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Trinity Sunday – June 4, 2023

“A Church Shaped by the Great Commission”

Read: Matthew 28: 16 – 20/ Memorize Mt. 28: 19

The last words of Jesus to His disciples in our gospel reading represent his marching orders for the church until He returns. There can be no more powerful, motivational text for mission than the words of the Great Commission in Matt. 28. And yet, there is a great deal of conversation happening in the church that we seem to have lost our way as it pertains to this commission.

There are many voices that point to the lack of emphasis on disciple – making as the reason for the decline of the church in the Western world. I have to add that caveat, because in the global south there is no lack of discipling of people. In fact, the church is on fire to make disciples. What could be the reason for the difference.

Some have suggested that the people of the church seem to be distracted from the main show. It’s kind of like when you go to the circus. There are lots of things happening around you but there is also a center ring. The center ring is where the main actions take place. The side rings are there for your entertainment, but they can also be distractions.

So, what is the main ring show in Jesus’ mind? At the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus announces His mission in Luke 4:

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor; He sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

The words of Matthew in our Gospel today become the bookend for that mission that Jesus talks about in Luke: “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, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

So here are some truths that we have to struggle with. Only disciples can make disciples. Steven Covey, the leadership guru of “7 Habits” fame, has popularized the phrase, “Begin with the end in mind.” The bottom line of the mission, the end result of the Great Commission, is disciple-making. We use the phrase, “Everyday disciples, Sharing Christ, Changing Lives!” as our shorthand of that mission. It seems like there are many in the church who have been distracted from that.

Here’s a simple definition of discipleship: Everyday disciples follow Jesus to the end that they are transformed into His likeness. We have to be careful as we evaluate ourselves. We can never think that we have arrived at the end, therefore we have gained heaven by our own means.

Rather, we receive heaven by grace, but are seeking to make progress in becoming more like Jesus. What do we do to help us make that progress in faith formation? The ancient church used things that they called disciplines to help them grow. Here are some of them: prayer, bible reading, service, giving and meditation. These were the things that Jesus did to form Himself and His disciples for the mission that God gave.

Last Sunday we heard one disciple preach one sermon in one day and get 3,000 converts. Today it takes an average of more than 100 adults 1 year to introduce 1.7 people to Christ. Why do we seem to lack the power of the apostles? How have we missed the point that the command of Jesus is to make disciples?

Some suggest that the problem is that discipleship has come to mean mere assent: I want to follow Jesus as long as I can live it my way. Biblically, we know that following Christ is a lifelong process and journey.

In the apostolic church, the first era of the church, the focus was on making disciples. Here’s a second point to consider: a congregation of disciples, committed to making disciples, will become apostolic in its passion and style.

But that changed about 350 years after Jesus died when the church became an institution of the empire. Lauren Mead in his book “The Once and

Future Church” calls this second era “Christendom.” This was the time when it seemed the state decided you were part of the church. It had very little to do with following Jesus.

Now, Mead suggests, we have entered the third era. He refers to this as “post-Christian Era.” The world is not guided by Christian principals and is sometimes opposed to the ideals we hold dear.

We need to remember that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was no easier to believe in the first century than it is today. As Paul describes it, it was “a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.” In fact, many biblical commentators say that the church of the first century and the church of the 21st century have a great deal in common.

There are some suggesting that we look to the book of Acts for our guide in living for Jesus. A congregation of disciples committed to making disciples, which becomes apostolic in its style and passion, will necessarily see itself as a missionary community in the world. The church will exist for the sake of the mission of Jesus.

That’s a pretty big shift for most churches. The church needs to cease seeing itself as an institution or an organization and begin to see itself as a movement, as a living organism. It is something that replicates itself not through the pastor but through the people. My job is to help you do that.

This year the Board of Elders and I have been talking about what it means to be spiritual leaders. A number of other groups are having the same conversations. Out of those conversations you’ve already seen one change. Now I caution you these are outward signs of how we believe discipleship is lived out. Only God knows the inward heart. I hope these look familiar to you: Gathering, Growing, Giving, Going.

The Christian disciple is:

- 1. Gathering – regularly not only for worship, but to be part of the Body of Christ in all aspects. Paul says we should do it daily. We do it together in such things as worship. We also gather in smaller groups. Perhaps that’s what Jesus meant about being with 2 or 3.**

2. **Growing** – in an organized way such as Bible study or Growth groups, but also personally, in things like bible reading and devotions.
3. **Giving** – The Bible uses Time, Talents and Treasure as the areas of giving. Jesus wants us to give away the gifts He gives us, trusting that He will always supply our need. Notice, it includes all three areas.
4. **Going** – We find ways to bring our Christian faith into the market place, where we live our lives. A lot to times this includes giving of ourselves through our time, talent and treasure.

When people adopt these habits it is normally an indication that they are experiencing spiritual transformation. They no longer live for themselves but are living in conformity to the transformation that God wishes to accomplish in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

That ultimately is the guiding force in the life of a disciple. That's where we find our power to do all those things that we just talked about today. **The Holy Spirit helps us accomplish the mission Jesus has given us to make disciples.**

We grow closer to that spirit through our time of practicing the spiritual disciplines. Perhaps the words of Pascal in this prayer remind us of God's work: "Lord, help me to do great things as though they were little, since I do them with your power; and little things as though they were great, since I do them in your name." **That's how everyday disciples see it as they are "Sharing Christ, Changing Lives!"**

Count me in: How will you use Gathering, Growing, Giving and Going to form your call to discipleship?