

Our Marching Orders

Matthew 28:16-20 NRS ¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

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Today's text is familiar to many of us. Those of us who grew up in evangelical traditions may have heard this passage preached over and over, especially at revivals, rallies, and fundraising moments for "overseas missions." Like many texts that have been quoted frequently, its meaning may have become limited and calcified. This morning I'd like for us to unpack this passage and hear it in fresh and more complete ways.

These final verses in Matthew's Gospel occur after the resurrection of Jesus. Now, "Jesus is on an unnamed mountain in backwater Galilee with a congregation of eleven, down from twelve the week before, and even some of them are doubtful and not so sure why they have come to worship this day." (Thomas Long. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3*, Louisville, WJK, 2011, p 47)

Even now, after all that had happened, even after resurrection, the eleven, the closest followers Jesus had, even now they had doubts. These eleven wavered between adoration and indecision, between prayer and puzzlement. What is striking, however, is that the disciples aren't excluded because of their questions. In fact, it is precisely to these followers, who are worshipping and doubting that the Great Commission is given. Too many of us have been taught that there is no room for doubt. We feel guilty about our doubts. We hesitate to ask questions, especially if we're questioning something that we have been taught when we were young. But here in today's text we read that even among the remaining eleven disciples, those who had been with Jesus the longest, those who were closest to him, there were doubts. And even those who had doubts received the Great Commission! Instead of proclaiming our certainty about God's will on every issue and running a high risk of self-righteousness and the sin of pride, we need to be more honest with ourselves and with one another. We say, "I believe in God the Father almighty . . ." but some days we believe more than others, some days we have more trust in God than other days. We, you and me, we are the church and the church is worship and doubt, fear and joy, trust and indecision.

Jesus tells the disciples to "go." We think in terms of where to go, but the message here is really about who we are to go to. For a long time we've put maps up on the wall with colored stick pins to mark where we've sent missionaries because of this passage that we call the Great Commission. Because the text speaks of "all nations" we've thought it was about geography. But the word here in the original Greek is *ethnos*, from which we get the word ethnic. The Jews in the time of Jesus used the word *ethnos* to refer to all people who were not Jews. If you weren't a Jew, then you were *other*, gentile, *goyem*, *ethnos*. In the past, we sometimes used the word "nation" to refer to ethnic groups, like when we would talk about the Native American tribes as the Indian nations. But today we almost exclusively use the word nation to refer to a political geographical place. A clearer translation here would be "all the gentile peoples" rather than all nations. This command isn't about places, it's about people!

As a side bar here, we can note that this is also a good example of how we should read scripture in light of other scripture. Earlier, in Matthew 10:5-8, Jesus had sent the twelve out, but had told them to not go anywhere among the gentiles. If we read that passage by itself, we could say that the message of Jesus was only for the Jews and no one else. But in the context of all the scriptures we find that God was always concerned with all peoples. In Genesis 22:18, God tells Abraham that all people will be blessed through Abraham's descendants. And earlier in this same gospel according to Matthew references are made to the teachings of the prophet Isaiah regarding reaching out to the gentiles. Matthew 4:14-17 quotes Isaiah 9:1-2 about God's light shining on gentiles in the lands around Israel. Matthew 12:17-21 quotes Isaiah 42:1-4 regarding proclaiming justice and hope to the gentiles.

We've often heard this passage as a command to go baptize. There are times in centuries past when the way we measured the success of missionaries was by keeping a scorecard of the number of baptisms. The focus had narrowed to seeing baptism as the final achievement in being a Christian and in salvation. But in the Great Commission the strongest command in the Greek text is to make disciples. There's no call to preach the gospel! There's no demand for faith as a requirement for baptism. What is emphasized is discipling. The Greek doesn't indicate whether teaching or baptizing comes first. And the teaching and discipling process is continuous for life. The gentiles are to be converted to a way of living together in the Messiah's community, the kingdom of God.

"The world will not be fixed by merely getting everyone wet. Saying the words, 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' is not magic. The more difficult task is that of making disciples. Disciples are students." (Steven P. Eason, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3* Louisville, WJK, 2011, p 47-48) Being a disciple is like a life-long internship. This isn't about hurling leaflets to the wind, a rally in a stadium, or a revival in a tent. It isn't about keeping a scorecard of how many have been baptized and how many have rededicated their selves to the Lord. This is the harder, less glamorous, more patient task of making disciples and building Christian communities. The church is to go out, "not as an army of occupation, but as a humble tutor, teaching mercy and righteousness and forgiveness and peacemaking." (Thomas Long, *Matthew, WBC series*, WJK, Louisville, 1997, p327)

Part of this discipling process is to teach them to obey what Jesus taught. This command to teach means we don't have a private faith. It isn't just me and my personal Savior. Teaching means that we are interacting with others. And the command to obey reminds us that grace isn't cheap. Baptism isn't the final goal, it isn't the punched ticket to Gloryland, it isn't fire insurance.

For centuries, the Jews had kept themselves separate from other people. As much as humanly possible they had kept themselves ritually clean and avoided possible corruption by the "unclean" gentiles who lived around them. And now Jesus tells a paltry eleven insecure Jews to change everything and go out to change the world.

The only reason they didn't fall down laughing at the ridiculous impossibility, or run away in fear at the risks involved, is because Jesus said, "I am with you always." He claims his authority, saying "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He exercises his Lordship with the command, "Therefore, go make disciples of all people." But this command comes with support. Early on, Matthew (1:23) told us that Jesus was Emmanuel, which means God-with-us. Back in chapter 18 Jesus told his followers that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matt 18:20 NRS) And now, at the end of Matthew's gospel story, Jesus says, "Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present

age.” They aren’t just to remember their time with Jesus, but to be assured that he is with them at all times in the future.

What does this Great Commission require of us today? First of all, going to all peoples doesn’t necessarily mean buying a plane ticket. The person who needs to become a disciple may be a neighbor; the *ethnos* may be the Hispanic community here in Thomasville. The *ethnos* today is whoever is different from you. In making disciples we are called to be with those who are different in color, in gender, in language, in economic status, in education, and in culture.

But to make disciples, we must first be disciples ourselves. We are commanded to teach others, but we can only teach what we have learned. Discipleship is a life-long internship. We are students all of our lives. That means that the opportunity to learn during the Summer Plus program is important. I urge you to make the commitment to participate in the three weeks of Summer Plus. I promise that you will learn about the *ethnos* who live all around you. I promise that you will learn about feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and sheltering the homeless.

We cannot disciple those that we push away. Almost as often as scripture tells us to stop being afraid, scripture also commands us to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. And scripture never says care for these people if they are like you. It never says care for them if it doesn’t cost too much. It never says care for them if it is convenient. It never says care for some limited number. In fact, scripture clearly tells us to care for them without discrimination, care for them as we would care for ourselves. And so I am appalled, angered, and ashamed of the people who stopped buses of women and children who risked their lives to escape the horrors of drug gangs in their homeland. The hate and cruelty of the protestors must make God’s stomach churn. May God have mercy on us!

Christ sent out those hesitant eleven to face a world that had crucified their Lord. Like them, we are called to make disciples, teaching, loving, baptizing, and forming communities. Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all those tribes of people who are not at all like you.” It is as if he said, “Go into all the world and cure cancer, clean up the environment, evangelize the unbelieving, and, while you are at it, establish world peace.” (Thomas Long. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3*, Louisville, WJK, 2011, p 49) Actually, that’s only part of our commission. We need to get to work! Amen.

Sisters and brothers,
Go out into the world in peace;
have courage, knowing that our Lord is with you always.
Be a disciple, always learning, always obeying
so that you may make disciples of others.
Support the weak, and help the suffering;
honor all people; love and serve the Lord.