

**SIMON THE ZEALOT**  
**Mark 3:13-19**

**Lessons By The Lake Summer Series**  
**Trinity Sunday—June 3, 2012**  
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These past few years we have heard much news about people who are being what is called “radicalized” by religious political groups like the Taliban/El Shabob. The fear among U.S. Homeland Security officials is that there are people right here in our own country who are possibly being radicalized to the point of extremism.

The possibility of one of these people doing a terrorist act right here in this country has greatly increased. We need to all pray that this will never happen like it did on 9/11.

Now this phenomenon of people becoming radicalized behind a religious philosophy, even to the point of being willing to fight and die for a cause, was also true in Bible times. In fact, there was a Jewish radical and resistance group then who were known as “The Zealots.”

These Zealots, who had roots as far back in the Old Testament to King David’s time, are mostly known for their opposition that began in 63 BC when the Romans took over control of their Jewish home in Palestine. This fanatical group hated the Romans.

In fact, many of the Zealots became urban terrorists known as “the assassins.” They were to have carried knives under their cloaks and would take pleasure in sneaking up behind a Roman soldier and plunging their knife in his back.

This violent opposition to Roman rule eventually led to a major revolt in AD 66 and to the battle which resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. In this defeat the last of the Zealots fled to Masada near the Dead Sea where their standoff against the Romans is well known in history.

So the Zealots were an important Jewish political party and movement. The other two political factions, of course, were the Pharisees who had a great concern for the meticulous faithfulness to the religious law. They were the ones who sought purity by separating from things unclean.

The other political party was the Sadducees who were really opponents of the Pharisees. They rejected any belief in the resurrection from the dead and were mostly focused on upholding the rituals in the temple in order to safeguard the covenant with God.

An interesting side note about the Zealot political party is that many scholars believe that Barabbas, the prisoner Pilate asked the crowd who he should set free at Jesus’ trial, was a Zealot. It says that he was in prison for murder and insurrection.

It is also interesting to note that some have wondered if Peter wasn’t sympathetic to the Zealot cause when he cut off the Roman soldier’s ear with his sword, or if Judas’ betrayal of Jesus wasn’t done with this hope of Jesus being arrested starting a major battle with the Romans and with Jesus demonstrating his power by defeating this evil nation.

Not knowing for sure any of these speculations what we do know for sure is that Jesus chose Simon, a Zealot, to be one of his disciples. In fact, whenever he is listed in the Gospel writings it is with the designation—Simon the Zealot.

Now this may seem like not a very big thing—Jesus we surmise simply chose a variety of people as his disciples. And yet something we know is that Simon by his radical background would have hated and would even want to kill a tax collector like Matthew.

Zealots were ones who thought that people like Matthew were the scum of the earth. And being one who was angry, ready to fight, and totally obsessed with the evil Romans Simon must not have been a very easy person to live with. He was most likely a thorn in people's sides.

And yet for that reason it is important to ponder the purpose Jesus had for him as one of his disciples. Was Jesus trying to demonstrate by these twelve men that people of different backgrounds, and factions, can get along together and can even work together if they are focused completely on Christ's mission?

Did Jesus choose Simon mostly because of the zeal and passion he had for making changes and getting things done? Or did Jesus choose Simon because he needed someone on his team who challenged the status quo, who challenged the other disciples if they were complacent, who was able to rally people to action?

Perhaps you have found, my friends, in your life and work that having someone a little radical, a person who challenges ideas and thinks outside the box, can be a good thing. A questioning and action kind of person can force us to grow, or make a staff team better, or even make our products or service to others better.

The problem, however, is that this kind of radical thinking has not often been welcome among Christians and in the Christian church. The humorous phrase asks, "How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb?...and the response is, "Change?????"

For some reason Christians throughout the years have often chosen to make the church an institution; to focus on its traditions and structures; to get locked into its bureaucracy and hierarchical leaders and systems. The result, of course, is that any radical change, or vision, or new life is nearly impossible to happen.

This is especially problematic, I believe, in our Lutheran church since our founder, Martin Luther, was a zealous radical who was not willing to allow the church to be status quo. Luther was not one who worshipped rituals and traditions, or who allowed church leaders to push their authority and positions in matters of faith.

Rather, Martin Luther questioned and stood up to the powers that be. He used the Bible and words of Jesus to challenge church traditions and teachings. Luther stressed a living and life – giving faith centered in God's grace rather than simply going through religious motions.

And as a result of Martin Luther's zealous and radical challenge to the church others were also empowered to stand up, to also read and study the truths found in the Bible, and to bring about the Reformation which dramatically changed church structures, and practices, and which set the church free to grow Christ's mission throughout the world.

Martin Luther, of course, this radical and Biblical zealot was excommunicated and labeled a heretic by the church. He was labeled an outlaw who could at that time be legally killed in order to, as the church explained, protect against Luther's false and inflammatory teaching.

And yet today we thank God that this little known monk, priest and Bible professor had the courage to stand up for Christ and for Bible truth. We thank God that he was willing to be a radical who pointed people to a life-giving faith in Jesus rather than a stuffy religiosity based on doing good works and following meaningless rituals.

So what is too bad today is how our Lutheran Church, founded by such a radical, has so often settled into some of the very things Luther rebelled against. We are to be a church centered in God's Word, free from hierarchical and bureaucratic constraints, who is zealous and passionate about reaching people and the world for Jesus Christ.

Jesus chose a radical Zealot like Simon to be one of his disciples because he knew that his mission was not for the timid or faint of heart. To follow Christ often meant rejection, being run out of town, being verbally mocked and despised, and also led to torture and death.

Jesus said in Matthew 10:34, *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."* Jesus goes on to say that to follow him will cause divisions in families, in friendships, in one's secure and stable life.

The whole basis of being a Christian, of being Christ's disciple, is to be a radical. Jesus calls you and me to go into all the world, to make disciples of every nation, to stand firm in the Bible and in the truth of Jesus and to change the world. It is a movement that is alive and powerful.

This, of course, is also the message and truth of Pentecost and of Trinity Sunday. For as God poured out his Holy Spirit on all believers and on his church he did this so that Christ's power, and joy, may live in and be reflected in our mission for him.

Through the Holy Spirit God has empowered us to be his witnesses, to proclaim God's message and truth with boldness and to shine Christ's light in the darkness of this world. Through the Holy Spirit our lives and church are to be continually renewed, enlightened and filled with vision for the future.

This means that rather than worshipping the past or letting our structures dictate our future we need to be focusing on where Christ and the Holy Spirit are wanting to lead us today and in the years to come. What changes and new ideas are needed if we are to reach this present, and future generations, for Jesus Christ?

What sacred cows need to be challenged and changed today for us to do Christ's mission more effectively? What structures and traditions stand in our way of being open to Christ's call and to the power of the Holy Spirit? What kind of zealous and passionate followers is Christ calling us to be today?

Jesus chose Simon the Zealot to be one of the twelve disciples—a move that must have brought a lot of questioning, and challenge, and passion to this group. May we remember, my friends, that fulfilling, and growing Christ's mission, is our purpose as a church and as Christ's followers.