
Mayhem and Marvels: On The Experiment of Following Jesus

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Third Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 6, Year A**

I was not a particular delight to teach in high school chemistry. It wasn't that my grades weren't good—they were, actually. My parents had agreed to pay me to memorize the entire periodic table during the first two weeks of September, and, considering that I was saving up for the latest Sony Walkman, several pairs of high waisted acid washed jeans, and a perm (I know, don't ask)—considering that I was saving up for all of this, I attacked that periodic table with the same fervor German tourists here for the World Cup are apparently going after the chopped brisket sandwiches at Buc-ee's. The problem for me in high school chemistry was not my grades or that I talked too much in class (though, of course, I did). No, the problem was that I could not be counted on to follow directions during labs. I could not be counted on to obey the rules and do as I was told. I wasn't the only one. My lab partner—who is now the executive director of a major symphony orchestra but who, as a teenager, once came over to my house to see how much she could feed my pet gold fish before it exploded—my lab partner and I approached chemistry labs basically the way we approached baking cookies—if a little of something was good, then more could only be better. The entire class was a bit like that. Thrilled to be unleashed in this room full of yellow caution signs and open flames and bottles marked with the skull and cross bones, we were like kids in a candy store, only with sulfuric acid and calcium carbonate instead of gummy bears and Hershey bars. Our teacher would get so mad at us sometimes—he would get so mad, he would just lose it. After having to use the emergency eye wash one too many times, he would wave his arms dramatically and scream, *What the heck were you thinking? You could have blown up the whole school! I don't know why I let you try any of this; I should just be doing this for you, I should be doing it all myself.*

I sometimes wonder if this was the way Jesus felt about his disciples— if, when it came right down to it, he thought maybe he should just be doing it all himself. If the Good News he came to proclaim wouldn't have been better proclaimed were it not entrusted to people who would rather have a root canal than speak in public; if his healing ministries might be more effective if they weren't turned over to those who faint at the sight of blood; if his followers were a little less impulsive, better organized, more obedient. If they were people who paid better attention to the instructions.

This morning's gospel reading contains part of what's known as Jesus' "Missionary Discourse." Basically, this is the section of Matthew's gospel where Jesus shares the simultaneously good and bad news that he is not going to function in this world as some mega rock star with just a few folks serving as his halfhearted backup singers. Despite the bang up job he's been doing on his own—preaching the good news, healing the sick, and casting out demons—despite the bang up job he's been doing on his own, Jesus is now commissioning some pretty clay-footed, bumbling, stumbling people to help. People like Peter, who can't stop himself from saying every last freaking thing that pops into his head. People like Jesus' own mother, who is sometimes a bit of a nag, especially at weddings when the wine is running low. People like Judas, who turns out to be a total sellout. People like James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Cananaean—I mean, we don't really know very much about these guys, but I'd be willing to bet that one was always late catching the boat back across the Sea of Galilee and the other chewed too loudly during the Last Supper. People like us, who sometimes—oftentimes—muck things up at the very moment we're trying hardest to get it right. When we've asked ourselves the question "What would Jesus do?" and come up with an answer we feel pretty good about. But then we blow it. We call a grieving friend and, after spending five minutes listening to him, use the rest of the hour to talk about how we can't decide what brand of water heater to install in our home. We give a \$5 bill to someone panhandling outside Publix, but clearly this was wrong, because the woman yells at us and throws our money on the

ground. We manage to spend the better part of a day respecting the dignity of our co-workers, our next door neighbors, our distant cousins in Sheboygan, Wisconsin with whom we FaceTime once a year—we do all this, only to go home and snap at our nearest and dearest the whole evening.

Why has he picked us? Why has Jesus picked us? Who knows? But he has and he does. He has picked us and he continues to pick us even though we show an incredible proclivity for missing the easy shots, for causing all sorts of explosions, for failing to follow through on the simplest of instructions. For going way too heavy on the judgment and skimping on the mercy and compassion. For thinking the Kingdom's going to be ushered in by profit margins or military might instead of by the satisfied burp of a refugee child who's just eaten his first decent meal in days.

And still he picks us—still Jesus picks us—to cure the sick, to raise the dead, to cast out demons, whatever form that may take. And not only that, he equips us to do these things. Did you catch that part of today's gospel? Jesus' first disciples were not chosen because they were the fastest out of the starting gate, because they had the most polished resumes or the highest SAT scores. It's not so much about them and their abilities or about us and ours; it's about God. It's about God. So we can all take a nice deep breath and relax our shoulders. Jesus has given us authority—not the authority of aptitude and of always coming in first and of saying and doing the right thing, but the authority of love and of that crazy kind of hope that never gives up. Which means that sometimes, when we're least expecting it, we get it right. God breathes on us and we take in a giant gulp of that sweet, sweet Spirit, and something good happens, something loving happens, something healing happens. Not because of us but in spite of us. You know, recently here at the cathedral, we've begun an experiment called Lunch Together. Every Friday from 12-2 p.m., parishioners, neighbors who arrive from Parish Grove and Andrews Drive, neighbors who arrive from across the city, walking, biking, taking MARTA—every Friday people come to the cathedral because they have heard we are serving up free food in the parking lot along with a side of good conversation and maybe a game of chess or UNO. Friends old and new come to the picnic tables underneath those gorgeous old oak trees so that together we can satisfy our physical, emotional, and spiritual hunger. Like I said, this is an experiment, so our efforts have produced mixed results. Last week, for example, we ran out of diced tomatoes after serving only a couple dozen people, but this week we had a vat of honey mustard dressing so big a small child could have gone swimming in it. We are constantly battling the weather—one Friday, it's the threat of thunderstorms, the next, oppressive heat. Stuff happens: Someone has a hard time finding us and is full of frustration when they sit down to eat. Someone gets a phone call bearing bad news from a loved one right in the middle of the meal. Someone needs to use the facilities in a hurry, but those facilities are located all the way across the parking lot. Stuff like this happens, and we fret and maybe even panic a wee bit. But there is magical stuff that goes on, too. There is magical stuff, like when the shy man who barely looks up when you speak to him suddenly shares his own poetry that's never before left the confines of his head. Or like the woman who introduces herself by asking over and over if it's really okay for her to be here and then only 30 minutes later she's laughing with someone she's just met as if they've been friends since high school chemistry class. Or like the older guy who brings a few bottles of hard lemonade with him and offers one to me. No thanks, I tell him, I've got a wedding I need to be vertical for this afternoon. Maybe next time, though.

And so we press on—all of us, everywhere, in our own way, whatever our calling, however Jesus has commissioned us. We move forward by fits and starts, sometimes stumbling, occasionally falling flat, and, every now and then, managing a move so graceful it can only have come from God. No one can say for sure what's going to happen next. Following Jesus is one heck of a messy and magnificent adventure, and I am grateful to be on it with you. Amen.