

**Sermon Matthew 28 Great Commissions**

Sermon Title: *Even to the End of the Age*

**April 28, 2019**

HPMF

**Matthew 28:16-20**

The Eleven disciples made their way to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had summoned them. At the sight of the Risen Christ they fell down to worship him, though some doubted what they were seeing. Jesus came forward and addressed them in these words:

“All authority has been given me both in heaven and on earth;

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations.

Baptize them in the name of God, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you.

And know that I am with you always, even until the end of the age!”

*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name of God, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

Somewhere along the way these words of Jesus became labeled as the “Great Commission.”

Last Sunday at Easter we celebrated together that the tomb was not powerful enough to hold the love of God - that God’s mission in the world would not be stopped: not by a stone, not by Roman guards, not even by death itself.

And this Sunday, as we hear this scripture text, these words of the Risen Christ to his disciples, we learn that the Resurrection is not the end of the story - not the end of the work. In Matthew’s gospel these are the only recorded words the Risen Christ spoke to his closest followers - giving them a mandate to carry on the mission of Jesus, the work of the Kingdom of God - that it may be on earth as it is in heaven.

I think it is worth repeating each Easter season something I read a few years back from Barbara Brown Taylor, that the change in the disciples is the best argument we have for the resurrection. When Jesus was arrested and put to death, the disciples of Jesus denied being associated with him and hid behind locked doors because they were afraid they too would be arrested and killed. But after Jesus comes to them, they stop hiding and start seeking. They stop making excuses and start moving mountains. They sell all of their stuff and put the proceeds in a common pot so that no one is in need. They lay their hands on the sick and people are healed. They defy the authorities - they are arrested again and again and they keep going. They never tire of telling people who gave them the courage to do such things, and they become known for their glad and generous hearts. In this way, their way of life becomes contagious. This is how resurrection people live.

After Jesus appears to the disciples, after he gives them this mandate to go and make disciples of all nations, promising to be with them always. They unlock their doors and start to venture out, leaving their hometowns in Roman-occupied Israel to tell others about this person Jesus of Nazareth who had preached that

God's kingdom had come to earth; who taught that those who were poor were blessed (not that they were punished for something they, or their parents had done). He taught that we should not kill our enemies (as we had previously thought), but rather, we should love them – even pray for them. This man told them that they should not be about violent revolution (as many of their ancestors had been), he had gone to his death peaceably, and had risen from that death. These first believers, “Followers of the Way” as they called themselves, lived a very different life from those around them.

This is an ancient Christian painting, found in some Roman catacombs, where some of those first Christians would have met to worship. They had to meet in secret as it was illegal to be a “Follower of the Way” for it was considered a *superstitio* by the Roman Empire, you could only legally worship as part of a sanctioned *religio*. In this painting we see a Christian praying (this ancient prayer posture with hands raised) inside a box. This box is to represent the ark, Noah's ark – you can see the dove with an olive branch in the top corner, which is a clue to signal us that this is in fact the ark. Noah's ark shows up in a lot of these early Christian paintings as it was an important symbol to these first Christians, they saw the Christian church to be very much like that ark. The world outside of the ark was full of violence, a world that had forgotten God; the ark was a safe place from that violence, a place instituted by God. So too was the church such a place for these ancient Christians - a place where their peculiar non-Roman view of the world was shared by others; a place where they grew as disciples. Other early Christian art reveals similar themes, how these first followers felt at odds within their culture. Paintings like these depicting the fiery furnace and Daniel in the Lion's Den. And other art, depicting their call to still go out and share the love of God, like this ancient painting of Jonah - with a sea creature looking much different than the whale that typically comes to our imaginations.

These first Christians were quite peculiar - in Rome, as I have mentioned before, they were known by three things: 1) Giving all in their Christian community a proper burial (regardless of if the deceased had money or not). 2) Caring for widows – this was the first institutional act of the church recorded in the books of Acts, a group of people determining a plan as to how all of the widows amongst them will have enough to eat. And, 3) for rescuing children from the trash heaps of Rome. It was common in those days, if you had a child you could

not afford to feed, or if you had a girl and would rather wait for a boy child, you would take your child to the city dump and leave them there to die. The Christians use to go out to that trash heap and rescue these children, raising them as one of their own family. Because of these things, it was largely the poor and women who were the overwhelming first converts to Christianity – those who were most disenfranchised in that Empire were the ones most attracted to good news of Jesus that was being taught and lived out.

Not only did they share their wealth and care for societal outcasts, but they also refused to fight in the military – we have court records of trials of soldiers in the Roman Legions, who, after converting to Christianity wanted out of the army - they would no longer kill or represent the Empire.

And they weren't just about making converts, they were about making disciples - making followers of Jesus' way. There was an ancient text called the Didache which gives instructions for how followers of Jesus were to live. To become baptized as a Christian at this time a person had to go through a two-year process of catechesis, which included having a mentor. This mentor would not only instruct you in "the way", they would also watch you to make sure your life was in-line with Christ's teaching and principles.

And some of these peculiar people, after Jesus gave this "Great Commission", set out to spread the "good news" that they had discovered in this person Jesus – to tell the story of God's love that came to earth in human form. And so, they began to travel all over the world. To the west they followed trading routes, using the elaborate system of roads that the Romans had built. And to the east, they followed the spice and silk trade routes. Though we often think of Christianity only being a major religion of the western world, missionaries went from Jerusalem to Persia and Africa in the south, and to Asia in the east, traveling by the "silk road" as far as modern-day China in the east.

And, according to church historians Andrew Walls and Alan Kreider, everywhere they went – no matter what country or culture – two things were true, two principles of Christianity were universal in this world movement.

**Indigenous principle:** Christianity is at home in every culture and in every language. This is part of what we celebrate at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes and the disciples were speaking in all sorts of languages - everyone there could hear of God's love and Jesus' work in their Mother Tongue – it is for the whole world. There is no one dominant or superior culture, not even our own. When these Christian missionaries went to Persia, they did not try to make Persians into Romans or Jews - they tried to be vessels of God's love that helped create Persian Christians. And when they went as far as Asia, they did not try to turn those they met in Asia into Romans or Jews – instead, they were trying to create Asian Christians. They sought to tell the story of Jesus in such a way that it made sense to those in Persia, and they told it in a different way so that it made sense in Asia. They tried to live in such a way that the news was in fact good – they sought to live with joy, with love, to treat others with justice. Where they went they did not try to make converts, and then move on. They tried to make disciples. Those who not only believed in their head, but believed with their lives; not just people who believed in personal salvation, but those who lived as Jesus taught.

Jesus' life and teachings should make sense in each culture, in each language; his life should feel at home everywhere – it should feel indigenous.

**Pilgrim principle:** At the same time, the good news of Jesus should challenge every culture. The life and teachings of Jesus will never be an affirmation of everything in a culture (not even our own), it will always be calling parts of each culture to transform, to change - to be more just, to be more loving. It will always make disciples feel that they aren't quite at home even in their home country or city. So, one seeking to follow Jesus will always feel like a bit of an outsider in any culture, they will feel like an alien. They will not just be like everyone else – they can never just be like everyone else because they are trying to follow the peculiar teachings of Jesus, teachings that, in many ways, do not seem to make rational sense to us – following the God of Resurrection makes little sense in a culture that serves and worships death:

-Forgiveness is not a natural reaction for someone who has been raised in a militaristic society

-Sharing our possessions and wealth do not feel like natural reactions in a capitalist society

-Saying that a community of people has a say in our life is not natural in an individualistic society

-Believing an ancient story should influence my life is not seem natural in a 'new is better' society

This was the way of life of the early Christians, whether they stayed in their hometowns or they traveled to distant lands, they were resident aliens – always at home and yet never fully at home – never fully comfortable with the culture in which they lived. This was the way of life of those who first tried to live out this “Great Commission” of Jesus - not going to all nations to try and create more Roman Christians all over the world - instead, they went trying to help people see why they would want to follow the ways of Jesus Christ.

Eventually, through a variety of routes and twists and turns over centuries, this story came to you - it came to me - the God of Jesus Christ was shared with you through someone's life, through someone's words, through someone's example. Someone helped you believe enough that it is Good News to be more aligned with the ways of Jesus Christ than the ways of any nation or culture.

And so I wonder, who has helped form you into a disciple? How did they do it?

Who has, to you, been one who has showed you the meaning of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Who has made you believe, with their life and their words, that the way of Jesus is actually good news?

I want you to consider that for a few seconds...

Turn to your neighbor - everyone find a neighbor.

*Yes, participation - the worst.*

You are going to have 1 minute each to share about one of those people and how they showed you/taught you this. Introduce yourself and decide who will go first. 60 seconds to talk about someone who helped you believe that being a follower of Jesus was Good News. *Go.*

The teachings of Jesus - the ways of being a disciple - no matter what culture you grow-up in, they will not make sense in many ways. We have to learn what it means to be a disciple; we have to learn the how the peculiar ways of following Jesus are actually good news - they are the ways that lead to new life. They are the ways of resurrection people.

May we be a people who never stop learning what it means to be a disciple.

May we be a people who never stop living in ways that show that following the Risen Christ is Good News.

Amen.