

Title: Jesus' Favorite

Mark 3:13-19

13 He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. 14 And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, 15 and to have authority to cast out demons. 16 So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); 17 James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); 18 and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, 19 and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Introduction: Video of teacher inviting to come up to the front of the class and look inside the box that has a picture of her favorite student.

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=5097951506920262>

The caption of the video explains what happens: Each kid comes up thinking they will see a picture (of themselves?), but instead they see look down into a mirror. At the end of the video there a couple small captions that presumably are what the kids said when they saw their reflection: "I'll accept that."

I'll bet kids can embrace this in a way that that gets harder for us as we get older. The older we get, the more comparing we do. If the head of the company did this with all her employees, would they be able to say, "I'll accept that." I think they would, but only if that boss was a really loving person. It takes a heart of great love to treat everyone as the favorite.

To everyone who accepts Jesus' invitation to be a disciple, he says:

You are my favorite. Yes. YOU.

But favorite what? Are you Jesus' favorite artist, or athlete, or auntie? What sets you apart?

You are Jesus' Favorite YOU, of course. I think that's why nicknames are so important. Maybe you've noticed that there are two Simon's and two James' listed among the twelve. We know there are a lot of Mary's in the gospel stories. Nicknames not only help us keep them all straight (mostly). They also take us deeper into the person's character.

Some people live nearly the entire lives being known by a nickname, totally apart from what's on their birth certificate is totally different. I had a classmate that went by Cowboy, an uncle everyone called Hombre, and I was thrown for a loop when I found out my Aunt Jane was really named Carolyn and my Grandma Ruth had never once gone by her first name Ruby. Both of my kids have nicknames – more than one, in fact – and I still have to be mindful not to use them outside of family situations. Nicknames can be precious, intimate things. They have power.

Did you catch the first sentence in this passage? It's easy to miss because we fixate on lists and that's pretty much all this is – a list of the twelve men who are called to serve as part of Jesus' inner circle. Verse 13 says that Jesus called to himself *those whom he wanted*. This was Jesus' dream team, the twelve men who were to represent the twelve tribes of Israel in this mission to usher in the Just Reign and Rule of God. This mission would begin with the Jewish people and would extend to every people group on earth. Jesus wanted these first twelve apostles or "sent ones" to showcase what a beloved community would look like to the rest of Israel. So Jesus led them up the mountain by Jesus to have a special encounter with God just as Moses and Elijah had done.

When Jesus wants someone, he wants them for a special purpose. It is no less true for us as it was for them. We each have a unique part to play in seeing God's will done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Notice how I said that the Twelve were only *part* of Jesus' core group. We know that there were women who were part of his inner circle as well – Mary Magdalene for one. Like Simon who got the nickname The Rock, it is possible that "Magdalene" – meaning "Watchful" for "Watchtower" – was the nickname Jesus gave Mary to describe her character. (This could have been instead of - or in addition to - indicating that she was from the Galilean village of Magdala.) Peter the Rock and Mary the Tower - the first leader of the church and the first witness to the resurrection – were Jesus' favorites. Their nicknames gave them – and us – a clear indication that were **seen** by their teacher and friend.

But others among the twelve got nicknames too. They were likewise seen and known. They too were Jesus' favorites. I can't help but think that, as with with Peter, the nicknames included here had layers of meaning. Perhaps Peter was both rock solid and hard-headed. James and John were called the Sons of Thunder and we have to guess at what that might have meant. Maybe the Thunder Brothers had a powerful presence. Maybe they were loud and boisterous and attention seeking. Maybe they were all of the above! Simon the Caesarean in this list is called Simon the Zealot elsewhere. Did that describe his love for life, his political affiliation, or both? Here and in Matthew, Thaddeus is listed. But in Luke the name given is Judas son of James. Is that same person? There is even speculation that "Iscariot" is a form of nickname for the betraying Judas.

Nicknames can describe the truth of who we are, but they can also call us to be the best versions of ourselves. Mary might have originally gotten her nickname because she was tall. But over time it could well have been an indication that she was stood head and shoulders above others in understanding Jesus' teaching and grasping the truth of the resurrection she saw and proclaimed. The point is,

Jesus wants us because of who we are now AND whom we are destined to become.

These disciples were all far from perfect. Their flaws, idiosyncrasies and failures are on full display. Jesus didn't call them because they were the best or the brightest. He called them

because they were the ones he wanted. Every person Jesus calls is chosen based on potential. And only Jesus Christ knows our true potential.

Since Jesus Christ is the only one who knows our full potential...
and since it is only by God's grace that our full potential can be realized...
and since none of us would be part of this graced community except that Jesus himself called us...
Our regard for one another must be based on that potential.

In other words, **we must treat every person we meet as though they are Jesus' favorite.**

There is a beautiful old story that captures the spirit of this invitation. You may well have heard it before, in one form or another, but it is not diminished in the repeating.

A monastery had fallen on hard times. It was once part of a great order which, as a result of religious persecution, had lost all its branches. It was decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the mother house: the Abbot and four others, all of whom were over seventy. Clearly it was a dying order.

Deep in the woods surrounding the monastery was a little hut that the Rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. One day, it occurred to the Abbot to visit the hermitage to see if the Rabbi could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot and commiserated. *"I know how it is"* he said, *"the spirit has gone out of people. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."* So the old Rabbi and the old Abbot wept together, and spoke quietly of deep things.

The time came when the Abbot had to leave. They embraced. *"It has been wonderful being with you,"* said the Abbot, *"but I have failed in my purpose for coming. Have you no piece of advice that might save the monastery?"* *"No, I am sorry,"* the Rabbi responded, ***"I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."***

When the other monks heard the Rabbi's words, they wondered what possible significance they might have. *"The Messiah is one of us? One of us, here, at the monastery? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Of course – it must be the Abbot, who has been our leader for so long. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas, who is undoubtedly a holy man. Certainly he couldn't have meant Brother Elrod – he's so crotchety. But then Elrod is very wise. Surely, he could not have meant Brother Phillip – he's too passive. But then, magically, he's always there when you need him. Of course he didn't mean me – yet supposing he did? Oh Lord, not me! I couldn't mean that much to you, could I?"*

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect, on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah. And on the off off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which the monastery was situated was beautiful, people occasionally came to visit the monastery, to picnic or to wander along the old paths, most of which led to the dilapidated chapel. They sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that surrounded the five old monks, permeating the atmosphere. They began to come more frequently, bringing their friends, and their friends brought friends. Some of the younger men who came to visit began to engage in conversation with the monks. After a while, one asked if he might join. Then another, and another. Within a few years, the monastery became once again a thriving order, and – thanks to the Rabbi’s gift – a vibrant community of light and love.¹

I’ve spent a good deal of this sermon thinking about the importance of nicknames. Maybe, like me, you are wondering to yourself: What is Jesus’ nickname for me? The question makes me think of Revelation 2:17 (NRSV):

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Among the things that are to be revealed at the End of the Age is your secret name, the name God gave you before dawn of creation, the name by which God knows you and calls you. And when you receive that white stone with that name upon it, only you will recognize it. “Oh! That me!” you’ll say. “That is who I am! That is who I’ve always been!” And then you will remember why you are God’s favorite.

Let us pray.

¹ <https://philipchircop.wordpress.com/2012/09/06/the-messiah-is-amongst-you/> which lists as sources *The Art of Possibility* by Rosamund and Benjamin Zander, as well as M. Scott Peck’s *The Different Drum*