

Our Commission

Matthew 28:16-20

May 10, 2020

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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There is a children's song I remember learning - I don't think I learned it as a child, so I suspect it was a Vacation Bible School song one year. It came straight from this text. The words said, "Matthew twenty-eight, nineteen and twenty; that's the great commission. Matthew twenty-eight, nineteen and twenty says to go soul fishin'. Matthew twenty-eight, nineteen and twenty says to go, go, go, go, go."

It was a catchy tune, although I suspect none of the children (or adults for that matter) who were singing it really knew what it meant to "go soul fishin'." After all, we are better at talking about the existence of the great commission in scripture than we are at knowing what to do with it.

And maybe part of the reason is that the task can seem daunting. It can seem daunting simply because of the enormity of it - "go therefore and make disciples of *all* nations" begins Matthew 28:19. All - only three letters - but it is a *very* big word.

And, if we know church history, we also know that too often the emphasis of the great commission has been placed on *making* disciples and *baptizing* and *obeying* - as people around the world have been forced into conversion, baptized whether they wanted to be or not, and told exactly what to do and not do in order to be considered a true Christian.

So many of us are left sure that this was not Jesus' intention, but still not sure what this commission means for us. Was this a commandment simply given to the disciples who followed Jesus in his lifetime? Was this a means of carrying on his message and starting the church? Or is this something more that continues to live for us and to call us into ministry together?

I would claim the latter.

While, for the disciples, it did give them some direction and helped them begin to understand that the message of Jesus was not only for his Jewish kin in his homeland, but for all who wanted to experience the love of God...for us, these words continue to call us into ministry and to call us to live and love on Jesus' behalf.

But how do we do that? This is the question that often gets in our way.

After all, as David Lose writes, "We derive a great deal of our sense of ourselves from our areas of competence -- at work, at home, in volunteer activities or hobbies -- when we find ourselves in situations where we do not feel competent our anxiety shoots through the roof"

(<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1584>).

So, the first problem we have is simply getting past our imperfections and our anxieties to even try...getting past our wonderings about what Jesus really means...getting past our worry that we won't be enough or do the right thing.

Many of you have heard me talk about the first congregation I served. It was a small country church in northeast Missouri. The first Sunday I went to preach there was November 8, 1992. I was 19 years old. And while I knew that this congregation had a long history of having pastors who were students at Culver-Stockton College, where I attended, it wasn't until I was the one being called to serve them that I realized how crazy this was. Did I mention...I was 19 years old? And I was acutely aware that I hadn't the foggiest idea what I was doing.

And yet that congregation not only welcomed me that day, but allowed me to be their pastor for the next three years. They gave me space to try things. They changed course with me when those attempts failed. They celebrated with me when we experienced joyful success. And more than anything, they showed me what it was to live in the ways of Jesus.

And I think of them whenever I hear this text. After all, just as the disciples saw Jesus that day and Matthew tells us they both worshipped and doubted, I wanted to serve faithfully even as I didn't think I was capable or frankly, even know where to start.

And just as the disciples were reassured that Jesus would remain with them, it became more and more clear to me - not only during the three years serving that congregation, but even today - that the only way that any of us is able to make a difference for God's kin-dom is because we do not do it alone. So often we think we have to be perfect in order to do a job. But think of all things we do amidst our brokenness or uncertainty.

When a first child is born, parents bring that baby home with no instruction manual, sometimes with little to no experience, and then, through effort and love, through moments of success laid alongside moments of failure, they find their way. And if a second child comes into the family, they discover they are far from experts because this is a different human being and so they take what they have learned and they keep on learning.

More than once an addict, having hit bottom, often having hurt themselves or others, has found their way to sobriety. And more than once these folks have gone on to make a difference for others, helping others see that there is another way, telling their story at just the right moment to make a difference or even save a life.

And if we remember these stories, then we know that we don't have to have it all together to do God's work. We don't have to be perfect to make a difference. We don't have to have a long list of awards and achievements to go into the world on God's behalf. And whatever we do, we don't have to do it alone. Rather we are called to serve in the midst of community and with the companionship of Christ.

And if we remember Matthew's gospel, a favorite part of many people I know comes just three chapters earlier in Matthew 25 where we hear Jesus say, "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25:35-36).

For many of us that seems so much more manageable. We can feed someone. We can visit someone. We can offer a warm coat or a comfortable pair of shoes to someone.

But maybe these two texts aren't so different.

What if we are called to go – imperfectly – into the world to show people God's love in ways that matter in their daily lives? What if that is exactly how we invite people to be part of this thing that Jesus was about? What if our calling isn't to preach louder and louder until they give in, but instead to live as Jesus lived in relationship with people? What if it is through a meal shared or a note sent or groceries bought that we show God's love and cause someone to wonder who this Jesus is?

This commission can feel daunting. It can feel daunting if we think we have to be perfect to do it. It can feel daunting if we think we are on our own.

But what if we remember that Jesus called the imperfect to work alongside him? What if we remember that women and tax collectors and outsiders were part of Jesus' band of followers? What if we listen to those before us – who in their doubt worshipped and who in their imperfection showed us who Jesus is? Maybe, if we can remember these things, we, too, can answer the call. Maybe we can live and love in ways that show the heart of God to others. Maybe, in the midst of all of our brokenness and with the companionship of Jesus, we can do God's work in this world.

Maybe, in the words of American novelist and poet Wendall Berry we should: "Every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing... Ask the questions that have no answers... Plant sequoias... Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful though you have considered all the facts... Practice resurrection" (*Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*).

Maybe, just maybe, this is our commission...to live in ways everyday that claim the Truth of life and love. Amen.