

People Who Changed the World
Mark 3:13-19

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And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. Mk. 3:14-15

Here is a list of twelve people to whom we owe more than we can imagine. The full number is much greater than twelve. The twelve here named were chosen from a larger group that included women as well as men.

We owe these people more than we can imagine because they changed the world forever. They helped to change our lives. Without them we would know nothing of Jesus. And, without Jesus, we would know nothing of life eternal, of the Loving Father, or of the peace that passes all understanding. These people were the first to hear the word of Christ and to carry his message out to the wider world. The odds against them were terrible and tremendous, but they lifted the name of Jesus, saved his name from oblivion, and placed his name in a position of honor, a position it has occupied through the ages.

Who were these people to whom we owe so much for their work of changing the world and our lives?

They were ordinary people.

Some of these people were so ordinary that we still do not know very much about them. We have the names of twelve of them, and the names of a few outside that group of twelve. Those outside the group of twelve include Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, Martha, and Lazarus. We have these names, to be sure, but of their backgrounds we know next to nothing at all. None seem to come from positions of clout; they were ordinary people whose back stories do not stand out in history but simply seem to blend into time.

Some of these people were so ordinary that we haven't any record of a single thing they said or did. Not only do we know nothing of their lives prior to their meeting Jesus, we know nothing much about them after they met Jesus. Not a single word they spoke stood out to be written down; no deed of theirs was deemed memorable enough to record.

And yet these ordinary people succeeded! I have told you before of the legend of what Gabriel said to Jesus after the Lord Christ returned to heaven in his Ascension. The angel Gabriel caught up with the ascended Lord and wanted know how things went on earth and what he was able to accomplish since Gabriel had announced his birth to Mary. Jesus answered that he left behind a group of people whom he called apostles. Gabriel was flabbergasted and distraught. He feared Jesus had destroyed the whole plan and ruined the enterprise God had in mind by leaving

everything to those few people who looked to have nothing going for them. Jesus replied that it would be OK for he trusted those people and knew they would do fine.¹

So these ordinary people did do finely. We owe them more than we can imagine. They changed the world.

They were busy people.

At least five of them were working when Jesus called them to the life of discipleship. The brothers Simon and Andrew were at work fishing when Jesus called them. That other set of brothers, James and John, were at work in their fishing boat, mending nets along with their father, Zebedee. Matthew was at work in his office as a tax-collector when Jesus called him to discipleship. So the Lord seems to have favored busy people and sought them out.

Perhaps Jesus knew of that maxim which says that if you want anything done you should ask a busy person to do it. People who are busy know how to work, they know how to get something done, they know how to prioritize, they know how to organize. Busy people aren't the kind to procrastinate or to let work lay idly by.

These were busy people whom Jesus called.

They were willing people.

James Michener, the novelist, once wrote, "I have never written any book on whose subject I was a preeminent scholar."² He went on to say that there were always others who were better qualified than he. But he was the one who was willing to be dogged enough to sit down and write about it over the time it took to get the writing done.

So these people whom Jesus called to be disciples: he called and they answered. They were willing to be committed to what he wished for them to be and to do.

Elsewhere in the gospel story a frustrated Jesus tells parables about people who were not willing when called. He spoke of someone who planned a party, sent out invitations, and received positive RSVP notes from people saying they would attend. But, when the day of the party arrived, they were no-shows. One had just purchased some property that needed to be examined. Another had some new oxen that needed looking after. All had some excuse of one kind or another. They did not have the willingness of conviction and commitment.

Again, Jesus told of a father who had two sons he asked to perform an errand. The one son said he would do the thing but did not; the other said he would not but did. Jesus spoke highly of the one who acted to perform the work he was asked to do. Jesus prized willingness.

We can be grateful for the willingness of these twelve people. Their willingness, in spite of their being ordinary and busy, changed the world and our lives.

They were people with a twofold purpose.

¹ James S. Stewart, *The Strong Name* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 53.

² James A. Michener, *The World Is My Home* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 381.

These people were to come to Jesus and to go out from Jesus. They were to come to him in devotion and go out from him in service. They were to come to him to hear him, to learn from him, and to enjoy his friendship. And they were to go out from him in mission, working in the world because of their friendship with him. Their work was to proclaim and to cast out, which I take to mean to heal, to help sort out. They were to take interest in the spiritual lives of people and in the physical and social conditions in which those were lived. They were to address and to help solve the issues plaguing people at the time.

From this twofold purpose of the twelve we gather the insight that there is something wrong with worship that does not move out into mission and there is something wrong with mission that does not draw from the deep well of worship. We are called to devotion and to service, to worship and to mission.

The point of a sermon like this is not to outline a history of what happened but to use the past of scripture to interpret the present and say what is happening now as well as what is possible now.

What is happening now is that Jesus is calling ordinary people like yourselves, busy people like yourselves, into discipleship, hoping you will be willing to accept the call to the twofold task of coming to him for worship and going out from him in service.

What is possible is not so much that you might change the world as these people did, but you can make a great difference in the lives of others today. Your name may not go down in history, but you will be remembered by some soul whom you helped along the way.

Two examples can show what I mean.

Dr. John Hope was the first African-American president of Morehouse College, a school for black men. Howard Thurman, who came to be an influential minister, teacher, and writer, enrolled in Morehouse College in 1919. Thurman remembers that Dr. John Hope, at every assembly of the college, referred to the Morehouse students as “young gentlemen.” Now, that may not sound like much to us, but Thurman said it meant everything to those young black men in the assembly. The 1920s, especially in the American South, was a time when white people referred to black males, regardless of their age, as “boy” or with some derogatory label. To be called “young gentleman” regularly by Dr. Hope put a sense of self-worth into those students that would not have been there otherwise.³ Who was Dr. John Hope? An ordinary Christian, a busy college president, but someone who was willing to help address the need of the day; and his efforts were remembered long after he died.

The other example tells of a woman who was sitting down with her family one day to a meal in a restaurant near her hometown. They were there on a vacation trip, but did not expect to see anyone in particular in this restaurant. Another woman came up to their table at one point and started to speak to the woman. At first she did not recognize her. A little further into the conversation she remembered the woman as an acquaintance though not a close friend from high school. This acquaintance thanked the woman for her example in high school. The acquaintance

³ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 36.

had always looked up to her, she said, admired her, and wanted to be like her. Who was the woman sitting down with her family for a meal? Just a woman sitting down with her family for a meal in a restaurant. But more than that, from an early age she was an ordinary person, busy with her homework and chores and a few extracurricular activities, and one willing to be a follower of Christ unashamed. Through her worship and service, all quietly done without any ostentation whatsoever, she became a role model, remembered long after for helping to steer a life in a good direction.

That can be you! I don't know if you will ever change the world, but you can change somebody's world.