

Organized Religion
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
May 5, 2019 – AM Sermon
Rev. Peter Jonker
Luke 6:12-24

Let's start off tonight with a quiz question for you. How many disciples did Jesus have? "That's an easy one!" you might think, "The answer is 12." But if you think that's your answer, you would be wrong. Jesus had a lot more than 12 disciples.

In chapter 10 of Luke we know that Jesus sent out no less than 70 disciples on a mission of preaching and healing. In Luke 8 we hear about a whole troop of women who were part of the group. At the height of his ministry there was a large group of disciples, all who followed him around Galilee, listening to his sermons and even assisting in the ministry.

What about the 12! What about Peter James and John and the others? Don't we call them the disciples? They're disciples all right, but what sets them apart is that they are also apostles. There were many disciples, but only 12 apostles. You actually see the distinction at work in our passage.

In our passage we see Jesus appoint the 12 apostles out of the mass of his disciples. Jesus looks over the whole mass of his disciples – all 70 or 170, or however many of them there were, and out of that big group he chooses 12 for a special office. "Out of all my disciples I choose you 12 to be my apostles."

Jesus is in effect creating an organizational structure for his ministry. Up till now it's been him and a lot of followers; now he's getting a board, a consistory a council; now he's choosing 12 men to be leaders in the group. Jesus is creating the institutional church.

If you read Luke's two books, the book of Luke and the book of Acts, you see the apostles' special role. They are clearly part of some sort of administrative structure. Again and again Luke will show them exercising authority: The apostles are the ones in charge of distributing the bread at the feeding of the 5000. The apostles are the ones privileged to share the table with Jesus at the Last Supper.

When Judas died, the community felt it important to elect an apostle to take his place. On Pentecost it was the apostles who preached to the crowds and when the early church gathered for their meetings they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles – it wasn't just anyone who taught and preached, it was the 12.

When the deacons were first chosen and appointed for their work, the apostles were the ones who commissioned them by the laying on of hands. In Acts 9, when Paul is converted and everyone is wondering about whether or not he's sincere, it is the apostles in Jerusalem who finally interview him and give him the thumbs up.

And in Acts 15, when the church has to figure out how to include Gentiles, it's the apostles who convene the council of Jerusalem and who guide the church toward a decision – only now they're assisted by another ruling group called the elders. When you read the whole sweep of Luke's two books you get a strong impression 12 people who have special responsibility and who are, in one way or another, in charge.

Sometimes, people talk about the early church as if it was an egalitarian utopia. People talk as though the New Testament church was this beautiful family of love. They talk as though there were no clergy, no bosses, just a society of equal brothers and sisters who shared everything and worked shoulder to shoulder for the Lord. “Everything was fine until organized religion came along! The institutional church ruined things, man!”

People who say such things get their inspiration from passages like Acts 2 where Luke writes how “all who believed were together and had all things in common.” People read that passage and imagine that the early church was an egalitarian commune where everyone got together to sing Kum ba ya around a campfire and everything was groovy.

Well, I like campfires as much as the next guy, and Kumbaya is serviceable song, but a broader look at what the gospels and Acts actually describe and you’ll see that religion has always been organized. Jesus founded an institution, and then he sent His Spirit to fill it and support it.

Right from the beginning there have been committee meetings. Right from the beginning there have been treasurer’s reports. Right from the beginning there have been clerks and presidents and elections of office bearers.

Since Jesus’ appointment of the apostles 2000 years ago, the church has been trying to structure itself and organize itself. Every denomination, every congregation, has struggled to make itself an effective institution. We’ve come up with all sorts of different structures and arrangements. You’ve got us reformed people with our elders and deacons. You have the Catholics with the cardinals and bishops and priests. You have the non-denoms with their all-powerful lead pastors. You have the Quakers with their egalitarian orders. Survey the 2000 years since Christ chose his 12 and you see a riot of church structure and systems, a crazy array of attempts to coordinate the Body of Christ.

Do you know what the one common link between all these leadership forms? Do you know the one common denominator that unites all these attempts to structure the church? It’s this: they’re all wildly imperfect. They’re all messy and fallible. For 2000 years the church has tried to come up with leadership structures that are Biblically faithful and real world functional and, without exception, everything we’ve come up with has been a work in progress.

Jesus’ original system clunked along: The original apostles weren’t content to be servants, they had embarrassing arguments about who would be the greatest. The early church fought: Paul’s letter to the Corinthians tells us that the church there divided along the lines of their favorite leader: I follow Paul, I follow Apollos.

According to one of the very early Christian writings, the first letter of Clement, already by the year 100 we had a case of the church getting sick of its pastors and firing them. For those of you who know the church order, it’s like the very first article 17 in history.

And even our rock solid Reformed church governance structure has not exempted us from the foolishness. Karin Maag, who is a historian and head of Calvin College’s Meeter Center, once told me a story of something that happened in John Calvin’s Geneva. The new protestant leadership of the town was determined that the old Catholic ways be abolished and one of the ways they did that was to outlaw the use of certain names. There were certain names parents were not allowed to give to their

children in Calvin's Geneva. For example: you weren't allowed to name your child Claude. Claude was the name of a local Catholic saint, and saints were bad, so...no more Claude allowed.

This led to the following ridiculous situation. A father would bring his infant daughter for baptism and the pastor would ask him: What is this child's name? And the father would say Claude. And the pastor would take the child and say, "I don't think so. I baptize this child as Adam, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

You can imagine how the Father reacted to that sort of thing. Sometimes the father would grab the child back from the minister and you would have the unseemly spectacle of a father and a pastor fighting over a baby at a baptismal font. I'm not making this up. It sounds to me like something out of the three stooges.

Aahh, the church. Books could be filled with stories of the boneheaded things church leaders have done over the years. Books have been filled with boneheaded things church leaders have done over the years.

That's why great hope in this story, the gospel of this story has absolutely nothing to do with the 12 men appointed by Jesus on this day, nor does it have anything to do with the office of apostle or any of the other offices mentioned in scripture or created by the churches in the years since. The great comfort of this story is what Jesus does before the apostles are chosen.

The great comfort is what Jesus did in verse 12. Did you catch that little detail? What did He do right before he appointed the 12? Jesus goes off by himself and spends a whole night in prayer. Jesus climbs up onto a hilltop, to a place where he can be by himself and he prays for the people he's about to appoint; for the leaders he's about to ordain.

This passage gives us a picture of the real foundation of the church. The church is not founded on the sermons of pastors. The church is not founded on the talents of organists. The church is not founded on the excellence of its elders and deacons.

The church is founded on the person and on the prayers of Jesus Christ her Lord.

What did Jesus pray that night do you think? What sort of things did he say to his Father about the church? And why did he spend a whole night praying? Is it possible that he could see everything that lay ahead for these men and for the church leaders that followed them? Is it possible that Jesus could foresee Peter weeping bitterly in shame after denying him on Good Friday? Could he see Paul and Silas in the cold darkness of the Philippian jail? Could he see the uncertainty of elders and deacons on their house visits and pastors struggling to find words for their sermons?

Maybe Jesus saw all the pain and work, all the late night committee meetings, all the wandering children, all the painful losses, and all the persecutions and maybe that's what made him pray all night on that mountainside.

We do have some idea about what Jesus might have prayed that night. Because in John 17 we have a record of one of Jesus' prayers for the church. In John 17, in what most people call the High Priestly prayer, Jesus prays for the church and her leaders and in that prayer you can get a sense of his concerns for us.

“Father make them one as we are one. They are going to fight Father, I see it coming. Don’t let them become hopelessly divided.

Father don’t let the world overwhelm them. They must live in the middle of a lot of temptation and distraction. Keep them Holy and distinct.

Father, I also pray that they would be one in you. There will be times when the doubts and questions will be all around them. Don’t let their faith be overwhelmed.

And finally Father I pray that at the end of everything, all of these good people may be with me where I am. Father when their eyes close, let them see my face.”

That’s the prayer Jesus prays for the church, and imagining him on his knees all night pouring out his soul asking for our protection is more than enough to make up for all the foolishness of followers who try to do his work.

Jesus prayer for the church is an ongoing thing. Romans 8 tells us that Christ still intercedes for his people. Romans 8:34 gives us the picture of Christ in glory at the Father’s right hand interceding for his people. The prayer for the church goes on.

Right now Jesus’ prays for the church, including LaGrave. Right now Jesus is praying for us. Our church is founded not on the quality of these elders and deacons we just installed, and it’s certainly not founded on the quality of any of us pastors, it’s founded on the prayers of Jesus. And what do you think Jesus prays for when He prays for LaGrave?

Maybe a version of John 17: *“Father see that church in Grand Rapids? Protect those people. Make them one as we are one; you know they don’t always agree about theology and politics – hold them together. Don’t let the world overwhelm them; their culture is an overwhelming force, don’t let them get swept away. And finally, Father, I pray that at the end of everything, all of these good people may be with me where I am. Father when their eyes close, let them see my face.”*

I love the church. I love this institution. I love her leaders and the chairpersons, the volunteers. But my hopes for her rest on that prayer.

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