

**This Sunday's Reading – The 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time** – The theme for today's readings could very simply be – we are all God's chosen ones. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2002 syndicated column in *The Messenger* adds this comment on today's readings – “Knowing we've been chosen by God to be part of God's people can easily give us a big head. This seems to be one of the reasons why today's three sacred authors composed our liturgical selections in just this way”.

Today's first reading is taken from the Book of Exodus. Exodus is Greek for “Departure” and recounts the story of the Israelites in Egypt, the flight from Egypt, and the making of the covenant with God. It's been three months since the Israelites escaped from Egypt and they are now encamped at the base of Mt. Sinai, the sacred mountain. They are really just a band of runaway slaves with little to no power. They are not a nation. In this reading from the beginning of Chapter 19 (first chapter of the covenant section), we read how God chose the Israelites and how He brought them to Him. God took the initiative to seek out the Israelites, not the Israelites to seek out God. He promised to make them a “kingdom of priests, a holy nation”. This relationship of God with His people was very different from the relationship of the pagan gods and the people. The people did not interface directly with the pagan gods but left that interface to a small group of priests. That way the people did not have to worry about any religious problems with their gods. They left that to the small priestly class. God's relationship with the Israelites is very different. They are to be a whole nation of priests, not just a few selected members. As a holy nation, they would not only worship and offer sacrifice to the one true God, but also care for the people. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2002 syndicated column in *The Messenger* adds this comment on Yahweh's choice of the Israelites as His chosen ones – “Going back to Yahweh's Sinai choice of the ancient Israelites as a “kingdom of priests, a holy nation,” the Exodus author revolves God's selection around God's love, not around any of the Chosen People's stellar characteristics. Yahweh reminds Moses that it was “. . . I who bore you up on eagle winds and brought you here to myself.” Yahweh's action alone made the Jews “. . . a special possession, dearer to me than all other people.” These former slaves contributed nothing to God's choice”.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, we see how Jesus chose the people of Israel for salvation. When you read this section, it sounds like salvation is only for the Jews. It must be understood that Matthew wrote his Gospel to a community that was predominantly Jewish Christians. This reading is in three parts. In the first section we see how Jesus was moved by the people who were “troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd” and how there were not enough “laborers” for the “harvest”. In other words not enough people to care for them. In the second section Jesus gives the 12 apostles authority over “unclean spirits” and the power to cure disease and illness. Note that this is the first time in Matthew where the term apostle is used. Remember that the word apostle means “one who is sent”. The significance of 12 apostles references the 12 tribes of Israel, something Matthew's Jewish based community would easily understand. Note also that Matthew lists the names of the 12. In the third section Jesus gives the apostles His first instructions before He sends them on their mission. They are to go only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” and are only to proclaim that the “the kingdom

of heaven is at hand” and to “cure the sick, raise the dead, etc.”. They are not yet teachers. That will happen after Jesus death and resurrection. Jesus proclaimed His message not only to the Israelites, but to the whole world. As Matthew states at the end of his Gospel when Jesus tells His apostles – “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations”. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2002 syndicated column in *The Messenger* adds this comment on today’s Gospel reading – “It’s significant this week to notice what mission he gives them. “Do not go into pagan territory,” he commands, “or enter a Samaritan town. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” In other words, they’re not to go to exotic places or people; they’re simply to surface those in their midst who have been marginalized by their own religion. More than anyone else, those hovering on the outskirts of faith must be reminded that “. . . the kingdom of God is close at hand.” And they’re to experience that kingdom especially in the healing and life which Jesus offers them through his disciples’ ministry. Organized religion rarely carries out the mission Jesus gave to his twelve. Perhaps one reason for this oversight is found in our passage’s last line. “Without cost you have received,” Jesus reminds his followers, “without cost you are to give.””

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these cultural comments on today’s Gospel reading – “Believers traditionally are content to call the group of Twelve whom Jesus selected “apostles.” The social sciences distinguish groups with greater precision and offer additional insight into the nature of Jesus’ group. Technically speaking, the Twelve whom Jesus gathered around himself form a special kind of *coalition* called a *faction*. A coalition is a group that gathers for a specific purpose over a limited time with no intention of being permanent. The key characteristic of a coalition is its many-sided network of relations directed toward the achievement of limited goals. In general, coalitions are informal, loosely knit, and elective groups. Joining a coalition does not mean one has to quit other more basic groups such as one’s family. The fishing conglomerate that included the families of Jonah (with his sons Simon and Andrew) and Zebedee (with his sons John and James) along with their hired hands could be an example of a coalition. A faction is a special type of coalition characterized by the charisma of a central person who gathers followers and maintains firm loyalty in his core group. Jesus initiates his faction with the call of Simon, Andrew, James, and John (Matt 4:18-22). In today’s story, he rounds out the core group by selecting and naming Twelve.

#### JESUS’ FACTION AND ITS MISSION

Matthew’s Jesus clearly specifies the limited goals of his faction: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 5). Moreover, the Twelve proclaim the same message Jesus did at the outset of his career, a proclamation taken over from John the Baptist: “The kingdom of heaven has come near” (v. 7; 4:17; 3:2). At the same time, Jesus raises the status of his core group of followers by empowering them to heal and cast out demons. Effectively, Jesus promotes his core group to a position like his. He makes them brokers of God’s power over spirits and disease. God alone has power to heal and exorcise. Human beings who share in this power must recognize it is God’s and not their own possession. This is the context for understanding the concluding verse of today’s reading: “You received

without payment; give without payment.” Actually, in the Middle Eastern world there never was and still is no free gift. Every gift has strings attached. It expects repayment. In the verses that immediately follow this reading, Jesus advises his apostles to take no gold, silver, copper, etc. They were to rely on hospitality, that is, kindness extended to strangers. If they receive this hospitality, they will evangelize; if not, they will move on. The charge to the disciples that they “give without payment” is a prohibition to expect or demand anything over and above normal Mediterranean hospitality. When at home, disciples could rely on their families to take care of them. When on the road, they are to rely on hospitality. Making a living in this world is not the gathering of gold or silver, but initiating, cultivating, and maintaining a network of friends. One final cultural note. Travel in the ancient Middle East was relatively rare. One stayed put. Moreover, travel was possible only in the dry season. Not only were roads manageable, but people were out and about waiting for crops to mature, watching the vineyards, tending flocks, etc. Jesus sends his “fishers of human beings” out when the fishing is best! Contemporary believers fascinated by small groups among our group-oriented ancestors must remember that individualistic Americans join groups chiefly for personal reasons, for a very limited period of time, with low level of allegiance. From a social scientific perspective, the small group does not appear to be a good way to rejuvenate church life in America”.

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