Today we start a new sermon series called “Six Disciples.” This is the short name for what I originally wanted to call the series, which was: “Six Disciples you may never have heard of, but probably ought to know something about.”
Yeah, I like Six Disciples better too.
The purpose of this series of messages is for us to learn from the lives of people who were among the first followers of Jesus Christ but aren’t so well known.
We know a bit about the 12 original disciples of Jesus through the Gospels: Andrew, Peter, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alpheus, Simon the Zealot, Thaddeus, and Judas Iscariot.
We know some things about the Apostle Paul, missionary to the non-Jewish believers (Gentiles), and author of 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament.
We know about them because they are the central characters in the story of how the Good News about Jesus spread in the First Century AD.
Their lives are worth studying.
They have a lot to teach us about things like faith, hope, perseverance, obedience, making mistakes, and most important of all—God’s grace.
But there are other people who also are worthy of examination in the Bible, and for the same reason: they have something to teach us about God, and about the human response to God’s divine love for us in Jesus.
So that’s the overall purpose of the series: To learn what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ from the lives of these lesser-known disciples.
To see how God worked through their lives, and what that means for us today.

This morning, we begin with a disciple by the name of Ananias.
We meet him in the Book of Acts, which is also the subject of our Summer Bible Reading Challenge. If you’ve been reading Acts with us, then you may know there are two men by the name of Ananias in this book:

- There is an Ananias living in Jerusalem. His story is told in chapter 5. This Ananias, along with his wife Sapphira, tried to shortchange God. They sold some property, donated the proceeds to the church, but they held back some money from the sale after claiming they’d given everything. In the story, both fell dead before the apostles’ feet.

- The other Ananias, the one we are talking about today, was a disciple of Jesus Christ living in Damascus, the capital of the Roman province of Syria.

So as we turn to today’s scripture, Jesus appeared to Ananias in a vision.

He calls him, “Ananias.”

Ananias answers, “Here I am.”

Jesus speaks to Ananias:

- Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street.
- Find the man named Saul.
- Lay your hands on him and restore his sight.

Now these seem like pretty straightforward directions, and they were.
But Ananias had an objection. He knew Saul as an over righteous Pharisee who was persecuting the followers of Jesus.

So we can imagine his surprise when Jesus tells him to go to the aid and comfort of the very man who was an enemy.

Deep down in his heart he probably had a question or two that might have started with:

- “Say what?”
So Ananias protested and said: “Lord, I have heard about this man who persecutes your people.”

Ananias knew enough about Saul:

- He had heard the stories—stories about friends, brothers and sisters in the Lord, who had been hurt by Paul and his gang of ruffians.
- He knew enough to know that “this man” was an enemy of God’s people.
- He knew that of all the people in the world, “this man” was the last man on earth he would want to have anything to do with.

Jesus, I’m sure, understood Ananias’ reservations.

Why, indeed, “this man?”

But Jesus knows what Ananias doesn’t.

Jesus has a mission for Saul the persecutor.

He tells Ananias to “go.”

Go to Saul because he has chosen Saul to share the Good News with the Gentiles.

So Ananias went to see Saul.

- Maybe he went reluctantly, with doubts and questions about “this man” still on his mind.
- Maybe he was uncertain about the wisdom of aiding “this man,” who was an enemy of Christ.
- Maybe he had all those things going on in his head.

But he went.

VIDEO CLIP [This video clip is taken from the TV series A.D. This depiction has a few dramatic elements added from what we read in Acts. In this scene, we see how some of the doubts Ananias had are expressed. WARNING: there are some very brief images of people being beaten in this clip.]
For Ananias, the problem was overcoming doubt and trusting God. God had to show Ananias that God was working on both sides of the problem: had already appeared to Saul, and the experience left him blind.

Theological theme: Saul was blind to the love of God in Christ. He did not see Jesus as the Messiah, the love of God poured out for humanity.

Now God shows Ananias God has already worked on the other side of the problem. God needed someone to minister to Saul, to open his eyes to the truth. God invited Ananias to take part in what God was already doing in the life of Saul.¹

- Paul’s eyes were open, but even more than that. The first words Ananias speaks to him in the scripture are, “Brother Saul.” All of sudden, Saul has gone from “this man” who persecutes followers of Jesus, to “Brother.”
- Now he has a place in the community of believers. God no only restored his sight, he gave him place in the community, in the Kingdom of God.²
- Saul receives the Holy Spirit and is baptized by Ananias.

What do we say about this story of Ananias?

Here’s the main point: Ananias was obedient to God even though he had doubts about helping Saul.

God called Ananias; he was God’s chosen instrument to return Saul’s sight and to bring him into the community of believers.

This shows us how God works in the world. When God wants something to get done, God doesn’t just “magic” something into existence. God uses people to accomplish God’s purposes.

For that to happen, God needs us to trust God and to be obedient in following God’s will.

- Antonio Stradivari was an Italian craftsman who lived in the late 1600s and early 1700s.\(^3\) His specialty was making stringed instruments such as violins, cellos, guitars, violas and harps. Stradivari paid such close attention to the quality of his work that his instruments came to be known as the best. To own a Stradivarius was like owning a Rolls Royce car or a Rolex watch. The name Stradivarius is synonymous with excellence. For Stradivari, making the best instruments was his calling. But what if he didn’t put his best effort into his work? What if he didn’t make violins? I suppose someone else would be known for making high quality violins, but they wouldn’t be Stradivari.

There’s a poem by the English poet George Elliot that’s help us think about this relationship between God’s will and our obedience. It’s called “God Needs Antonio”:

“…when any master holds
‘twixt chin and hand a violin of mine,
he will be glad that Stradivari lived,
made violins and made them of the best….
I give them instruments to play upon,
God choosing me to help him…
…if my hand slacked
I should rob God—since he is the fullest good….
I say, not God himself can make man’s best
without best men to help him.
God gives skill, but not without men’s hands: he could not make
Antonio Stradivari’s violins
without Antonio.”\(^4\)

God needs people to do God’s work on earth.

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Ananias did his part even though he couldn’t see the big picture of what God was up to.

His role in the Bible was short. Like a minor player in a stage production, he comes on, says his few lines, then departs and is never heard from again.\(^5\) God had a calling for him to fulfill.

It wasn’t big or apostolic.

But it was powerful.

It helped change the world

Lesson for us: we can’t see the big picture, God can.

God has a calling for all of us, and it’s different for everyone.

We may have doubts and uncertainties about it, but we need to learn to trust God and to obey His calling when it comes.

Maybe you’ve already had a moment like this in your life. Or maybe your moment is yet to come.

So what’s your calling?

What’s your “violin?”

What is it that if your “hand slacked, you should robe God” of your fullest good?”

God needs you. God needs all of us.

Because what we do, no matter how minor it seems, matters to God and to God’s Kingdom.

Amen.

\(^5\) Willimon.