



## Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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January 25, 2009  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
Acts 13:1-5  
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: 1 Kings 19:19-21  
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 62  
Second Lesson: Acts 13:1-5  
Gospel: Mark 1:14-20

### **Set Apart for Service**

An unlikely group  
A Spirit directed task

Have you ever had anything that's really special to you that you just set apart to use in certain circumstances? When I was young, for a few years while I was playing baseball in the summer, there was a certain undershirt that I wouldn't wear any other time except for the game. It was one of those white shirts with colored sleeves that you usually wear underneath your jersey. It wasn't issued by the team, but that's what I had set apart. There were times when I would have liked to wear it while playing ball down the road with other kids, but that was something I used only for the games.

In the ministry, it's been almost the same. There was a certain suit I had during the first 15 years of my ministry that I wore for every single funeral I ever did. I didn't wear it for anything else. It was set apart for that use.

Did you have anything like that ever in your life? Did you have a certain shirt that maybe when you asked that special girl out you would wear because it was set apart for special use?

Have you ever considered this truth that we just heard? While you and I might set apart things like clothes or maybe something else for special use, God has actually set you and me apart for special use? We are the special instruments that God has set apart to use in his kingdom. That's kind of an awesome thought when you stop and think about it. We are that special to the Lord that he said, "I'm setting you apart and this is the task that I want you to carry out."

We see that taking place at the church in Antioch, but the same thing happens here today. You look at the church in Antioch and these guys and you see that it's an unlikely group of people that God had set apart. I think if you look around this morning you can also agree it's an unlikely group of people God has set apart for service in his kingdom.

But here's the other thing. God has set us apart just like he did those people in Antioch. The Spirit gave them the tasks to do. And I think if we consider this Scriptural truth today, we'll see that the Spirit has also set us apart for a task that he has given to each of us.

The church at Antioch had prophets and teachers that are listed here for us. Some say maybe in list of importance. We don't know that for certain. But the one thing you can say about this list that is before us is that it is a rather diverse group. You have Barnabas, who was John, a Levite from Cyprus I believe it was. But he was called Barnabas. He's listed first. Barnabas means "son of encouragement." Here was a guy that was such a ray of sunshine on a cloudy day that the apostles gave him the nickname "Mr. Encourager." Then at the end of the list, you have the guy that the apostles were all afraid of, right?—Saul, the guy who had persecuted the church. "Mr. Sunshine" and "Mr. Gloom and Doom" I suppose were the bookends on this list.

Then in between you have Simeon, a Jewish name, called Niger. Niger is Latin for "black." Evidently he had a very dark complexion compared to the rest of them. Then you have Manaen, whose Hebrew name was actually Menahem, who was the foster brother it appears of Herod the tetrarch. He had grown up, you would think, in some kind of royal setting. Then you have Lucius of Cyrene, a Latin name.

You have Jews and non-Jews. You have people that are rays of sunshine. You have people that had persecuted the church. That is the group that is called the prophets and teachers of Antioch.

Then we see the Lord comes to them while they are fasting and worshipping him. They don't set up the plan. God comes to them and says, "Here's your plan. Here is what you are going to go do." And they go and do it. God sets apart Barnabas and Saul—the guy who is often going to be under attack maybe by others who still view him with an eye of suspicion—with "Mr. Sunshine." He sends them on their way and it becomes the first missionary journey. They travel around and they preach the Gospel in places it had never reached before. And they had accomplished incredible things. John Mark was with them. It's a fascinating story and makes up a large section of our study of Paul's life. That's what Saul later was called, "Paul." That's probably how you know him better. An unlikely group gathered from across the Mediterranean from different backgrounds and here they are brought together to be prophets and teachers.

You look around at the group around you today and you think, "We're not all that different," right? It's not like we have different nationalities. It's not like we have different skin colors. It's not like we speak different languages, we who are gathered here this morning. In a sense, we are a pretty homogenous group. It doesn't mean there aren't differences among us though, right?

Just think of your taste in music. Some of you think the peak of pop music was probably Sinatra, right? Some of you maybe like Slim Pickens. Some of you maybe like Slim Shady. Maybe it's Miley Cyrus that you go gaga over, or Motorhead; maybe Metallica. I have to venture that there are a lot of different tastes when it comes to music sitting in the pews, right? There are some differences among us.

I have to believe that we are also all in different circumstances in our life. Not just our age, but the things we are facing. We bring different experiences to the table, or to the pew I suppose you would say this morning. We are facing different pressures in our life. We are facing different temptations. We are struggling with different things. That is all true. We are alike, but there are a lot of differences. But what makes you and me an unlikely group to be called by God is none of these things.

What makes you and I can unlikely group to be called by God to serve God is the one thing we all have in common. Each and every one of us sitting here, no matter our taste in music, no matter our life experiences, no matter where we are, no matter what we are facing, no matter what we are struggling with, share this in common. We have a sinful nature that is capable of more than you and I care to admit.

Have you ever said to yourself when you saw something in the news or heard what someone else had done, "I'd never do that. That's terrible. I could never do something like that. I would never do that terrible, terrible thing."

Here's where you and I ought to get over ourselves. We have a sinful nature that is capable of any and every sin that is imaginable. There is nothing that you and I are incapable of doing and if we think we aren't, we are giving ourselves too much credit. By nature, with our sinful nature, we are capable of any sin that is imaginable. That's how thoroughly we are corrupted by our sinful nature. This is what makes us an unlikely group to serve our God, because our God is a holy God. Our God hates sin. Our God doesn't want sin. He wants no part of sin and yet, our God loved us so much that in spite of how thoroughly we are corrupted by our sin, he left heaven and came to this world. He lived perfectly because you and I can't do it. He took all of our sins, the sins that we think, the sins that we say, the sins that we do; he piled all of them on his back and carried them to the cross. And there, the punishment that our sins deserve was poured out on him. Our sins are completely and absolutely forgiven.

Here's the amazing thing. It's not you and me. It's our God. He loves us in spite of who we are. We are the ones that are unlikely to serve, but God, in his power, through his Gospel, through his life, through his death, through his water and Word, through his wine and his wafer, through talking to us through his Word, he changes us. He leads us to believe that what Jesus did for the world, he did for us personally. His love isn't just nebulous and out there somewhere. It's a love that is for me personally, for you personally. That's what our God says to us. He says, "You are valuable, not because of what you can offer me, but because of what I have given you and what I have made you. I love you with an everlasting love even when you feel absolutely unlovable."

God has taken this unlikely group, those of us that are gathered here this morning, and brought us to know and believe that Jesus lived and died in our place and has opened our eyes to see that we too are called to a Spirit-directed task.

The Spirit said to them directly, "You are going to go. You, Saul and Barnabas, are going to go on this missionary journey. Get up and go." They got up and went. It sure

would be nice if our God would say something that specific to us, wouldn't it? So we would know what our task is. I believe God has. I believe God has given us a Spirit-directed task.

Shortly after I came here, at different meetings and things, we looked at what our Spirit-directed task is as a congregation. It's on the front cover of your Bulletin. Do you know what it is? It's there every week. Have you ever read it? I think that Spirit-directed task that's on the front cover right above the graphic arts is also a fitting task for each of us individually as Christians. Our mission is to honor God or to glorify God. We live to thank the one who has taken away our sins. That's our overriding purpose. Didn't God say, "Whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God"? So we seek in our thoughts and our words and actions to honor God.

But we have specifically said there are two ways that we want to honor God. We want to honor God by growing in the Gospel, by carrying out the task God gave. Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as a congregation and as individuals. God has called each and every one of us to that. God didn't say, "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ until you're 14 and you wore a white robe with a red flower on it; and then after that, you can quit growing." We act like that sometimes.

We certainly budget like that as a congregation sometimes. We say it's so important that our youth stay in God's Word, right? After they are confirmed and when they are in those challenging years of high school, as a congregation we say to them, "You're on your own. We're not budgeting anything for you. We'll devote 67% of our budget to you until you're 14, but after that, you're on your own."

God has said "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ all your life." That's why we offer all the different Bible studies. That's why we point you to different things you can do on your own even if you can't make it to those different Bible studies; so you and I can get to know God better. There's nothing in this world that is more exciting than knowing our God better and seeing the love he has for us, the patience he has for us, the forgiveness he has for us. That's what our God gives us in his Word as we grow in it.

Then we've also said we're called to go with the Gospel to others, to share the Gospel as a congregation and as individuals, to point people to Jesus Christ as the only answer for sin, to point people to Jesus Christ as the purpose for life and as a reason for living that supersedes and surpasses anything that you and I can come up with apart from him in this world. We have that. We have the opportunities to grow. We have the opportunities to go.

God has brought us together in this place at this time to be one, to be united in this purpose, in this task; this unlikely group. He has formed us into one body so that we can live to serve him. When we look at how we can do this as a congregation, we'll all have different ideas just like we like different music. But because we are one in Christ,

we agree that whatever is decided, we will get behind it and we'll work toward it. We express that oneness as we work together toward those common goals. We express that oneness today as we come and kneel next to each other because when we commune together, whether you're kneeling or you stay standing, we are expressing that we are one with those we commune with; one in the fact that we are sinners, one in the fact that we are forgiven, and one in the fact that we are working together in the Spirit-directed task that our Lord has given us.

That's just amazing. That's just neat that we have this oneness. When we come together, we don't have to argue about whose music we are going to sing in church. We sing music that focuses on our God, not on ourselves. We don't spend our time looking at our belly buttons. One of our Spirit-directed tasks is to get over ourselves and stop thinking it's all about me and what I want and what I think and that it's all about God and how we can love him more and know him more and serve him more. That's what our God has called us to. That's what we're set apart for.

I guarantee, as we work together, God will do more than we could ask for or imagine as we continue to look at this incredible love he has for us in Jesus. It gives us purpose because it has given us these tasks. Amen.