

“The Great Commission”

Matthew 28:16-20

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In my former church in Indiana, whenever we sent the youth group out for their annual summer mission trip, we would hold a special commissioning service for them during Sunday worship. We did the same when we sent a group of adults to New Orleans to help rebuild homes devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The damage was SO extensive with over 180,000 houses being flooded that twenty-five years from now, they will STILL be working on all the damage that hurricane had wrought. When our group departed for Louisiana, they did so as MORE than just members of the First Presbyterian Church or citizens of northwestern Indiana. ABOVE ALL, they were AMBASSADORS OF CHRIST and by sending them forth under the aegis of our church with our special blessing upon them, it was a way of reminding them that they were representatives of God’s kingdom and how they conducted themselves down there would reflect back on their families, on their church, and ultimately upon JESUS CHRIST, HIMSELF.

Our sending them forth with blessings and prayers had its precedent in our text for this morning- the final five verses of St. Matthew’s Gospel, and we dispatched them with the same love and exhortation to faithfulness that Christ had given to his OWN followers. It appears within the context of one of Jesus’ final appearances to his disciples before he ascends to the Father. Three times in Matthew he foretells that he would be raised from the dead and then go into Galilee where his disciples were to meet him. Galilee was probably chosen, not just because his disciples were all Galileans and familiar with the area but they would undoubtedly be much safer THERE than were they to remain in Judea, the region around Jerusalem. And Jesus would meet them at a mountain because that is a location where God frequently addressed his followers. It was on Mt. Sinai where Moses received from God the commission to liberate his people and the same mountain from which he received God’s Law; it was on Mt. Carmel that God encountered Elijah and demonstrated that he alone was God; it was on a mountaintop that Jesus delivered his famous Sermon on the Mount and on another where he was later transfigured, thereby displaying the glory of God. Now, in one of his final appearances before his departure, he meets with his disciples on a mountain to give them their final orders, to commission them for the work for which they had been called and trained throughout the past three and a half years.

But in Matthew’s description of this meeting, he says something too strange to be believed- he says that when the disciples saw Jesus, they worshiped him; “but some doubted.” Some couldn’t believe their eyes and ears; they weren’t sure that the person speaking to them was who he presented himself as and the things he was saying. Well, you’ve got to wonder how that could have been possible- after all, they had lived and followed this man for more than three years; they had listened to many hours of his teaching and watched him perform miracle after miracle; and he had personally appeared to them at least twice in the Upper Room following his resurrection- they certainly knew who Jesus was, their Master and their Leader. Yet we are told that there were still some who just weren’t sure who this man was they were opening their hearts to. Actually, the word “some” doesn’t occur in the text. The little Greek word *de* is often translated “but,” but it can also mean “and.” Thus, this verse could ALSO be translated, “And when they saw him they worshiped him and they doubted.” Here we see how some OR ALL of

his closest followers obey this man: they come and worship him, they commit themselves to his cause and receive his blessing, all the while doubting who he may have been or what exactly their mission entailed.

Now before we become too critical of those disciples for their lack of perception or understanding or possibly even belief, in ALMOST ALL of Christ's resurrected appearances, NO ONE seemed to recognize him. This point became all-too apparent in my last two sermons. When Jesus approaches Mary Magdalene at the Garden Tomb on the morning of his resurrection, we're told she was so overwhelmed with grief and sorrow that she mistook him for the gardener. Then when he encounters his two despairing disciples on their way home to Emmaus to begin their lives all over again, their hopelessness and disappointment is such that they're completely oblivious to this stranger's identity. But we see it again when Peter--his closest lieutenant--meets Jesus beside the seashore, he is so overcome with guilt for having denied his Lord three times that he cannot recognize who it is that sits beside him, cooking their meal. In each of these instances, Jesus goes unrecognized by those nearest to him for reasons of either intense sorrow or deep despair, of crippling fear or excruciating guilt. It is only when Jesus seeks them out for the purpose of drawing them out of themselves and sending them back into the world where they belong that the blinders fall away and they finally discover who it is that stands in their midst.

So here on this mountaintop, we are told that even after all eleven fell down and worshiped Jesus, some STILL doubted and thus failed to recognize him! Well, to be honest, I'm relieved that Matthew refers here to the doubts of those disciples, even as they worship him in front of them. Any minister who is the least bit honest with HIM OR HERSELF will admit that despite their many years of seminary and church experience, they're still left with so many more QUESTIONS than they are answers. I've been an earnest student of the Bible for over five decades now, and yet I find that with each passing year my knowledge ABOUT God seems to become less and less certain. For instance, if you were to ask me "What is the Trinity?" or "What does it mean that Christ was 100% God and at the same time 100% man?" or "How does the blood of Jesus save us?" I could probably give you some stock answer that can be found in Calvin's *Institutes* or in some standard book on Reformed Theology but do I TRULY understand it or even COMPLETELY BELIEVE it in my heart, I don't know. As Luther himself once said, "Try to deny the Trinity endangers your salvation; to try to COMPREHEND the Trinity endangers your sanity."

Even after all these years, there is still so much about my faith that I don't get. However, what I've learned, not ABOUT God but of GOD HIMSELF IN MY RELATIONSHIP TO HIM is altogether different. You see, MY THEOLOGY ABOUT GOD and MY RELATIONSHIP TO HIM are two entirely different things. The former is all HEAD understanding while the latter is experiential and involving a HEART knowledge. My love for Jesus does not depend on my theology or how well I can comprehend or explain certain tenets of the Christian faith. Conversely, God doesn't love me because I have a correct knowledge of who Jesus Christ is and how he goes about saving us. If anything, I seem to possess just one vital conviction that overrides all others- it is the belief that many years ago, someone or something reached out and took hold of me to claim me for himself so that I am no longer ultimately in charge of my own life or my destiny. What's more, this person or entity to whom I now belong promised to never give up on me or leave my side and for no other reason than that he or it loves me so. In the final analysis, that's really ALL I can say that I DO believe and understand. It is a mysterious and

abiding conviction that I find only GROWS and INTENSIFIES with each passing year while the REST of my theology seems to become LESS AND LESS IMPORTANT to me.

I wonder if this is not an accurate picture of Christ's Church TODAY even as it was of his Church back THEN. Like those disciples who worshiped him despite not fully comprehending who they were glorifying and expected to obey, I think more often than not we all find OURSELVES confused and uncertain of what it is we affirm and who it is we worship when we gather on Sunday mornings. For instance, do you really believe it when after confessing our sins I pronounce each of you forgiven, that you're now an entirely new creation in the eyes of God- a people without sin or guilt? Can you actually bring yourself to believe that prayer can move mountains just as Jesus said it could, that God can establish peace in the Middle East when even the best diplomacy has failed, or heal a disease as unforgiving as cancer is? Do you truly accept that every time we have Communion, that that small crust of bread and thimble full of grape juice, which isn't even enough to comprise a proper hors d'oeuvre, does constitute a great feast and that those elements do in fact betoken the body and blood of our Lord as our Book of Order says they do?

There's a lot that goes on in the name of Jesus that confounds all reason. It's not uncommon to hear of Christians flocking from miles around to observe some sight which some insist is actually a vision of Christ. When I was ministering in Syracuse, NY, hundreds of persons held prayer services beside a small house only a few miles from my church because they genuinely believed that the image of Mary could be seen on the side of it. Of course, many had come out of curiosity but there were MANY MORE who made the pilgrimage because they WANTED or NEEDED to believe it ACTUALLY WAS the image of Jesus or the Virgin Mother, persons who were NO LESS sincere in their veneration of it when they got there. When I lived in the San Francisco Bay area back in the 1970's, a woman claimed that the image of Christ had actually been burned on a flour tortilla she was cooking and both she and the tortilla became an instantly famous. Someone even wrote a popular play about it called not surprisingly *Jesus on the Tortilla*.

Now before we dismiss such persons as loony, maybe we need to stop for a second and think of what it is WE claim to believe in; can anyone say that our OWN beliefs are any LESS fantastic? Just think of it- as Christians, we affirm that God came to earth as a man, and that when this man--Jesus Christ--tried to save us, he was executed for it. But then we are told that death could not hold him and so after three days, he was resurrected and then appeared to a number of his followers for a period of forty days before ascending back into heaven. Gods aren't supposed to die and certainly not at the hands of that which they CREATED, of that they are the MASTERS of! But let's not stop THERE. Then he promised one day to return for us and, after putting all his enemies under his feet, establish his kingdom with a new heaven and a new earth. In a few weeks' time, we will be celebrating Pentecost Sunday when we are reminded how the Holy Spirit, representing the actual presence of Jesus Christ himself, resides within each of us, making our heart his home. Last BUT NOT LEAST, we affirm that there is life after death and that when our time on earth is up, our Lord will escort us from this side of life across that mysterious threshold to where we shall enjoy his presence and the presence of the rest of God's saints forever. Now be honest and tell me that a story like that isn't too far removed from the likes of Harry Potter or *Alice In Wonderland*.

All this is to say that there is much that can be considered bizarre and confusing about the

Christian faith, much that we don't quite understand or know what to do with- and yet we affirm it ALL THE SAME. This is because Christianity does not first insist that you must UNDERSTAND it all before you can BELIEVE it but quite the OPPOSITE, that you must first BELIEVE it before you UNDERSTAND it. The fact is that there is so much we CAN'T know or understand about our faith and our relationship with God, and yet despite the many uncertainties and unanswered questions that plague us, we go on worshiping, we go on offering up what we can of ourselves because on an even DEEPER level "we know that we know that we know" there is someone, something out there that seeks us out and lays claim to us and once we are firmly in its grasp, it promises to never let us go. We have been "helplessly caught" as one Christian writer has aptly put it.

When Matthew says, "And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted," the word translated "doubt" here occurs only twice in the New Testament- here and in the story of Peter getting out of the boat and venturing upon the sea in Matthew 14. The Greek word *distazo* carries a sense of standing in two places at the same time or being of two minds. Like Peter, who kept telling himself "I can't walk on water" all the while attempting to, those disciples were telling themselves that it COULDN'T be Jesus, that he was dead, while worshiping him all the same. Thus, we see Jesus commissioning, not perfect persons with a perfect comprehension of him and his mission, but persons who both doubt and worship at the same time, persons who obey and serve him REGARDLESS of whether they completely understood or not who this person was or what was being asked of them. Amid all their perplexity and confusion, they worshiped and then "went forth" into the world, baptizing and teaching all the same- and THAT, dear friends, is a perfect portrait of the Church and a perfect picture of US this morning!

Jesus has gathered his disciples together for the purpose of giving them their marching orders- they were to go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that he commanded them. Then he seals it with this unconditional promise: "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." I believe this last sentence of the book--the promise of Christ's unconditional presence and love--is the single most important verse in all of Matthew's gospel for it contains the greatest gift they or ANY of us can ever receive. Those words assure them that regardless of where they go or whatever may befall them, they will never again have to fear being alone or forsaken or rejected for Jesus promises to accompany them every day of THIS life right on through to the NEXT. That promise is all they will ever need to faithfully carry out their commission for he has pledged to be one with them until the end of time- guiding them, enlightening them, empowering them, delivering them. They take him at his word and do exactly as he commanded- they head out into the four corners of the ancient world making disciples by proclaiming, baptizing, and sharing his teachings with everyone. For such faithfulness and obedience, they were met every step along the way with persecution and imprisonment and painful execution and yet they were MORE than willing to endure such things in light of what they knew Christ had endured HIMSELF on THEIR behalf.

My friends, the commission those disciples received--to go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that he commanded them--is not just limited to the eleven but it now becomes the responsibility of the WHOLE church, of YOU AND ME AS WELL. This is as much OUR mandate, OUR marching orders, OUR job description by virtue of our baptism whether we are ordained ministers or not. Don't fear that God has perhaps called us to become

fire breathing evangelists on the order of Dwight L. Moody or even Billy Graham for that matter. The Bible is clear that we are called, not to defend GOD but to defend “the HOPE that God has given each one of us.” And if we ARE children of God who know we are loved with an everlasting love, then there is certainly something "hopeful" in us TO share and defend before the world. We might not understand completely the depth and breadth of such theological terms as “incarnation” or “atonement,” or “the trinity,” but we DO know that behind them all is someone, something who has claimed us for himself and will not let us go; that this mysterious entity who is abundant in mercy and forgiveness and love has pledged to never leave or forsake us regardless of how far or how fast we may try to run, and that it is best represented in the person we’ve come to know and love as Jesus Christ. There is a whole world awaiting us-- family members, friends we work with, even strangers God might bring our way--needing to know and experience such forgiveness and love THEMSELVES and he has made us his personal agents to share that message WITH THEM.

And we CAN do it, not because we are so supremely gifted, but only because of Christ’s unconditional and irrevocable promise to us, that he will accompany us always, even unto the end of the age. Because we are assured of THAT, because we trust in his enduring love and presence throughout our lives and wherever we go, what we doubt and DON’T understand no longer seems quite so important. Rather what BECOMES important is helping others to discover this same loving God, helping them feel his everlasting arms around them, and leading them to understand that Christ will be with them always, even to the end of the age. Let us pray...

*Gracious and most merciful God, what we don't understand, and it is much, help us to make up in greater devotion and obedience to you. Give us such a passion and joy for who you are and the things you have done for us that we cannot help BUT share that same story of love and grace with others who need to hear it as much as WE do. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*