

“Revisiting Our Calling”
Matthew 28:16–20
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Today’s reading from Matthew 28 is familiar to most of us. It lies at the very heart of the Baptist understanding of our purpose in the church, the Great Commission, as we know it. This title is not in any Greek text, and there are other commissions attributed to Jesus in the New Testament – one in Luke, one in Acts, and at least one in John, perhaps two. All these commissions carry weight for the Christian community, but Matthew 28 is still central to our calling, and thus it is worth revisiting. The message still applies to us today, though it may need a little clarification and refocusing, not to change Jesus’ message but to understand it in its original context and for our time.

Regarding context, it is important to note that Jesus is addressing a small number of frightened and isolated disciples. When he says all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, he is not talking to a massive crowd ready to celebrate his inauguration as Messiah with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing in the background. There may be two and half billion Christians in the world today, but this is not how things begin. We need to have a different picture in mind here.

There are eleven disciples on a mountain, one down from the original number, since Judas is gone and his replacement has not been chosen. The text says they worship Jesus but some doubt. They are all afraid. They have cast their lots with a man who has been put to death, though he is alive again, but they don’t know what will come next. And as homiletics professor Tom Long says, they are called to a radically different life — caring for widows and orphans, suffering persecution, and spilling their own blood in a culture hostile to their faith. (*Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, p. 45). They need a pep talk!

What Jesus gives them is a purpose, as well as a promise of companionship. The purpose we will get to, but the companionship is

provided by Jesus himself. “I am with you always,” he says, “to the end of the age.” Somehow in Spirit, perhaps with the full weight of the Trinity, which is referenced in this passage, the God who was in Christ will be with those who seek to heed Jesus’ calling.

There is no refined understanding of Trinity at this point, just a reference to Father, Son, and Spirit. As Long notes, Christian doctrines are not developed for fun in ivory-covered buildings by theologians weaving doctrines out of wisps, shadows, and thin air. They originate like river bridges built by armies. They are assembled on the fly in times of need and crafted in the field to bear the weight of people marching on a mission.

The notion of the Trinity is like this. It begins with people’s experience with God as Parent, Son, and Spirit, and then it is shaped into a kind of bridge that will enable Jesus’ disciples to take the risks they will have to take to carry out his mission. They will be working under his authority, which may not seem like much, there are no armies to protect them. But his authority lies in self-giving, not domination. Surely, they understand this by now. If they are serving others, they are under his reign, and he will be with them as they do. His presence will be enough to sustain them in the very real challenges that lie ahead.

At first glance, we may feel like our context bears no resemblance to that of the first disciples. We do not live in fear because of our faith. While the First Amendment strictly forbids any establishment of religion, our culture has been friendly to Christian faith, not hostile. Even recent shifts to the margin – at least partly self-inflicted damage — do not equal hostility. Loss of privilege is not persecution. Furthermore, there are two and a half billion Christians in the world, and we still constitute the majority in this nation, at least by self-designation.

And yet, we live in an increasingly secular time when the church’s place is more in question, and many who call themselves “Christian” either don’t darken the doors of the church or don’t live in a manner consistent with Jesus’ teachings. Over a decade ago, I got to know Gethin Abraham-Williams, a Welsh pastor John Lewis had a pulpit exchange with during his tenure here. Gethin had written a great deal about the decline of organized religion and the rise of spirituality. When

he lamented the state of the European church in contrast to the American church, I told him, “I don’t know that we are that different. We are on the same trajectory here, we’re just a bit behind you on the journey, and typically arrogant about where we are.” I wish I had been wrong.

Our context is different from that of first-century Palestine, but we still have challenges. Our lives may not be at risk, but we are swimming upstream. So, we rely on the promise of Christ’s presence as we continue to work under his authority of service and self-giving love.

Garret Keizer, a minister in Vermont, tells a story about an Easter vigil which illustrates our situation. Only two people show up to join him. The candle sputters in half darkness, like a voice too embarrassed or overwhelmed to proclaim the news, “Christ is risen.” He continues:

But it catches fire, and there we are, three people and a flickering light in an old church on a Saturday evening in the spring with the noise of the cars and their winter-rusted mufflers outside. The moment is filled with ambiguities of all such quiet observances among few people, in the midst of an oblivious population in a radically secular age. The act is so ambiguous because its terms are so extreme: Either the Lord is with us or we are pathetic fools (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, p. 49*).

Tom Long adds this comment. “So it is always with the church. We take a fragmentary community, a fragmentary faith, a fragmentary understanding of the Trinitarian God, and we go into the world with everything Jesus has taught us. Either the Lord is with us and all authority has been given to Christ, or we are indeed pathetic fools.”

So, Jesus gives us the promise of companionship to sustain us in our calling, but what exactly is our calling? What is the purpose of the church, at least according to this commission? Quite often grammar gives us a clue. There is only one action verb in the Great Commission. You know what it is, of course... It’s one of those biblical questions we realize we are supposed to know, but if put on the spot, we may panic. I won’t ask for a show of hands or a shout-out reply, but the only action

verb, the grammatical center of the text and the heart of our calling, is *to make disciples*. Those raised on the KJV are given a pass, because it begins with “Go ye,” but going, baptizing, and teaching are participles in the Greek. Disciple, or make disciples, is the primary action in the text.

Jesus calls us to make disciples of all nations, that is, all people. For Jesus’ first followers, this means Gentiles are included. For us, whomever we might leave out rises to the top of the list. And we are to make *disciples* of them, followers of Jesus in his way of love and compassion, sacrificial service and self-giving love. He does not call us to get other people to believe exactly what we believe, though beliefs matter. Nor does he call us to make good church members, though we need members for the church to fulfill its purpose. The calling is to shape Jesus-like lives which can transform the world.

Two thousand years later, there still aren’t enough of them. There are a lot of people who talk about Jesus, but not enough who live like him. It’s why Mahatma Gandhi, who deeply revered Christ and his teachings, especially the Sermon on the Mount, said, “I would be a Christian if it were not for the Christians.” We know what he meant.

From public leaders who claim to be zealous believers while displaying the opposite of Jesus’ teachings about helping the poor, welcoming the stranger, and practicing forgiveness to people we know who put bumper stickers on their cars and signs in their yards while cheating on their taxes and their spouses, acting in racist and xenophobic ways, embracing one lie after another, there are many examples of why the Great Commission has not been fulfilled. It’s not just telling people about Jesus, it’s living by his teachings and inviting others to do so too.

To do this, we have to go to where people are. “Go ye,” is still part of the equation, and one we need to rediscover in an age when the primary mode is to invite people to join us here. I have told some of you about a woman who started a church in a very poor and violent housing project in Richmond, Virginia. Her flock consisted mostly of young people struggling with addictions, gun violence, and HIV. People thought she was crazy to start a church there, but she repeatedly talked about the needs Jesus addressed in the natural rhythms of life, and then she would add, “Jesus said, ‘Go ye,’ not, ‘Y’all come!’” Indeed.

Making disciples in a world where people have come to question institutional religion requires that we go to where people are and not just talk about Jesus but invite them to join us in Jesus-like activities. Many people who won't show up for a Sunday School class will volunteer with the clothing ministry or work with immigrants. I led a men's group in a microbrewery in Winston-Salem. Kentucky Baptists have a chaplain at Churchill Downs. We need to go to where people are.

Baptizing is also still part of the equation, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, according to Jesus. In Acts 2:38 Peter tells the crowd in Jerusalem they should be baptized in the name of Jesus. There was some tension in the early church as to whether baptism was in the name of the Trinity or just Jesus, though by the time of a turn-of-the-first-century teaching called the Didache, the Trinity seemed to be favored, though this same document allowed for flexibility in the ritual.

So, the point was not that baptism had to be performed in one precise way, nor was there presumed to be any magic in the ritual that produced mature disciples on the spot. It was just a key beginning in which people could confess their faith publicly and receive the blessing of God and the community. Both Jesus and the early church knew that how we begin a journey shapes the manner in which we experience it. Maturing disciples of Jesus take seriously their beginning in baptism.

Finally, teaching still matters too. We begin with baptism, but becoming like Jesus is a lifelong process. Jesus tells his disciples to teach people of all nations to obey everything he has commanded them. That takes time. It's like dog training. We begin training a puppy with simple tasks, but whether we are training our furry friend for obedience, rally, agility, therapy, police work, or to be our pet, it doesn't happen all at once. In 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, the Apostle Paul laments the immaturity of the people, saying he wants to feed them solid food, but they are only ready for milk. Teaching is necessary because growth is required.

So, where does this leave us? We have our fears and doubts, like the first disciples, reasons to isolate ourselves and deal with our own concerns, but we also have a calling to go into the world and help shape something better, in Jesus' name, and with his help. May we embrace it!