

Mission, Vision, Values

Matthew 28:16-20

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Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (NRSVue)

A congregant said to a colleague of mine once that she clearly needed to have some extra training as a pastor because the congregation wasn't growing. My colleague asked what the congregant was doing to grow in their own faith and the person looked at her with scorn; the purpose of a pastor is to grow a church, they said, and to make sure there were people to step up to take over leadership roles when that person and their friends decided to step down. In the mind of the congregant, the mission of the church was self-replication.

"Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee," Matthew writes, and it matters in all Scripture readings that we put them in context, but it matters tremendously here. Although we celebrated Pentecost and the gifting of the Holy Spirit last week, we're going back in time a bit. Five verses before today's reading, the newly-risen Jesus told Mary Magdalene and the other women as they ran back from the empty tomb to send everyone on to Galilee to meet Him there. "Do not be afraid," Jesus said, because Jesus was always saying that and God is always saying that and I can't be the only one who wishes God would stop saying "don't" and start saying "no I totally get it, fear makes sense here." "Do not be afraid...there [in Galilee] they will see me."¹

At least a couple of days have passed since that promise and now the eleven disciples have gone to Galilee—eleven. Professor Stanley Saunders writes, "Matthew introduces elements into the story that challenge the apparently triumphal character of this scene. There are not twelve disciples with Jesus, but eleven, a reminder not only of the absence of Judas but, implicitly, of the betrayals in which the eleven also participated. Matthew also notes that their initial response to the presence of the risen Jesus is a mixture of worship and doubt."²

This text, especially verse 19 in which Jesus tells the disciples to go, is commonly known as the Great Commission. It's a passage often used to say that the mission of the Church is to go out and convert the world to Christianity, often understood to include whatever means necessary. Clearly, some say, it is of paramount importance that Jesus takes this post-resurrection moment to make sure the disciples know what they are meant to do: go out and make other disciples, just like them. If that's true, the mission of the Church is self-replication, just like that one congregant said.

Our sermon series here at Ann Arbor First spent the whole of the Easter season talking about that dreaded "e" word, evangelism, acclimating us to the reality that it doesn't always have to be chucking Bibles at people and telling them how sinful they are. We were reminded that we

¹ Mt. 28:10, NRSVue.

² [Commentary on Matthew 28:16-20 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2020

are called to tell the story of our faith as though we're not ashamed to hold it, as though we're committed to learning how deep it runs for ourselves, as though we want to understand how praying the Lord's Prayer and advocating in the House of Representatives are connected and true. I'm aware that coming in after all that conversation with this of all texts may have some of you running for the nonexistent Midwestern hills yelling, "I knew it! I knew it was a trap!"

It's not a trap. It is an invitation to think about why we tell that story. As we shift into the months-long season of Ordinary Time in which we take time away from the major holy days to learn about and observe the church being itself in the world, I wanted to take the time to look at this commissioning text as mission, as vision, and as values. When I was working through my MBA, these three things were in nearly every class I took because no organization will get anywhere if they aren't clear on what their mission, vision, and values are. There must be a direction; there have to be boundaries where the organization will not go; there must be a purpose, clearly communicated, so that everyone knows why and how they are part of that organization and its mission.

Church, please tell me you know our mission can't be self-replication.

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you". In The United Methodist Church, we've distilled this into a mission of "making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." But what does Jesus mean? Am I really about to send all of you out to State Street and tell you to baptize whoever stands still long enough and make them recite the Golden Rule?

(Don't worry, I'm not.)

Just as we need to put today's reading into context, we need to put this command into context. Before saying "go," Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." It is the first thing Jesus has said since "they will meet me there." It is the first thing we read after learning that the disciples are worshipping *and* doubting, that there are eleven where there should have been twelve, that the whole concept of Church is falling apart before it even gets off the ground. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" says this Man Who defeated death, Who barreled through the might of Rome and lived to talk about it, Who waited in Galilee because He promised He would. *All* authority, which means that whatever comes out of Jesus' mouth next will not be swayed by the disciples' doubt or their fickleness or their grief or their assumptions about profit or butts in seats. *All* authority, which means that "go" comes with power, with a pointed awareness that nothing on earth can touch the will of Heaven.

Professor Susan Hynen writes, "The passage is...a strong statement of the authority of the risen Jesus. The word 'therefore' in 'Go therefore and make disciples' suggests that the action of making disciples results from the previous verse...Jesus' instructions result from the authority he possesses." When Jesus says to go and baptize, He does so knowing that the disciples are grounded in His own connection to God's promise of family, of love, of belonging, and that no power can override that. Hynen continues, "Although baptism has not been mentioned since Matthew 3, in that context John the Baptist connected Jesus' authority to judge with baptism. John pointed to one 'more powerful than I' who 'will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat

into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire' (3:11-12)."³ Jesus does not say "go and baptize and teach and we'll talk about how that works later;" He says "go, for My authority goes with you."

When Jesus calls to His disciples and tells them to go and make more disciples, He isn't interested in self-replication because He does not need more people to make sure He is powerful enough. Let me repeat that: Jesus, Who has all authority in heaven and on earth, does not need us to make sure that the Church is powerful or profitable or that enough disciples are being made to cover the mortgage payment or the vacant trustee spot. These things proceed from the mission to go; they are not, cannot be the mission itself or we lose the incredible gift of Christ's authority. Jesus is not interested in copies but in changemakers, in doubting fools who come to Galilee even when they don't understand because Jesus knows that no amount of uncertainty will undermine His work of moving heaven and earth into the alignment intended for them. *Go*, He says, go, therefore, and make disciples and baptize them and teach them what I have taught you: to remember every person's humanity, to stand with the marginalized, to refuse judgment that comes out of power and shaming, to forgive even the ones who leave us alone in the hour of death, to eat with the ones planning to kill us, to refuse silence in the face of oppression, to set boundaries in care of ourselves, to choose kindness, to honor God, to love, to love, to love.

These are our values, Church! These are what undergird the mission to go out into the world, not to forcibly bend it to our doctrine but to fling wide the doors to this magnificently weird experiment called faith. It is not and never was ours to build the Church, to remake heaven as earth, because Jesus had the authority to bring earth to heaven and did not give us the mission of self-replication or of power. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," which means we don't need to fight for it, or fear for it, or force anyone into it. We as Christians have *centuries* of harm in doing exactly that because we have missed, over and over, what comes *after* the Great Commission: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Today is Trinity Sunday in the liturgical calendar of the Church, which is always a bit of a mess of a day. The Episcopalian Rev. Dr. Marshall Jolly writes, "Trinity Sunday is the only day of the entire church year that is devoted exclusively to a doctrine—which is never mentioned by name in Scripture. Preachers must use caution and craft careful language to avoid the minefields of heresy."⁴ The Trinity is the Christian doctrine that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—or, if you like, God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, or any number of other names anchored in beginning, human, and advocate—are one and the same God. We are not polytheists with three separate gods but Christ-followers who understand Christ to be a person of three face. It's a weird doctrine because it makes no metaphysical or mathematical sense, but *that's the point*. Martin Luther is variously quoted as saying, "To try to deny the Trinity endangers your salvation; to try to comprehend the Trinity endangers your sanity."

We take one day a year to honor this doctrine not because Jesus sat His disciples down to explain multiphasic theology but because Jesus said, "I will be with you." Rev. Dr. Jolly writes, "When we think about the Trinity abstractly, it is ever so easy to forget that the central tenet of our faith is not just that we are created by God, but that God walks among us, most fully in the person of Jesus, and also in the face of the stranger and the oppressed and the marginalized, and

³ [Commentary on Matthew 28:16-20 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2017

⁴ [Understanding the Trinity, Trinity Sunday \(B\) – May 26, 2024 – The Episcopal Church](#)

God leads us to new depths of faithfulness in the power of the Holy Spirit...The Trinity gives us perhaps the most complete understanding of what God is like: God creates us purely out of God's love and desire for relationship; relentlessly pursues us, even stepping in to offer to die so that we might live; and abides with us."⁵

Eleven disciples stood together in Galilee and worshipped and doubted and were not twelve; eleven disciples heard that Jesus had been given all the authority; eleven disciples were told to go, baptize, and teach; eleven disciples were promised that they would never be alone in the journey of telling the story of a God so in love with creation that Jesus lived and died and lived again, that the Spirit came with tongues of fire to make a statement in no uncertain terms and every single language that God was there, is here, will be ever-present and always alive.

This is our mission, Church: not to break the world around our understanding of God but to allow ourselves to be remade into God's understanding of us. It is our mission to go out and be the ones who have heard that love is not a religion but a difficult and beautiful choice, a core value, a guiding vision of a world in which all are welcome, all are valued, all are seen and heard and recognized as holy creations of a bafflingly three-in-one and one-in-three God. It is our mission to go into the world, into all of our highways and byways, and say to others that I met a Man in Galilee, in Jerusalem, in Ann Arbor, and He changed my life. It is our mission to remember that God is with us to the end of the age, even when we doubt, even when we are brokenhearted by what the world has become and by how much of that damage is what we Christians have done and how we are constantly being invited to make a different world as it is in heaven. This is our mission: to go, therefore, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Will you take up the mission, child of God?

⁵ Ibid.