

The Magnificent Twelve – VIRTUAL EDITION

Rev. Curtis Webster

Westminster Presbyterian Church - Ontario, CA

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Year A - 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 9:35-10:8

In 1960, United Artists released one of the greatest Westerns of all time, *The Magnificent Seven*, featuring an incredible cast with Yul Brynner, Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson, Eli Wallach, Robert Vaughn, James Coburn and so many others.

Audiences flocked by the thousands to watch the story of seven gunfighters hired to protect a small Mexican village from a group of bandits led by the sadistic Calvera (Eli Wallach's character). The action is great, no doubt about that, but there were plenty of other films with equally great action sequences released around that time that are now largely forgotten. *The Magnificent Seven* stood out from the rest of the crowd largely because of its wonderfully rich characters. We talked last week about teamwork and team chemistry and one of the delights of *The Magnificent Seven* is watching this disparate group of very flawed individuals who initially were in it only for the money come together and fight as a team for the higher purpose of protecting the weak from the strong.

I can't help but think of *The Magnificent Seven* when I read passages like we heard from Matthew a few minutes ago. It's a story at least as old, apparently, as The Bible. A group of people who initially have little in common are called together to collectively serve a greater good and, against all odds, they succeed. The Twelve were held together, at least in the beginning, only by their devotion to Jesus. They came from different backgrounds and probably from very different theological perspectives, even though they were all Jewish. For instance, I can tell you pretty much for certain that none of the rest would have welcomed Matthew the tax collector

with open arms unless they had been told to do so by Jesus. When you see this team come together at the beginning, you would not want to bet a nickel that they would succeed in their mission but, nonetheless, they wind up doing exactly that.

And there is another way today's reading ties very nicely with *The Magnificent Seven*. Calvera, the sadistic leader of the bandits, has this to say when challenged about the wrongness of preying on the villagers: "If God didn't want them sheared, he would not have made them sheep." Jesus and Calvera would agree that the villagers were weak and vulnerable. After that, obviously, they part company. Calvera says that the weak are fair game for the strong. Jesus says that the weak are the very special responsibility of the strong.

Weakness can come in many different forms. There's physical weakness. There's moral weakness. There's spiritual weakness. There's economic weakness. I think it's fair to say that each of us is weak in some fashion. And I think it's fair to say that each of us is also strong in some fashion. Each of us is a shepherd. Each of us needs a shepherd. Each of us has the solemn duty to protect the other and each of us is entitled to seek the protection of the other.

And maybe that is part of the holy genius that Jesus displayed when He assembled the Twelve. The Twelve came from different backgrounds and each had special skills . . . and each had weaknesses. Even Simon Peter, the Disciple whom Jesus named "The Rock" and upon whom He bestowed the duty of founding His church, was definitely a mixed bag of some very special gifts and some almost fatal weaknesses. Jesus knew that the first generation of Christians was going to be a very weak and very vulnerable group. They were going to have to watch out for one another if the movement as a whole was to survive and prosper.

Two thousand years later, not that much has changed. The church is a group made up of

people who are both gifted and flawed. Even if Jesus hadn't told us so many times that we were going to need each other, I think we would have known that by instinct. This is a big part of why it has been so hard on all of us to not be able to gather together these past few months. We feel stronger and safer when we can be together. I hope that these virtual worship services have helped sustain a sense of community but I know that there really is no substitute for being together.

We will be together. Right now it may be hard to see the progress toward re-opening worship because that progress is necessarily going on behind the scenes. But I guarantee you the day is not so far off when we will gather in person again for worship. When we will share gifts. On that day, whenever it may be, let's be very clear: we are all shepherds and we are all sheep. We are all strong and we are all weak. Together, we can increase our strength and diminish our weakness. We are the many. We are the one. We are Westminster Presbyterian Church.