



“An Unlikely Community”

Genesis 18:1-15, Matthew 9:25-10:15

Two years ago I decided to plunge into the world of virtual social networking by setting up a page on Facebook. I went in with some fear and trembling because believe it or not, I am not the Facebook generation. I left college just before email became a source of mass communication, and the idea of taking courses online was still a dream. What I have enjoyed about Facebook are the people that I have reconnected with from high school and college, although perhaps most wonderful was finding my best friend from 2nd -4th grade with whom I lost touch after she moved to England. Judging from the emails and posts that I get, there seems to be a fairly significant shock that I am now a minister. Never you mind why they are surprised...let's just leave it that I am, perhaps, a bit unlikely. More generally, as a female minister just 50 years ago in the Presbyterian Church I was unheard of, and judging from conversations with many of my airplane seatmates I remain a curiosity if not a heresy even today. Still, what's funny is that it is rarely the voices outside my head that I must contend with in believing myself called by God, it is much more often the ones inside that stir up trouble.

So when the internal doubts start to take hold, I am always glad to turn to texts like the ones we have today – starting with Genesis. I am always encouraged by the wacky things that happen in Genesis. This time the story is about Abraham and Sarah and the news that they will conceive and have a son. This might not be such a big deal except that we are told that Abraham and Sarah are quite old. It actually says, “Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.” Three times, right in a row, we hear about it. It's like saying, “They were old. I mean really old. I mean like not going to happen kind of old.” No one thought a child was possible, so when the three visitors said that they would return to find Sarah with a son, she began to laugh in utter disbelief. And yet three chapters later...unlikely meet Isaac, Isaac meet unlikely.

If that isn't enough, we can also look at Matthew. We're about a third of the way into Matthew when we get his list of disciples, and though it isn't quite as obvious right off the bat, they are a pretty unlikely bunch themselves. Chances are a lot of them haven't met before. Several of them are from different social classes. None of them seem to be really well off. They are not power people, and it's doubtful that they were picked for their networking connections. There is not a religious professional among them, and yet they have been chosen as apostles (literally, ones who are sent out) to proclaim the good news. Taking a second look at them we have:

- ❖ Simon (or Peter) and his brother Andrew – both fishermen, as are James and John.
- ❖ Peter is the one that will shout Jesus' praises one minute and deny him the next.
- ❖ James' and John's highlights include arguing about getting to sit beside Jesus when he's “in charge”.
- ❖ Andrew we only know as Peter's brother. He's bound to have a complex.
- ❖ Thomas we really know through John's Gospel and his claim to fame is as a doubter.
- ❖ Matthew is a tax collector – not a prize. In Jesus' time they were soundly disliked because they were considered cheats that only looked out for themselves.

- ❖ Simon the Cananaean, sometimes known as the zealot – zealous how we don't know, but he is bound to have his own agenda.
- ❖ Bartholomew and Thaddaeus – we literally don't know anything about them.
- ❖ And finally we have Judas whose great distinction is that he betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

It doesn't exactly sound like the dream team, but that's just the point. Jesus didn't go out to find perfect people (as if there were any), or even people that expected to be on the recruitment list. Jesus chose ordinary folks that were willing to put down their nets or their accounting tables, put aside their doubt or their distrust and follow him.

This is not a new idea. Besides Sarah and Abraham or the disciples there are a hundred other examples of unexpected, unlikely people who are asked to step into God's path....Moses, the lispig murderer who leads the slaves out of Egypt; Esther, who hid her background from everyone until she had to step in to save her people; Jacob, the lying and cheating shepherd who becomes the father of the tribes of Israel; and of course Mary, an unwed teenager who just happens to bear the son of God in her belly. Imperfect people called to do important things; It is not a new idea, but it is an idea that has big implications.

What it means is that not just me but you are also called by God. Yup, you. If we were updating this story the disciples might have been called Shanti, Josephine, Gary, Porter, Janet, Cindy, Emily, Kyle, Erik, Sarah and Carlos. Maybe our tasks would look different, or maybe they wouldn't. Some of them would likely be the same – proclaim the good news, have compassion on the harassed and the helpless. I think we probably have to wrestle a bit more with commands to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons, but we probably ought to wrestle with that a bit. What would that mean for us now, and how can we get on that? Then, how we will do those things without taking any gold or silver in our belts, no bag for our journey, no extra clothes or food is worthy of a conversation too. They are all big questions, but if you are like me, I think the biggest thing to get your head around is that *you are called by God*. Perhaps the other side to that is coming to grips with the fact that you actually have something to offer in service to God. We all do.

And we are all needed. It is very interesting to me that these twelve apostles are sent out just after Jesus notes that the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. He has been healing and cleansing, and casting out all over Israel, and after seeing how much there remains to be done I think he wanted help. The instructions Jesus gives to the apostles are to do the very same things Jesus himself has been doing. This isn't the "B" team; this is work that is so important that Jesus is calling in reinforcements. He is calling people who will come – people who may seem unlikely but who will take the next step to do what they can because the need is great. Today we are those people, and today we can choose what happens next because what we have is today.

I might wonder about being somewhere else. I might imagine doing something else, but I am here. I have today. I can be present in it, or I can fluff my way through. Those are my choices. I can enact the calling I have in the context I'm in, or I can change my context to follow my call but anything else is not living into my call or my context. It's just coasting, and coasting doesn't really take much effort. Coasting doesn't presume that we could be apostles, sent out to

serve God and to proclaim the good news. Coasting just means that I'm either living off of previous effort or I'm going downhill. That has implications for each of us personally and for us communally as a church.

If First United chooses to call itself a mission congregation because of all we have accomplished before, then we are coasting. But if we can keep our hearts stirred with compassion and look for new ways to stand with the harassed and the helpless then we just might find ourselves sent out with them.

If we laud our children's ministry programs without looking further into the ways we serve other generations, then we are coasting. But if our success with youth leads us to greater relevance with young adults and greater support and nurture for older adults then we might increase an already fruitful harvest.

If we choose to say that we are Christian simply because we were baptized, then we are coasting. But if we take our baptismal vows seriously, then the moment we are welcomed in is also the moment we are sent out – apostles forever called to proclaim the good news.

If we take this moment we are given – an unlikely moment maybe, as we remain in the search for a lead pastor...with unlikely people, if we do an even passing inventory of ourselves...making an unlikely decision, to follow Jesus Christ because the call is there to help. If we take this moment then we could be blessed by God with a very unlikely community. Amen.