

THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

a sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Tom Collins
Santee (SC) Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 10: 1-15;32-33;40-42

The movie *Casablanca* was made in 1942 and takes place a year earlier. The starring role is played by Humphrey Bogart whose character is a man named Rick, an American expatriate who owns a bar and gambling hall in northern Africa. At the end of the movie Rick kills a man, and a corrupt police officer, played by Claude Rains, feeling some compassion for Rick, tells his men to “round up the usual suspects.” That may not be the most popular line from the movie, but it is the one you leave the movie with because it comes so close to the end.

Many have played with those words over the past seventy years. There is actually a movie entitled *The Usual Suspects*. My twist today is to describe the twelve apostles as “Unusual Suspects,” believing that they would be the last men this congregation would choose as elders or to form a search committee or to do much of anything else in the life of our Church.

You may remember the story of Samuel anointing David, the second king of Israel. Samuel must do this surreptitiously because King Saul is still on the throne. Samuel is told that one of the sons of Jesse will be the next king, but he isn't told which one. When the first son, Eliab, goes before Samuel, Samuel is impressed. Convinced he is the one, Samuel says, “Surely the anointed is now before me.” (I Sam. 16:1) Samuel is told by God, “The Lord does not see as mortals see. . . The Lord looks on the heart.” (I Sam. 16:7)

Jesus had all those Old Testament stories entrenched in his heart when he chose the twelve apostles. You've heard the old expression, “God's ways are not our way,” but why did Jesus choose these particular twelve men?

I'm not sure I know the answer to that question or if anyone does, but my suspicion is that Jesus would have never chosen any one of us. We are just not poor enough or uneducated enough or possibly not even discouraged or disappointed enough.

But the twelve apostles were poor peasants who lived from hand to mouth, who probably didn't have cupboards in their meager homes because there was no food to put in them, and who married early and likely died young. No one knows what happened to most of them, except for Judas Iscariot (who is given two descriptions of his death in Mt. 27:5 and Acts 1:18), and John who dies on the island of Patmos.

There are four listings of the twelve apostles, and they all list eleven consistently, but the last one is up for grabs. Matthew (10), Mark (3), Luke (6), and the Book of Acts (1) have complete listings of the apostles. (John has no listing but refers to many of the apostles by name.) In all four lists, the following are included;

Simon Peter
Andrew
James
John
Philip
Bartholomew
Matthew (Levi)
a second man named Simon
Thomas
a second man named James
Judas Iscariot

The last apostle was either Thaddeus or a second man named Judas.

Now let me set apart the word “apostle” from the word “disciple,” and incidentally the words are somewhat interchangeable when it comes to the eleven or twelve men I have listed. A disciple is a learner, but a disciple doesn’t learn by going to school or by attending classes or by taking notes. He learns by being apprenticed to a master. He is tethered to a teacher, and he learns by doing. He eventually will master a skill or a way of living, so a disciple becomes a follower, not just of a set of teachings but of a way of life, a pattern of living. Most Jews in Israel scouted the countryside for a teacher they liked, then tied themselves to that teacher. Gamaliel, who taught Paul, said, “Find a teacher and lose your ignorance.”

But Jesus did just the opposite. He says to his disciples (and this includes you and me), “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” (Jn. 15:16) To follow Jesus was a matter of answering a call from him. It was responding to a personal invitation. Jesus had many disciples in his earthy ministry and far more as the Risen Christ, but he chose only twelve apostles.

Why just twelve? Why not 120 or 1,200? Indeed, there was so much to do. Why just twelve? Jesus saw himself as the embodiment of the new Israel, the promised Kingdom of God, so he wanted to reflect his spiritual heritage by choosing an apostle for each tribe of Israel, the twelve sons of Jacob. But all twelve were “unusual suspects” because not one among them was a great scholar, a great leader, a mover or shaker, a man who would make Jesus look good, or a man with political connections. And if the choice of the twelve made no sense at all, it was simply because Jesus himself wasn’t at all what

people expected. He was the Messiah, the anointed one, but he ended up ignominiously dying on a cross. Jesus was also a peasant, and his band of twelve were a ragged, rugged lot, yet within this unlikely group of thirteen, God was renewing the remnant of Israel so they could become a light to all nations.

And they did! You see, a disciple learns, but an apostle is sent. They weren't much as disciples --- remember, they all scattered when Jesus was crucified --- but after his resurrection, they became what Jesus had taught them to be. Through these twelve apostles, Jesus was restoring Israel's call to be a light to all nations, the salt of the earth, a city set on a hill, a blessing to all nations, not by war or violence but by radical love!

And that's where you and I come in. We're supposed to carry on where the apostles left off. Just about every Sunday I give you a benediction which goes, "And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always." It speaks of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but it is known as an apostolic blessing. It comes right out of the Bible (II Corin. 13:13). As we leave the church we are blessed by and tied to the apostles of old. That doesn't make much sense unless we do what they did. We must continue where they left off. It was the work of the apostles to spread the good news. They emanated out of Jerusalem after the Day of Pentecost. They shared what they had experienced in the resurrected Christ. It wasn't just Jesus' earthly ministry which changed the apostles. It was the resurrection which validated his earthly ministry.

As you leave this sanctuary today, I want you to think of the best Christian you have ever known and perhaps still do. Within that person you have found an apostolic presence, a person who enjoyed Christ and delighted in him and couldn't keep Christ to himself or herself.

About a year ago I mentioned Mina Grier who on June 6, 1954 gave me my first Bible. It is the only Bible which is always in my living room. Mina Grier could have been the poorest person in our community. She didn't even have a bathroom in her house. I can't remember much of anything she taught us that year when a ten-year old boy turned eleven, but I *do* remember Mina Grier. We were tied together for a year, and I now realize for much longer. She taught through her life, not by word. She became for me the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. She was an apostolic blessing.

Now this didn't happen years ago in 1954. It happened over the course of time. It usually does. There was an apostolic presence in Mrs. Grier. She carried Christ. She was an unusual choice, an unusual suspect, but in fact we all are! Share Christ and join the apostles in their work.