

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

The Beauty of “Different”

(Mark 3:16-19; Acts 2, 6, 13)

Study #2

Sermon Series: Life-Changing Relationships

Nurturing relationships that help us follow Jesus.

Introduction: The spice of life...

Same-old, same-old. That may describe your breakfast routine, but none of us want “same-old, same-old” to describe our life.

Variety and spontaneity and diversity make life interesting. Sometimes more difficult and messy, sure. But so much more appealing and exciting. As the saying goes, *“Variety is the spice of life.”*

That’s true with regard to food and entertainment and travel. And, as we’ll see today, Jesus’ church was created to bring the spice of LIFE to the world through the witness of the stunning variety of the people who make it up.

The Plan A for Jesus’ mission...

Jesus’ life was driven by a purpose. He had a mission.

He came to seek and to save the lost. He came to be the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world, which He did when He gave His life on a Roman cross.

He died to take the penalty for your sin and for mine and for everyone else.

And He came to give life - eternal and abundant - to all who believe in Him.

His sin-bearing mission ended, mission completed, when His earthly life ended. He took away the guilt of your sin so that by believing in Him you would receive the free gift of eternal life.

His mission, though, to bring eternal life to those from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation was not finished when He died.

That work would have to be carried out by others. If you have believed in Jesus, you are one of those “others” who will carry out the on-going mission of Jesus.

And, before you and I came along, there have been two-thousand years of others who have played their part in fulfilling this mission, starting out with a group of twelve.

This morning, we’ll see Jesus’ genius by observing the people He chose to carry out His mission. We’ll especially pay attention to the variety - the “different” - within that first group of followers.

It was His plan that those who were following Him would spread the life-changing message of the Gospel to the world. That was His Plan A to reach and to redeem the world - and there was no Plan B.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke¹ all include a listing of the twelve men Jesus chose to be the first generation of those who would carry out His mission. Here is the list as given by Mark.

[Mark 3:16] And He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom He gave the name Peter), [17] and James, the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James (to them He gave the name Boanerges, which means, “Sons of Thunder”); [18] and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus (listed as “Judas the son of James” in Luke), and Simon the Zealot; [19] and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Him.

¹ John’s Gospel doesn’t include a listing of the twelve apostles.

There were others who followed Jesus besides these twelve. Crowds of thousands followed Him, but many of those didn't believe in Him.

There were others who were very close to Him,² and there was a group of very faithful women who followed Him and who helped support the group from their personal means.

But this list Mark gives us names the apostles. They are the ones who were closest to Him for the last year and a half of His three-year ministry.

In this list are at least two pairs of brothers.³ Eleven of the twelve lived in Galilee, the lone exception being Judas Iscariot.

These apostles had certain similarities of culture since they were all Jews.

And they all lived in the same poverty-ridden, Roman-oppressed society. They were all men of the first century and were probably all nearly the same age.

They all traveled with Jesus and spent around a year and a half with Him. But some were closer to Him than others, even among the apostles.

Simon Peter, along with the brothers James and John (sons of Zebedee) made up the apostolic "*inner circle*."

They spent more time with Jesus than the others and had experiences with Him that the others didn't have.

The first of the three was Simon. He is listed first in all three of the lists. We probably know more about Simon than we do about all the other apostles combined.

The Very Different First Disciples

The Inner Circle

Simon Peter

Simon was an independent fisherman (he owned his own boat) and was among the first people Jesus called to follow Him. At the point of calling (John 1:35-42), Jesus nicknamed him "Peter" (meaning "rock") hinting at his future, foundational role in the mission. (Luke 5)

When Jesus called him to follow, Simon immediately said, "*Yes!*" and started learning how to fish for men instead of fish. (Matthew 4)

Peter talked. A lot. And he was the spokesman for the group on many occasions.

When no one else would, Peter asked Jesus to command him to walk out to Him on the water - and he walked on water. (Matthew 16)

When the others were silent, Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. And right after that, he rebuked Jesus for predicting that He would suffer and die, and heard Jesus say, to him, "*Get behind Me, Satan!*" (Matthew 16)

When up on a high mountain, Jesus was transfigured and met with Moses and Elijah. Peter, **[Mark 9:6] for he did not know what to answer**, proposed that three tents be made for Jesus and His guests. God told Peter from heaven, "**Listen to [Jesus].**" (Matthew 17)

He was a bold and honest question-asker. He asked Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who wronged him and what the future held - for the world and for him. (Matthew 18; Mark 13)

He resisted Jesus' foot-washing and swore that he would never deny Jesus.

² In Luke 10, we read that Jesus sent out a group of seventy on a mission trip.

³ Three if Matthew and James (the lesser) were sons of the same Alphaeus. Most scholars believe they were not.

He fell asleep when Jesus asked him to pray, used his sword when Jesus was arrested,⁴ and then did exactly what he said he would never do, denying three times that he even knew Jesus. (Matthew 26)

He ran to the empty tomb on the first Easter Sunday, jumped out of a boat to reach the resurrected Jesus at the Sea of Galilee, and learned that a violent death was in his future. (Luke 24; John 21)

So, who was Peter?

Think of someone you know who is a born leader and has succeeded and failed big. That's Peter. He didn't pretend and he didn't have much of a filter. He spoke before thinking and was over-confident.

With Peter, what you see is what you get. Real. Genuine. Messy.

The inner circle also included James and John, brothers and sons of a fisherman named Zebedee.

James and John, sons of Zebedee

Like Peter, they were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. Also, like Peter, they were called by Jesus to follow early in His public ministry.⁵

The three in the inner circle were the only apostles present at the transfiguration, at the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead, and with Jesus at prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. (Mark 5, 9, 14)

These two brothers don't get any awards for humility. They approached Jesus⁶ and asked for places of honor in what they expected would be Jesus' soon-to-come kingdom.

They lived up to their nicknames ("*sons of thunder*") when they asked Jesus for permission to call down fire from heaven to burn up Samaritans who wouldn't provide hospitality for Jesus. (Luke 9)

And they joined Peter in sleeping instead of praying in the Garden when Jesus asked all three of them to "*watch and pray.*"

Who were James and John? Well, they both had a demanding, self-serving streak. Their commitment to Jesus was genuine, but it fueled an "us vs them" mentality and a contempt for outsiders. They have been called "bigots" by many who study these things.

Beyond the inner circle, there was a second tier of the apostles who were lesser known and less prominent.

The Second Tier

Andrew, brother of Simon Peter, and Philip

Andrew and Philip show up together at several points in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Andrew, who was the less-famous brother of Simon Peter, began following Jesus when Peter did, but knew about Jesus before Peter did.

He had heard John the Baptist identify Jesus as "*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" and then Andrew told his brother - Peter - that he had found the long-awaited Messiah. At about this same time, Philip met Jesus, began following Him, and brokered an introduction between Jesus and Nathaniel. (John 1)

Jesus interacted with both Andrew and Philip before the feeding of the five thousand.

There was a three-way conversation in which Jesus asked Philip, [John 6:5] "*Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?*" and Andrew asked Jesus, [John 6:9] "*There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?*"

They worked as a team. When Philip was approached by some non-Jews (Gentiles) who wanted to see Jesus, he went to Andrew who forwarded the request to Jesus. (John 12)

⁴ Peter cut off the right ear of the High Priest's slave in defense of Jesus.

⁵ Matthew 4

⁶ Their mother played a role in this request. Matthew 20:20ff...

In Andrew and Philip, I don't see the "edge" that was present in James and John. Both were happy to bring others to Jesus. So, picture a couple of guys who are friendly, open, approachable.

Then, of course, there is Thomas.

Thomas

Before Jesus and the twelve went to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead, Thomas, knowing that they were heading into danger, was obviously ready for a sacrificial trip when he said, **[John 11:16] "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him."**

Most famously, though, we know Thomas because he was not with the other apostles when Jesus appeared - post-resurrection - in a closed room on the night of the first Easter.

When they all told Thomas about it later, he told his good friends, **[John 20:25] "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."**

Hence, "doubting Thomas."

Thomas is your brooding, moody, pessimistic friend. He seemed drawn to expect the worst. He refused to believe his friends when they told him of a "too good to be true" meeting with Jesus.

Matthew / Levi, son of Alphaeus

Matthew (or Levi) is also in this "second tier" of apostles. We know that Matthew collected taxes from his fellow-Jews for the Romans, but precious little else.

Because he was a tax-collector, Matthew would have been hated and considered a traitor by the Jews of his day.

Jesus' called Matthew to follow Him while he was working at his tax booth. And we learn that a party was held in his home for Jesus,

the other early disciples, and other seedy characters referred to as "tax-collectors and sinners." (Mark 2)

Matthew's personality doesn't surface in the Gospel narratives. But it is interesting that the Gospel he wrote is harder on the tax-collectors (usually lumping them in with "sinners") than in Mark, Luke, or John.

I imagine Matthew as that friend of yours who has a sober sense of having lived hard and bad, knows what life is like on the other side of the tracks, and is now redeemed. He is humble and self-aware.

There are other apostles we know virtually nothing about.

The Third Tier (only named in the lists)

The third tier of apostles don't appear in any Gospel narratives. We know nothing about their personalities or character. I suspect that they were good men, but all they do is fill out the lists in the three Gospels in which they are named.

There is a second James, Bartholomew, and Thaddaeus (called "**Judas, son of James**" in Luke's list).

And there is Simon the Zealot, *zealot* probably identifying him as a member of a political / para-military group intent on overthrowing Rome and re-establishing Jewish sovereignty in Palestine.

Finally, and in a class by himself, is Judas Iscariot.⁷

Judas Iscariot

⁷ Note the following about Judas Iscariot: The devil put it into his heart to betray Jesus. (John 13:1-4) He was identified at the Last Supper as the one who would betray Jesus. (Matthew 26:20-25; also, John 13:24-30; He exp) He experienced remorse after betraying Jesus and killed himself. (Matthew 27:30-10)

It's fascinating, isn't it, that Judas became the group's treasurer. John tells us that Judas was a thief and that he skimmed off the top and took for himself what should have been reserved for all.⁸

Judas got indignant when a woman anointed Jesus during the week before He died with very expensive perfume.⁹ It seems that this act of worship was the nudge that pushed Judas over the edge and that prompted him to betray Jesus.

For the last two thousand years Judas has been known as the "friend" who approached the Jewish leadership with a promise that he would hand Jesus over to them, for money.

And this He did late at night in the Garden of Gethsemane after identifying Jesus to them by means of a friendly kiss of greeting.¹⁰

Judas must have appeared trustworthy or would not have been placed in charge of the money box. He is that person you know whom you wouldn't trust as far as you could throw. He followed Jesus, but he loved money.

Summary:

This is the group Jesus chose. Together, they are His Plan A to reach the world for God. It is not a group, of which you would ever say, "*Now there's a group of world-beaters! Class Five leaders, all of these!*"

No, the group ran the gamut on the enneagram spectrum from reformer to helper to achiever, from enthusiast to loyalist to peacemaker.

There are hints throughout the Gospels of competition among them. And there must have been fascinating relational dynamics between Matthew (the former tax-collector) and Simon the Zealot.

Was Thomas the perennial wet blanket? And how did Judas Iscariot get along with the rest?

⁸ John 15

⁹ John 20

¹⁰ Matthew 26

Jesus picked a highly diverse group of men to be with Him. The diversity was intentional. He wanted it that way.

And I want to spend our remaining time seeing why it was so important that the group He chose should be diverse. We see the reason clearly when we watch as the church began to fulfill its mission.

The Great Benefits of Different

We'll Learn to Accept "The Other" (Acts 2)

After Jesus rose from the dead, He appeared to His disciples for a few weeks, and then ascended into heaven.

The group of one hundred and twenty Jesus-followers were gathered in Jerusalem, waiting for the "***power from on high***" that Jesus had promised. (Luke 24:49)

Then, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fell on them and they were all filled with the Spirit, spoke in tongues, and proclaimed "***the mighty deeds of God.***" (Acts 2:11)

After Peter gave a powerful message, three thousand souls were added to the number of those who believed in Jesus.

And, as Luke tells us, ***[42] They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.***

This is remarkable unity among newly minted Jesus-followers. And we would be wrong to think that the unity came easy. These were NOT all Judean Jews with a monolithically Palestinian background.

No.

Luke tells us that they were from all over the known world. ***[Acts 2:9] Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, [10] Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and***

visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, [11] Cretans and Arabs.”

It was in the first days of the existence of the church that a big part of the rationale of Jesus’ choice of a diverse group of apostles became crystal clear.

The cultural divide separating Jews of Judea and Jewish proselytes from Arabia was enormous. There would have been striking differences between Palestinian Jews and Mesopotamian Jews.

And yet, all these newbies who have chosen to believe in Jesus enjoyed unity.

How so? Well, I can only imagine Peter and the other apostles thinking, *“If Jesus chose and accepted us into His fellowship, we can certainly accept into the fellowship those who have chosen Him.”*

The first church was the context in which Jesus-followers first saw the beauty of “different” and the necessity of accepting “the other”.

There were Grand Canyon-sized divides between members of the first church. They, having been accepted by Jesus, accepted and loved each other.

And today, Jesus has accepted you and He has accepted me into His church.

With every fault and distinctive unique to you, He has accepted you. With every one of my perspectives and all my opinions, with all my baggage and personal oddities, when we each believed in Him, He gave us each the gift of eternal life and accepted us.

There are divides between us, too. So, as you and I have been accepted by Jesus, let us ***[Romans 15:7]...accept one another, just as Christ accepted us to the glory of God.***

A second benefit of the diversity that Jesus hard-wired into the church from Day One is seen in a watershed incident recorded in Acts, chapter 6.

We’ll Learn to Creatively Change For “The Other” (Acts 6)

Despite opposition from the Jewish rulers, the church of Jesus continued to expand, still located entirely in and around Jerusalem.

They were still enjoying unity and fellowship and food. In fact, one of the ministries that developed among these thousands of believers was a daily serving of food to the widows of the church.

This ministry of the church to provide food for the widows was great. Every day, the church sacrificially served the widows with meals. And for that we say, *“Way to go, church!”*

However, as well intentioned as this ministry was, it wasn’t really going all that well. If you had asked the apostles, they might would have told you that it was going great.

Widows were being served. Food was going out. *“It’s all good.”*

But there was a problem. It was a problem, though, that the leaders hadn’t seen.¹¹ Listen carefully and you can hear a low-level *grumble* in the background.

[6:1] Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.

The term “Hellenistic Jews” refers to Jews who had come from the Greek world to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover and Pentecost. They were Jewish, but they had Jewish names and customs and language and dress and taste in food.

Those in charge of the food distribution to the widows - probably Judean Jews - had “overlooked” these Hellenists at mealtime.

¹¹ Note to self: It is easy for leaders to be oblivious to significant problems in an organization.

We wonder how this could have happened in a church that was doing so many things right? Helpfully, Luke doesn't say. By not saying we can wonder a bit.

Luke doesn't say that this tragic oversight was malicious. More likely, the cause was inattention, thoughtlessness, and insensitivity.

Somehow or other, these Hellenistic widows were "slipping through the cracks.

I don't think the Hebrew widows were cutting in front of the Hellenists in the serving line. But it is easy for me to imagine the word about the meal plan - where to go, when to go there - not having gotten out to the Hellenists.

Maybe it was a language thing. They sent out the email in Aramaic, but that didn't communicate to the Greek speakers?

(I can tell you that such things have happened over the past three years here as we have welcomed Encuentro and have made plans and sometimes neglected to include Encuentro or have forgotten to send out the information in Spanish.)

In Jerusalem, there were lots of Hellenistic Jews in the *ecclesia*. But this food ministry was overseen by the local Hebrews and the Hellenists just weren't on their radar.

This was a big deal. The Hellenistic widows were going hungry. What was the church going to do?

Well, they got creative.

The apostles handed off the responsibility to the church for figuring out how to adequately serve ALL the widows. Then, the church gave the whole ministry over to seven godly men.

[6:5] The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.

The church assigned **seven Hellenistic Jews** to oversee the ministry of food distribution to all the widows in the church.

One way to have avoided the problem altogether, of course, would have been to simply decide to have two churches: one church for Judean Jews; one church for Hellenistic Jews. Each church takes care of its own widows.

Thankfully, they didn't opt for that solution. They got creative.

It was the presence of varied ethnicities and cultures that made for the challenge and it was the presence of "different" that prompted the church to respond with creativity to provide food and love.

We are getting to see the creativity that comes from "different" here at Northwest in these days.

Our Christmas Eve worship service this year was especially meaningful with English and Spanish singing, Manuel Abarca playing a special on piano, and a rousing chorus of "Feliz Navidad."

Our Benevolence Ministry is now a shared ministry. Manuel and I discuss needs and decide, together, as to how to distribute funds to people in need on the English and on the Spanish side.

We're learning to think outside the box and to get creative.

That's good, because God never envisioned a homogenized church where we all look the same, talk the same, and think the same. He loves "different" and as we get more creative, we will be more able to accept others whom Jesus has accepted.

A third benefit of diversity in the church of Jesus is seen later in Acts, in something that happened in the church at Antioch.

We'll Learn to Reach Out to "The Other" (Acts 13)

Antioch was hundreds of miles north of Jerusalem and the Jewish center of Jesus' church. It was in Syria, in the heart of Gentile country and there was a lot of diversity in the church at Antioch.

[1] Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

These five men were the “go-to” spiritual leaders in Antioch. And what a picture of ethnic diversity. There is a Hellenistic Jew, an African, a Romanized Jew, an aristocrat, and a trained Jewish rabbi.

If there were differences between the people in the church at Jerusalem, Antioch’s differences were on steroids.

And yet, despite their differences these men served Jesus together. Jesus’ Gospel does, indeed, unify. He breaks down barriers.

And get this. It was in Antioch that we first hear of the Holy Spirit leading a church into intentional, cross-cultural ministry. (Acts 13:2ff...)

This church was uniquely prepared to leave home to spread the Gospel to “different” because the church itself was filled with “different.”

When a church consists mainly of *US* (like the Jerusalem church was made up of only Jews), that *US* is less likely to think much about *THEM*.

But when a church is made up of *US + THEM* (like Antioch was), other *THEMS* will be on that church’s radar, because *THEMS* are always right there in front of *US/THEM*.

This is the outreach element in the “different” equation. Church minus “different” becomes more ingrown. Church plus “different” becomes more focused and passionate about reaching out.

Conclusion:

Among my favorite proverbs is this one:

**[Proverbs 14:4] Where no oxen are the manger is clean,
But much revenue comes with the strength of the ox.**

Even as a non-dairy farmer, I can understand that if you take away the cows, there’ll be a lot less mess - and a lot less income.

But the proverb isn’t really about oxen. It’s about life.

And “different” - diversity - is an ox. It leaves messes behind. Life is harder with “different”. But there is an incalculable richness to “different”.

That is especially true in the church, an entity whose members are commissioned to reach “different” around the world.

Jesus chose the twelve and He welcomes anyone who comes to Him by faith to join His team.

The church - *our* church - benefits from “different.” We need “different”. “Different” viewpoints and strengths and opinions and priorities are the spice of discipleship that whets the appetite of the world for life in Jesus.

With diversity, we learn acceptance and love, we are prompted to creativity in ministry, and our eyes are opened to a big, needy world outside the church filled with “different.”