

JULY 12<sup>TH</sup>, 2015: FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Amos 7:12-15 Ephesians 1:3-14 Mark 6:7-13

Listening to today's three readings, there's no doubt God has especially called us.

The disciple of Paul responsible for the letter to the Ephesians says it best: "God chose us in (Christ) before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. . . . In him we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will, so that we might exist for the praise of his glory, we who first hoped in Christ." We're not an historical accident. God not only brought us into existence, Jesus has chosen us to carry on his ministry. According to the author, should we doubt our having been chosen, we simply have to reflect on the fact that Jesus' Spirit has become an essential part of our life. We don't have such a powerful Spirit because of our looks, but because of what Jesus has called us to do and be.

We're certainly not the first people to be chosen by Jesus to carry on his Spirit-guided ministry. Mark tells us in today's gospel pericope that he originally sent out the Twelve to join him in preaching "repentance."

Scholars tell us that, as an itinerant preacher, Jesus was frequently accompanied by "the Twelve." They were the outward sign of his determination to direct his good news to all of Israel's twelve tribes, not just to the preeminent tribes of Judah and Benjamin. He presumed all Yahweh's Chosen People were actually chosen; chosen, as he believed, to change their value systems so they could experience God working effectively in their daily lives.

Today he teaches his specially chosen twelve disciples that the message he entrusts to them is more important than anything else they'd experience on their journey. They should concentrate only on the essentials. Where they stay or what they eat is insignificant. It doesn't even matter whether they fail or succeed in their preaching. He expects them to understand the importance of their message. Those chosen by God must always make certain their priorities are God's priorities.

Yet, as we hear in Amos' encounter with Amaziah, in difficult times we have to keep reminding ourselves that we're actually set aside by God for God's work. We can't waver in that conviction as Amos seems to do in today's passage. How can he tell Amaziah, "I'm no prophet?" He certainly looks and talks like a prophet.

Realizing the normal biblical way to surface Yahweh's word in our lives is to surface the prophets in our lives, priests and kings in ancient Israel created a system of "shrine and court prophets:" individuals on the payroll of the priests and kings who supplied visitors to their shrines and advisors in their palace with the "word of God" the priests and kings wanted the visitors and advisors to hear.

Given this system, Amaziah thinks all he has to do is tell Amos, "Off with you, visionary, flee to the land of Judah! There earn your bread by prophesying, but never again prophesy in Bethel." He expects Amos to obey him like all his other "prophets" obey him.

In this situation, when Amos shouts, "I'm no prophet!" he's basically saying, "I'm not your prophet! I'm not on your payroll!" He's convinced Yahweh took him from "following the flock." Yahweh told him to prophesy, not Amaziah.

Perhaps one reason we cave in under pressure when we're trying to carry on Jesus' ministry is that we're not exactly convinced Jesus has called us to be "other Christs." It's then that we should reread Ephesians 1. There's no reason we can't be as certain of our calling as Amos was of his.

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JULY 19<sup>TH</sup>, 2015: SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 23:1-6 Ephesians 2:13-18 Mark 6:30-34

We can never forget that the bible is a self-critical book. Though we frequently use its writings as ammunition to cut down other faiths or denominations, our sacred authors almost always took stylus to papyrus in order to critique the way in which their own faith was being lived or abused by the communities for whom they wrote. This is especially true of today's three readings.

Our Jeremiah pericope is just one of many in which the prophet attacks Judaism's "shepherds:" a biblical term normally reserved for the country's leaders. (Since there was no concept of the separation of church and state in 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE Judah, Jeremiah includes both priests and kings in this condemnation.) Yahweh's complaint against these individuals is short and to the point: "They mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture."

Our biblical authors – Hebrew and Christian - presume authentic leaders should faithfully direct and go before us down the path God has chosen us to travel; a path that always has unity as its goal. No matter their diversity, God's people are meant to be one people.

Of course, as all serious students of Scripture know, toward the end of his ministry, Jeremiah gave up all hope of ever changing the organized religion of his day and age. He only prayed that the future Babylonian destruction of the institution would eventually lead to a rebirth of faith and the rise of a new, righteous king; someone who would reign and govern wisely, and do what is just and right in the land.

Though he certainly wasn't a king, Jesus' first followers believed he was the leader for whom the Chosen People had been waiting for centuries. The Pauline disciple who wrote Ephesians clicks off his unifying characteristics. "He is our peace, he who made both (Jew and Gentile) one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity . . . abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims, that he might create to himself one new person in place of the two." If he's not uniting us, Jesus can't be "the Lord, our justice."

Yet, as John McKenzie pointed out in his late 60s best seller *Authority in the Church*, some early church leaders refused to imitate Jesus' leadership style. Our evangelists rarely condemn anyone for rejecting authority. Their condemnations almost always are directed at those abusing their authority, as we hear in today's gospel pericope. "His heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd." (Scholars remind us that when the gospel Jesus has an issue with Jewish leaders, the evangelist is actually directing his words to Christian leaders. It's simply a more gentle way to condemn them than calling them out directly.)

Mark has already called leadership to task back in chapter 3, accusing them of the "unforgivable sin:" crediting the devil for something that actually comes from God. If our leaders can't distinguish good from bad, we're in trouble.

In today's whole "deserted place" passage, Mark's Jesus will provide an example of true Christian leadership by forcing his reluctant followers to give the hungry crowd something to eat. In the bread miracle which follows - but is omitted from our lectionary - Jesus doesn't feed the people, his disciples do. He simply instigates the process, blesses what "little" they have, then gives it back to them to distribute to the crowds. Mark's message is clear. Only by sharing with others do we unite others. True leaders provide opportunities for sharing.

Once we understand what our sacred authors are trying to say, we don't have much time left over for criticizing other leaders except our own.

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