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Sermon Series: *Jesus: Provocateur, No. 7*

A Greater Team

November 1, 2020

Matthew 10:1-4 (NIV)

Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

We're in the 10th chapter of Matthew this morning, if you'd care to turn there with me.

Let me tell you something funny here before we start.

In each Saturday's Pastor's Update, I include a .pdf version of the worship folder for those worshipping at home. The folder has to be electronically assembled, because all the inserts and song sheets are all separate .pdf files. So Renae sends them to me, and I save them individually to my computer desktop. Then I put them together, one by one, to make one document.

Well, several weeks ago, I downloaded .pdf versions of both the Republican and Democratic Party platforms, so those files were on my computer desktop too, and none of them is particularly well-labeled. So last Thursday, when I was putting the worship folder together, I accidentally inserted one of the party platform documents.

Now, I caught it in the final look-over before I sent it yesterday, but can you imagine what would have happened had I not caught that and sent it to the whole church mailing list?

I just thought that was too funny not to mention. You have to take humor wherever you find it these days.

In the Pastor's Update from Saturday, October 24th, I included an article by Catholic scholar Francis Maier that some of you appreciated – and some of you didn't, because in the last couple of paragraphs, Maier declares which candidate he simply can't vote for – while admitting freely that good people will see things differently than he does.

Let me say that I included the article, not so much because of the last paragraphs, but because Maier wisely addresses the anger that seeks to control all of us in these strange days, and because of his excellent reminder that no matter who wins this presidential election, the only real hope of our nation – the only one who can make all things new here is Jesus Christ, and "until we rest in Him" (that's the title of the article), there will always be work to do and strife between us as we do it.

I'd think we could all agree with that.

The reason I mention it this morning, though, is because I so much resonate with the way Maier begins the piece. In his very first sentence, he writes, "*I've been dreading this November for the past year. In half a century of voting, I've been worried or frustrated by our public life many times, but 2020 has a unique toxicity, as*

if the whole nation were heaving, rudderless, on an ocean of poisonous blame. There is no peace and no dignity in this political storm."

That assessment is, I'd think, something *else* with which we could all agree.

Of course, I have my political opinions, as we all do, which, as I've said, I'm happy to talk about privately.

I don't talk much about those things here though, because the gathering of the church to worship and to talk about Kingdom things is a higher order of proclamation, and it's already hard enough for Christians to remember that the Kingdom of God is not the United States of America, or vice-versa. The Kingdom of God is a far bigger, broader, and greater thing than anything that's going on in Washington, D. C.

There are overlaps, of course, and there are certainly Scriptural positions on issues that are important to our ability to function as a society and which we have talked about here: issues like

- the existence of God,
- the freedom of persons,
- the sanctity of human life,
- the care for the needy, widows, orphans and foreigners among us,
- the stewardship of our world,
- Biblical standards of human sexuality and all of the moral issues that go along with that,

and on and on. Scripture speaks of all those things very consistently, and so have we, here, in worship.

Now, how we, individually, interpret and rank and nuance those *can* be different, and that is difficult for some to imagine. Some simply can't believe that Christians could see nuances of some of those things differently than they do, but certainly we can.

And, let me say, the best way to figure out *how* that can be is not by yelling *at* or *about* those who differ – or by stealing their yard signs, or by posting nasty comments online, or by just ignoring those who think differently than we do. In the body of Christ, the best way to explore differences, and to sharpen each other in the process, is by simply asking and engaging and debating, and the ability to do that ought to be a given in the church.

A couple of months ago, Keith Iddings began a discussion group for just that purpose: for Christians to discuss things that we differ on. Honestly, we were both rather disappointed that only a small handful of people were interested in being part of it.

The fact is, it's always easier to *declare* than to *discuss*, but when has Christianity ever been about taking the easiest route?

I realize that, as of today, probably many of us and maybe even most have already voted. If you haven't, I certainly hope you're planning to – and to vote according

to the principles of God's word and your conscience about that.

Jesus doesn't speak of voting, because to vote on governmental leaders was, of course, an inconceivable thing in His day. Frankly, it's an inconceivable thing for the vast majority of people through history and even in our world today. Most people would give their right arms to be able to vote in or vote out their leaders, which is why, I might add, you never see homemade rafts full of people sailing from Miami to Havana; it's why you never see hordes of Texans or Arizonans hiking through Mexico to reach Venezuela. There are good reasons for those one-way streets, and yet, it's remarkable to me that this year's poll by the Victims of Communism Foundation found that acceptance of Americans toward socialism, communism and Marxism is higher than it's ever been.

If you want to be depressed, you can search the "Victims of Communism" website to get those details.

Just the same, since Jesus doesn't address voting, I'll mention what the *fourth* person of the Trinity, John Wesley, said in 1774 about voting. He wrote that people:

- 1) should vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy,
- 2) should speak no evil of the person they voted against, and,
- 3) should take care that their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side.

The increasing inability of our nation to do especially the last two, speaks loudly to the need for a Holy Spirit-empowered transformation of heart in our national life, and of course—that has to begin in the church.

Someone once said that a Christian is the most dangerous when he or she is correct about a thing. I would add that this danger is exacerbated when we are already under stress from other life issues:

-when we are separated from each other such that we aren't able to look into the eyes of the brother or sister with whom we disagree, and

-when we feel that the stakes are high, the time is short, and the pressure is on.

Those are the times we are very liable to win an argument, but in doing so:

- 1) to lose the *unity* among believers that Jesus valued highly enough to pray for multiple times,
- 2) and also, to lose the *integrity of our witness* to the world as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

And the honest truth is, because of our human short-sightedness, most of us are quite good at winning battles, but we often forget that we are part of a much greater war.

And I think that's because, regardless of where we might fall politically today, most of us are convinced that we know what God's will is in this election.

And the truth is, we don't.

Now, if you ask, "What does God want for our nation?" we *do* know that.

We are a wayward people, nationally speaking, and we are getting *waywarder!* Like it or not, ours *is* a post-Christian culture.

I said last week, we're a lot like ancient Israel. For decades now, we've called on God *only* when in need—and now, the majority in our nation don't even do that.

We don't live, nationally, as God wants people to live.

Therefore, we know that God wants to bring us to Himself. Because God is a God of love, we know He is out for our redemption and restoration.

But how does He accomplish that? How does God bring stubborn, rebellious people—nations—to repentance and to godliness?

You know how, although it makes us squeamish to admit it: God brings rebellious people to repentance by allowing them to do as they choose, until they become so miserable that they cry out for Him.

You see it all through His history with nations, and I'd imagine we've all seen it personally in the lives of family members and friends who've rebelled against God and His ways.

As any good parent knows, there comes a time when the rebel child has to stew in the juices of their own poor choices until *they* embrace their need for the better way.

Is that pleasant thing—for child or parent? No.

Is it what we want or wish to happen? No.

But when you're dealing with human free will, that's about the only thing that will do the job.

And that's why I can say with confidence that God is letting us, as a nation, come closer and closer to hitting bottom—so that we have nowhere left to turn but to Jesus.

Now, don't get me wrong: I don't celebrate that. I don't like it. I have three sons—I don't want anyone who comes after me to have to experience it.

But history shows me that's the way God works.

What does that mean for this election?

It means that, though you and I live and work and vote in this world, we must also keep hold of the longer view with regard to the things of this world—and with regard to one another.

It means that, even though we all think we know what God's will is for this election and how it ought to play out, the reality is, we don't.

Is Trump or is Biden the divinely designated implement to preside over the next chapter of God's plan for the redemption of our nation? Which one will take us to where God has determined we need to go, in order for us to see our need for God?

There's not a one of us who can answer that question with authority.

So, we think and pray and research and vote—that is the responsible thing that we all must do, but as we do, we also have to remember that, in the eternal scheme of things, we know far less about what God has in mind than we think we do.

And with that in mind, here's the other thing: with all that we don't know about God's plans for the days ahead, we'd better be very careful about how we live in the reality of His Kingdom, and especially how we live with our brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we may disagree. They are, just as we are, children of God,

citizens of His Kingdom, co-heirs with Jesus, and eternal souls.

In *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis writes, “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit...[whom we relate to with] no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption.”

Friends, what’s happening in our nation is important, certainly it is, and we take it seriously, but it is all earthly – a secondary concern compared to the realities of the Kingdom of God.

The political identities that *will* divide us if we allow them to be *all secondary* to our identity as children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ. We are those things before we are anything else, which means we should feel “at home” with people who share our *faith* but not our *politics*, even *more* than we feel at home with people who share our *politics* but not our *faith*.

And what’s ironic about that is, if we were to actually put the reality of Kingdom before the politics of earth, that may well be the very thing that would speak the loudest to our nation about the reality and power of God.

Far more than our allegiance to any earthly ideology or party or person, our ability to love one another enough to engage, to talk, to debate, to disagree, but then to continue in loyalty and partnership with each other – to live and eat together as family, especially in these days of all but civil war: that’s what will speak loudest to our nation about the power of Jesus to make things new.

We care about our nation, but Kingdom people must care more about the mission and body of Christ, which is what struck me about this passage in Matthew 10. [You didn’t think we’d get there did you?]

I don’t know how many times I’ve read this, but only this week I realized the significance of Jesus choosing Simon the Zealot and Matthew the Tax Collector to be on His team.

Zealots were the ultra-right-wing, small government guys of their day. They hated everything about the Romans and felt even their murder was permissible to preserve the self-rule of Israel. Zealots were the hyper-nationalists of Israel.

And Jesus put one on His team of disciples.

And then, right across the table, on that same team, Jesus put Matthew.

Matthew was a Jew employed by the Roman government to collect taxes from his own people. He was, what we’d call a left-wing “big government” guy that patriotic Jews would have regarded as a filthy traitor – something akin to a Jew who’d report on other Jews to the Nazis.

There could scarcely have been two more opposite people with more opposite convictions and world views. Yet Jesus put them on the same team to make that team somehow greater – somehow more able to accomplish, and with their own lives to illustrate, His purpose of bringing people together and to Him.

In the years they were together, those guys may or may not have come to agreement regarding this or that

earthly circumstance, but they did come to realize that Jesus called them to work in a greater reality – about something bigger than personal gain, bigger than financial security, bigger than an earthly economic system or ideology, bigger than love of country.

Not that those things are unimportant – they all are important.

And, not that Simon and Matthew wouldn’t, individually, be proven right in some ways and wrong in others about their beliefs. I’m sure they both were, in one way or another.

But if Simon and Matthew were to be part of “Team Kingdom” here, they had to declare their loyalties. They had to put Kingdom first. They had to put the good of one another and the integrity and the unity of the team and mission before everything and everyone else – except Christ Himself.

And Jesus calls us to do the same.

There is so much that we *don’t* know about the plans of our God – Who lifts up nations and leaders and brings them down again (Daniel 2:21).

There is so much we don’t know about His responses, His timing, His methods, and His choice of personnel in carrying them out.

But we do know – we’re told over and over in His word – that all earthly kings and kingdoms will pass away.

Isaiah says, “Before God, all the nations are as nothing” (Isaiah 40:17).

Paul reminds the Corinthians that the things of the earth are transient (2 Cor. 4:18).

The Psalmist tells us how the heavens and earth will perish (Psalm 102:25-26a) – *but people* will remain.

Scripture consistently gives us a crystal-clear prioritization of Kingdoms for those who follow God.

The good news is, we all want the best for our nation – and God does as well.

But the best will only be found in Christ.

So regardless of what happens in our nation in the days to come, and regardless of the result of this week’s vote, remember:

our purposes – yours and mine and every Christ-follower’s – are *greater*, and
our relationships – our *family connections* – are *greater*, because
our citizenship is greater – and *eternally* so.

In order to meet together at this table with integrity, we have to embrace that.

Service of Holy Communion

Silence – let the Spirit speak - repentance

Affirmation of Forgiveness

Lord’s Prayer

Words of Institution

Body of Christ

Blood of Christ

Closing Prayer

Closing Song

Benediction: This week, we place our nation that we love into God's hands, confessing that He is, not only the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but also the redeemer and savior of nations. We offer Him our own wayward and confused nation, to redeem and to save as He chooses.

And then, first and foremost, as citizens of God's Kingdom, we commit ourselves to Him, to His truths and principles, and to one another – to serve our King's

purposes and people, above all others, that we might hear one day, if not from any earthly King, but from the King of Heaven, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Until that day – the day His Kingdom comes in fullness and His will really is done on earth as it is in Heaven, may He bless, guard, keep and protect you – and me – and all who are His own. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, amen.