hear in the second reading, was convinced that God's unlikely choices are manifestations of divine goodness and generosity: "[God] chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him" (Eph 1:4). The people to whom the author of Ephesians wrote were not powerful, or smart, or well-connected, or wealthy. They were slaves and former slaves. They were dockworkers and maidservants, day laborers and ditch diggers. Like Peter and the Twelve, they were illiterate – someone would have had to read this letter to them. But the author of the letter to the Ephesians was convinced that God had called them; and in calling them, God had promised to transform them: "In love [God] destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved."

People in Catholic health care are undoubtedly better educated than those ancient Ephesians to whom our second reading was originally sent. They are certainly more accomplished than Simon Peter and the other Twelve who are sent out on mission in today's episode from Mark's gospel. But for all of the differences between the world of the New Testament and the world in which we live today, there remains one unshakeable similarity – God continues to call men and women to care for the sick in the name of the Lord. And every generation, including our own, is blessed to count among its members those who have answered the call of God to bring the healing ministry of Jesus to those who need it. In answering that call, these men and women are being transformed.

Thanks to their transformation, you and I can hope for healing. Let us bless God for his goodness and his generosity in having called them. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him" (Eph 1:1). And let us bless these heroes of health care – who have no feast day of their own – but who nevertheless deserve to be celebrated for their accomplishments.