

So, Who Are We?  
Matthew 28:16-20  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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Who are you? How would you answer that question?

The other day at youth group we did an activity where the first person told us their name and their age. Then the second person told us their name, their age, and another detail they wanted to add - in our case, I think it was how many siblings they have. The third person then told us their name, their age, how many siblings they have, and another detail - I think it was something they enjoy doing. So, you get the picture...each person had to add one more thing that we should know about them. And with 15 of us in the room, the list got long and we struggled to remember what all we were supposed to say! By the end of this exercise we had shared name, age, siblings, pets, favorite color, favorite book, favorite video game, favorite ice cream flavor, what school we attend, and so many other details. And, we learned something about each other and found points of connection.

One of the things I was reminded of, is that there are many ways to answer the question, "Who are you?"

So what about this question: Who are we? Who are we as a group? As a community? As a congregation?

Over the next six weeks we are going to explore more of who we are not only as part of First Christian Church located in Coralville, Iowa, but as members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

We're going to talk a little about our history. We're going to talk a little about our values. We're going to talk a little about how those two things - our history and our values - have come together to shape us into the denomination, the congregation, and the people we are today.

And, while many of our sibling denominations have histories that go back *many* hundred of years and that started in places across the ocean, our part of the Christian movement, while shaped by people who came out of churches with longer history, our particular movement was born on the American frontier. And that is so important to remember because we are shaped by it and for it.

Being born on the American frontier means a lot of things.

- It plays a role in the particular way we embrace the priesthood of all believers, the idea of shared ministry - and we'll talk about that in a couple of weeks.
- It plays a role in our embrace of unity, or perhaps our founders would say, it was a setting ripe for conversations about unity as the realities of an expanding national identity meant that people were better off to see themselves as one rather than dividing into various factions. We'll talk more about that next week.

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- And, of course, with unity as a core value (or as our “polar star” for those of you who know those old quotes from Disciples’ history), how could we not have an open table? A table that keeps opening wider and wider. Again, that’s something else we’ll be talking about over these coming weeks.
- Now our birth on the American frontier also means we have things to grapple with, particularly around relationships with indigenous people and with slavery. And we will talk about these as well.

So, over the course of the coming weeks, we will continue to dive into our identity.

And yet today, as we begin this conversation, it seemed appropriate to begin with what we’ve come to know as the “great commission” - this passage from the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus is sending his disciples out to continue his work in the world.

After all, especially as a Christian movement coming to age in the early 19th century in this particular country, our existence was dependent upon this idea of spreading the word about Jesus. Evangelism was at the heart of who we were and how we came to be.

But, let’s be honest. At this particular point in history, we have a difficult relationship with the idea of evangelism. And that is multi-faceted.

While our early history was dependent upon evangelists, for some number of decades now, we have struggled with evangelism because we are a people who, by our nature and by our values, do not declare that there is one answer, or one way, or one creed which we must all confess. We have always welcomed other voices to the table and worked to remain in relationship even across our differences. And so, many of us have then found it difficult to consider ourselves evangelists. Because too often we have perceived evangelists as those with one particular answer. And, we have not wanted anyone to understand that we were telling them that *we* had the answers and *they* didn’t.

Add to that the current landscape of Christianity in the United States and the reality that many people connect words like evangelism and evangelical - words that are different but come from the same root - to a movement where religion and politics have become entangled in ways that so often feel opposite of our commitments...add that reality to the conversation and many of us are nervous to even associate with an idea like evangelism. Just recently I was in a conversation with a friend who talked about her years as an evangelical and the evangelism that she then prescribed to which was rooted in a belief that everyone not like her was going to hell.

As a lifelong Disciple, I can’t even imagine holding that perspective. And yet, I know that means I need to come to understand what evangelism is about when that is not at its core. Because still we hear these words from Matthew’s gospel, “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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (*Matthew 28:19-20, NRSVUE*).

And, yes, we can acknowledge that sometimes this commission also makes us nervous. We have seen it played out in ways that have harmed other people, that forced conversions, that have minimized the faith of other traditions.

But, in an effort not to throw the baby out with the bath water, what would happen if we reclaimed it for ourselves and for our world?

What would it look like for us to make disciples, not by force, but by invitation?

What would it look like for us to offer baptism, not as something one must do to save themselves from the depths of hell, but as an invitation to live as part of a community of people who are striving together to follow Jesus?

What would it look like for us to teach others about the good news of Jesus, about the good news of God's expansive love that never turns its back on anyone?

It is funny to me that while the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) began as a movement for unity with a strong sense of evangelism, in my lifetime these last fifty years I have more often heard us call ourselves the best kept secret. At our best, that comes from our humility. At our worst, that comes from our fear.

But what if we were known as the people who just couldn't help but share God's love? What if we lived our lives as people who reflected the welcoming, boundary crossing, division defying life of Jesus? What if in all that we do, in the ways that we live we found ourselves modeling and teaching people about a God who draws us together, who gifts us for the good of the world, who calls us to live lives of generosity, compassion, and justice?

What if we reclaimed evangelism in such a way that our lives were invitations to others, invitations to come to know the love of God and to be welcomed into communities of justice and deep faith?

Who are you?

Are you a person who knows the love of God? Share that with others.

Are you a person committed to living in the ways of Jesus? Let people see that reality in you.

Are you a person with a deep spirituality and a commitment to bringing wholeness and healing? Invite people into that movement.

Friends, this, too, is evangelism. This, too, is the way of living Jesus' commission. This, too, is our calling. Maybe it be so.