

### *Second String Disciples*

In Stephen Sondheim's play, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, the slave named Pseudolus (played by the incomparable Zero Mostel) begets a ridiculous scheme to win his freedom from his master, Hero, by arranging the marriage of Hero to the beautiful Philia.

There's just one problem: Philia, a courtesan in the house of Marcus Lycus, has already been promised to the war hero Miles Gloriosus.

Actually, there's way more wrong with the plan than just that, and what ensues is a farce, culminating in a chase scene through ancient Rome with multiple women (and one man) dressed in white gowns and veils, and a surprise twist at the end, which I'll leave unspoiled that resolves the situation with no harm to anyone.

It's a classic comedy of errors – actually it rips more than one or two cues directly from Shakespeare's play, *The Comedy of Errors*.

There's something about the unraveling of madcap plans that seems pervasive in the development of a good plot.

Think about some of the funnier books or movies: *Me Talk Pretty One Day* – a comedy of errors that propelled David Sedaris to the top of the best-seller lists.

*A Fish Called Wanda* (one of my favorite movies) – definitely a comedy of errors.

*My Cousin Vinny* – perhaps one of the best examples of a comedy of errors...

There's something about well-meaning people doing something absurd that makes for considerable amusement.

In an almost perverse way, the text this morning from the Acts of the Apostles is a comedy of errors of the first magnitude.

First a little background: there are 120 folks present... that's significant, because in the time of the Church of Acts, 120 was the required number of folks to form a synagogue with its own council – so it could make its own decisions and implement them in their own way.

So, with the barest minimum quorum required, Peter sets out to restore a sense of order to what he must have perceived as evidence of chaos.

They needed twelve disciples.

Fair enough. Twelve is a significant number in the Bible. There were twelve tribes of Israel, each named for one of the sons of Jacob. When Jesus fed the four and five thousand, twelve baskets of leftovers were collected after the meal, again, a nod to the twelve tribes.

Jesus, of course, called twelve disciples until Judas's choices made his life run completely off the rails and he ended it all.

So Peter, newly emerging as the leader of this motley crew, draws the conclusion that they need to return their number to twelve, and he establishes the criteria by which the new Apostle will be judged. I'm assuming they didn't consider the women, despite the fact that it was the women who stayed with Jesus long after the male disciples had failed spectacularly in their attempts to remain faithful to Jesus's request that they stay with him... it was the women who stayed to the very end, and it was the women to whom Jesus first revealed himself.

Anyway, despite the fact that the women are clearly more qualified, two *men* are identified as candidates meeting the criteria: They were present from the time of John the Baptist, and they stayed with the disciples all the way until Jesus was taken up, except, for that unfortunate interlude where all the men were gone faster than a parking space on Walnut Street.

And it's interesting why the whole thing happened the way it did. Retaining the number twelve maintains continuity with the story of Israel. Moreover, selecting someone who was there all the way through keeps up Luke's stated intent to provide an orderly account from eye-witnesses.

It all makes perfect sense, within a certain framework... but the humor comes from the reality they they're going to all this effort, and yet God is about to do a very new thing...

What's more, what they perceive as a pristine witness is just an illusion.

Because, of course, it's absurd to think that the church's integrity comes from pristine leadership... that's not a commentary on present company, it's a statement of fact: the apostle they were replacing fit the bill of what they were looking for exactly, except that he was a traitor.

And the man moderating the meeting, Peter, can hardly be considered a model of rock-ribbed rectitude... O he of three denials.

The church has *never* been comprised of pristine persons.

So much is this the case that Will Willimon writes, "The church has no cause for conceit at this point, for Luke has reminded us, even before the story of empowerment begins, that a disciple, one privileged to witness the whole Christ-event from the first, can and had betrayed his Lord. No scorn for later despisers of the gospel, no judgment on later infidels, can match the sober, gruesomely detailed picture of the end of Judas or the irony that the one who speaks of Judas did deny and curse his own master." Willimon concludes, "The church meets no failure or deceit in the world that it has not first encountered in itself – even among those who founded and led the very first congregation."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, Acts in *Interpretation*, Mays, Miller and Achtemeier, eds. (JKP, Atlanta, 1988) p24

So, to recap: the early church sought to demonstrate its integrity by inflating its leadership with someone who seems to have no more qualification to lead than that he has been around a long time.

Jesus didn't pick him, the Holy Spirit hasn't shown herself yet, and the unfortunate Matthias never gets mentioned again in the entire Bible.

It's over faster than Alexis Rose's recording career.

If the story ended *here*, like this, it would be tragedy, not comedy. But it doesn't.

The story doesn't end here, (well, it does for Matthias) the story goes on.

And because it is a story that *God* is unfolding, and not us, it goes on in surprising and wonderful ways.

Next Sunday is Pentecost. Among the texts for the day is one from Acts, and it's the story about how the Holy Spirit shows up and all of the sudden, Peter, who at this very moment seems obsessed with counting, suddenly transforms into a visionary.

The narrative abruptly transforms and the people in it are transformed, because the Holy Spirit shows up and reminds us that God is always the unseen actor in the story.

The disciples may have been hung up on numbers, but God was lying in wait, preparing a future for them that they couldn't even yet imagine.

In that *new* future, Peter is leader, a real leader, because the Spirit of God is in him. It's as if he is a new person, and in a very real way, he is.

And then there will be Saul... Saul who supervised the murder a young deacon named Stephen who was following Jesus... but then himself was knocked off his horse with a vision of the Gospel, and he too becomes a new person, a new creation named Paul.

And the *new* man, Paul, a Pharisee born of Pharisees, becomes the great evangelist to the Gentiles, carrying the word of God into Asia Minor and Europe and in very real ways, right up to the present moment.

Here's the object lesson of the story: *when God gets involved, things change.*

Things change because God is *always* working for redemption.

You know the thing about those criteria that Peter and the disciples laid out for discipleship before they rolled the dice and picked Matthias?

*None of us meet the criteria.*

Nobody has met that criteria for a couple thousand years...

We weren't with Jesus from the start. We've never met John the Baptist...

Yet the story goes on... because it was never *us* leading the story.

It was always God, and God has never stopped moving the story forward.

God has been picking second-string disciples to move the good news forward all along.

Just to put a fine point on it: You and I are the second-string disciples.

Do you know what you signed up for as a second-string disciples? Nothing more and nothing less than sharing *good news*. I understand that demonstrating faith can be a little bit intimidating at times, and even though I know you know exactly what the good news is, let me give you a handy little synopsis to put in your back pocket that I heard from the late Peter Gomes a few years ago. You can use it any time. It goes like this:

“1) God is.

2) God is love.

3) God loves me.”<sup>2</sup>

That’s it. That’s the whole gospel that is going to change the world.

Because if God is, then the whole of creation is in God. And if God is love, anything less than love is less than God. And if God loves me, then God loves you.

And God is looking for some second-string disciples to keep this message rolling forward.

Now, I bet I can tell you in a nutshell right now why some folks are afraid of sharing the good news, because it’s usually the same reasons:

1) They are afraid they don’t know enough. Malarkey. Just remember: God is, God is love, God loves me.

2) They’re afraid they aren’t good enough. Again, that’s hooey. Frankly, God seems to have been largely unconcerned about the qualifications and purity of whom God is using.

I love an old story about young man who was getting harangued by his father about his lack of direction and apparent motivation. The story goes that his father, reaching a frustration point with the young man said to him, “Do you have any idea what Abraham Lincoln was doing when he was your age?”

Of course, his father meant splitting rails and teaching himself to read and write on the back of a shovel. But the young man replied, “No, but I know what he was doing when he was *your* age!”

And *just* like that, the Holy Spirit is never done with us, not this side of the kingdom, at least. We are *always* in the process of becoming what God is making us.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Gomes, [Doing What You Can](#). (Harvard, Cambridge, 2004) p214

I've been pretty tough on Peter and the disciples, perhaps deservedly so, and I have plenty of scholars who can back me up on my claims about their myopia.

But I'm coming increasingly to the conclusion that the number one obstacle to the gospel isn't our personal failings. It isn't disinterest. It's not disbelief. It's *certainly* not the competence and purity of the person sharing it.

It's *inertia*.

And whatever Peter may or may not have gotten wrong, he kept moving forward.

Discipleship works the same way: God takes ordinary people, usually without particularly great qualifications, and then God does extraordinary things.

The book of Acts is the story of extraordinary things.

Sure, when you get people involved, there is always the strong possibility that the whole thing will wind up in a comedy of errors, and there's no telling when we'll wind up on a crazy chase, but that's the brilliance and the beauty of it: God can do anything, and God picked us!

And so, to you and to me, the challenge remains:

When God calls, do it.

Whatever it is, do it.

Do it!

Now.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.