

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
 Cultivating Jesus Followers
 Jesus leaves the disciples with a command and a promise.
 Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20
 Rev. Steve Filyk
 Opening Hymn: Christ the Lord is risen today 247
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Sometimes I get distracted.
 There is a task that I should be working on.

But instead of tackling that task,
 I find myself avoiding it
 With positive procrastination.

No, I'm not the type to lose a lot of time
 On the couch in front of the tv.

I just get busy with tasks
 That are less urgent and less important
 Than that one thing I need to be doing.

I start doing some housework,
 Or begin researching the next home repair project:
 the plans, tools, and materials that are needed.

Do you ever find yourself distracted?
 Do you ever lose your focus on the most important
 Work that remains to be done.

How about the church?
 Does we maintain a laser-like focus
 On what is truly important or get waylaid
 By issues of secondary concern.

I've spent the last 25 years in the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

And I've noticed that we invest our time/energy/thinking/life
 Into a few specific areas:

We tend to devote a lot of time managing money and assets.
 We tend to pour our energy into conflicts over power and control.
 We tend to reflect on our style of worship.
 And much of our life seems focused on other peoples' sins.

To be fair, topics like worship and morality,
 And administration and stewardship are all important
 In their own right.

But sometimes items of secondary importance
 Distract us from fulfilling the one task
 That should be at the center of our existence.

Today we are at the end of the Gospel of Matthew.

Today we hear the last words,
 Those final instructions of the resurrected Jesus,
 that Matthew records.

Up on that mountain somewhere in Galilee,
 Jesus gives his disciples a new commission,
 the Great Commission.

Earlier in the Gospel the twelve disciples
 had been sent by Jesus on a practicum within Israel.
 They were given authority to “cast out unclean spirits,
 heal the sick, and proclaim the good news
 that the kingdom of heaven has come near (10:7).

Jesus had been doing the same things
 preceding this commissioning of his closest followers.
 The only distinguishing mark of his ministry was teaching;
 Jesus did it, the disciples did not.

[But in] this final commissioning of the disciples,
 Jesus widens the audience—from Israel to all nations—
 and adds teaching to [that] charge of... his followers.”ⁱ

These graduates of Jesus’ apprenticeship program,
 Are now commissioned to carry on
 The full scope of Jesus’ ministry,
 And bring it to the entire world.

In particular, Jesus calls them to make disciples,
 That is they are now to apprentice others
 In following Jesus.

Notice that Jesus did not say make church-goers
 Or make church members.
 Jesus calls them to make new apprentices,
 New Jesus followers,
 Like he had done of them.

To provide greater clarity Jesus follows this imperative of making disciples,
 with three subordinate participles:
 going, teaching, baptizing.”ⁱⁱ

Going would involve leaving that mountain in Galilee.
 More importantly it would involve crossing cultural divides.
 Despite that original promise of God to Abram
 That promise about blessing all nations,
 The Jewish people had historically kept to themselves.

Even Jesus’ ministry with a few exceptions
 was focused on the people of Israel.

Now Jesus was urging his followers to cross cultural/geographic boundaries.
 And make Jesus-followers of all peoples.

That’s the going.

In our era, going is less about geography
But it involves movement all the same.

For most of us it means getting out our close-knit
Church and kin groups and reaching out to people
Who are different than ourselves.

Those differences include differences of culture and religion,
Lifestyle and worldview, age, income, and status.
Jesus doesn't want us to limit ourselves
To those who are most like us
When we consider who might be an apt apprentice.
Jesus wants us to adopt a broader view.

Jesus wants us to go.
And he wants us to baptize.

For Jewish people baptism wasn't a normal event or occurrence.
You were simply born into the family of faith.

Baptism was a way for non-Jews to enter into this family.
But because Judaism wasn't actively soliciting converts
It wasn't all that common.

You may recall that John the Baptist baptized people,
but that was his uncomplimentary messaging
that the Jewish people had lost their way,
Effectively becoming like Gentiles.

In his Great Commission, Jesus adopts it
As an official sign of entry for his followers.

This public and physical act
would mark the commitment of individuals
(and the heads of households with their families)
To follow Jesus as Lord.

When we baptize people in our church we ask them
To publicly profess their faith,
That is to share their commitment to Jesus out loud.
The baptism, the sprinkling of water
Declares God's commitment to us.

Jesus wants us to go.
Jesus wants us to baptize.

But it is not enough to get people wet,
Jesus wants us to teach them and cultivate their faith.

In Matthew, the Gospel writer presents Jesus
As the teacher greater than Moses.
Now the teacher wants the disciples to pass on
His teaching to others:
'[to teach] them to obey everything I have commanded you'.

Just as Jesus had spend three years mentoring his disciples

Jesus calls them to continue his mentoring program
Among new believers.

There are many ways to that this can occur.
Talking to the Bible Study group I asked them
How they had been mentored.

The list of examples included classroom/lecture settings,
Small group discussions, one-on-one relationships,
And service activities.

For apprentices of Jesus to grow in faith and understanding
They need more than a sprinkling of water,
And they need more than a copy of the Bible.

They need a community of faith willing to share
With them what they have learned and experienced.
They need people to show them the ropes.

It is only through this sort of mentoring
That we can expect to see mature Christian adults
Who are willing in turn to mentor others.

PAUSE

Jesus places a great deal of trust in his disciples
By commissioning them to this ministry.

Only days earlier one of them had betrayed him,
Another denied him,
And most of them scattered.

As one commentator notes:

Telling this little band of confused and disoriented disciples
that they were to herd all the peoples of the earth
toward Mount Zion in the name of Jesus
would be like standing in front of most congregations today—

many of them small
and all of them of mixed motives and uncertain convictions
—and telling them,

“Go into all the world and cure cancer,
clean up the environment,
evangelize the unbelieving,
and, while you are at it, establish world peace.”

This command, this commission that Jesus gives to his disciples
Does sound unrealistic for those early disciples...
And it sounds unrealistic for us
Even if we are small and mighty.

It is unrealistic
Except for two things that Jesus mentions
in addition to his command:

- Jesus tell us that this work is done under his authority.
- Jesus promises to be with us to the end of time.

“The work of the church cannot be taken up
 unless it is true that “all authority”
 does not belong to the church or its resources
 but comes from God’s wild investment of God in Jesus the Son

and the willingness of the Son
 to be present always to the church in the Spirit.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus is behind the work that he has called us into.

PAUSE

There are many good things
 That we can be doing as a church community.

There are many important things
 that will compete for our energy, our attention, and our time.

But there is one thing that Jesus has called us to:
 To make new Jesus followers.

May we keep this at the forefront of all that we do.
 Amen.

ⁱ Stephen B. Boyd, “Theological Perspective on Matthew 28:16–20,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 44–46.

ⁱⁱ see Craig S. Keener “Matthew 28:16-20” *The Lectionary Commentary: the Gospels* 158

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas G. Long, “Homiletical Perspective on Matthew 28:16–20,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 47–49.