

Trinity Sunday
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
7 June 2020

Matthew 28:16-20

The Gospel for today comes from Matthew 28. This is the famous Great Commission speech of Jesus. The passage presents us with four action verbs I would like to talk about. The first is the imperative word **“Go!”** The second imperative is **“Make.”** The third action verb is “Baptize,” although in our passage we have in the participle form **“Baptizing.”** Lastly, we have the verb teach, also in the participle form, **“Teaching.”** These are the last words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew and they bear repeating. Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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.”

If we assume that Jesus' first sentence functions as an opening (“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”) and the last sentence functions as a closing to this speech (“Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”) then the emphasis of the passage should rest with one of the four verbs in the middle section: Go, Make disciples, Baptize, Teach. For many, the emphasis has been placed on the “go,” which they quickly connect to the “nations.” We then conclude that Evangelism is something that happens “out-there” in the nations. We go from here to there and we do something once we are there. The problem is that the verb we translate as an imperative, “go” is really a participle in the original language. We use participles in English every time we add the “ing” ending to a verb. In this case, the literal translation would be “As you are **going** your way.” Translated this way then, Evangelism is not just something we do out there in Haiti, Honduras, or Africa. It is rather, something we do “as we are going our way.” As we are going our way to the market, to work, to a restaurant, etc. Evangelism is something that happens every time we go anywhere, which of course includes the nations, as Matthew tells us today.

Other people believe the focus of this passage is on the phrase “Baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” This is very important, as most Christian denominations place great value on the sacrament of Baptism. And today, on Trinity Sunday, we could spend a lot of time on the formula “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” But, once again, the verb “Baptize” in this passage is also a participle. “Baptizing” is a proper translation. This is the answer to the question “How?” How do we make a Christian? Answer: baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son... Again, Baptism is not necessarily the focus and center of our passage, but the way in which we do what the passage is asking us to do.

Some believe that the focus lies in the expression, “Teaching them everything that I have taught you.” Certainly Jesus wants us to teach a doctrine, a set of beliefs, a particular way of understanding the world, God, humanity, sin and salvation. As we are going, we are to be baptizing into the name of the triune God and we are to be teaching people the things God commanded us to do. This is very important, but again, the participle “teaching” denotes a way in which we do something and not the something itself. This is the answer to the question “How do we make disciples?”

Lastly, the expression translated in our text as “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” is seen by some as the center of this passage. I like the translation “Remember” but this is a bit of a stretch. The literal translation is “Behold” or “Pay attention,” “Pay heed,” even, “Listen carefully.” The word “Remember” has sacramental implications and this is why I like it. We gather together week after week to “remember” that God is with us always, even to the end of the age. But, this is a mandate to pay attention to God’s presence among us, rather than a mandate to recall something from the past. As we are going our way, we must pay attention and listen carefully to the God who is among us. We are to be aware that we are not left orphans. God is here with us. This is an important part of our proclamation, but it is not the center idea of this passage.

It is ironic that we place the emphasis of the Great Commission on Baptism, Discipleship, or even Liturgy (“Remember”) when the actual focus of this passage is “Make Disciples.” In our church we spend a great deal of time preparing for baptism, engaging in liturgy, teaching our congregants through Bible studies and the like. But, perhaps the area we need to work on is the area of disciple-making or Evangelism. We must make disciples as we go on our way. This is the mandate today. We don’t need to go to China to make disciples for Jesus. We can do it here in our backyard. In our own lives. As we come and go. Starting with the people we already know and with whom we interact daily.

I believe much of what we call “Evangelism” is ineffectual. The reason for this is that we focus too much on a verbal affirmation and acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior, and we don’t spend enough time befriending and relationship-building. The knock at the door; the high pressure tactics; the scary question, “If you were to die today, are you sure you would go to heaven?” And the praying of “The Sinner’s Prayer” are all ineffective in making Disciples for Jesus Christ, unless they are preceded and followed by a concerted effort to befriend the person, to enter into relationship with them, and to become a part of the narrative of their life. I once heard someone say, “You have to earn the right of relationship first.” I agree with this.

Now, I couldn’t think of a more appropriate passage for today, as we see the images of pent-up anger and frustration on our television sets, as we continue to

remember George Floyd and all the victims of hatred and violence, and as we see businesses owned primarily by black and brown people being destroyed by those who are using this tragic event for their own purposes. The world is in great need of Jesus of Nazareth and it is our responsibility to make disciples of all nations. But, we can't do this with any degree of integrity until Christians begin to behave as true followers of Jesus of Nazareth. We need to make disciples through example or it becomes nothing more than empty words and trite little formulas. As we go on our way, we must show the world what a committed Christian looks like. We stand on the side of justice and we grieve with our brothers and sisters in this congregation who feel rejected, unwanted, and alone. My heart and my prayers are with you this very day.

As we go, we go as ambassadors of the Prince of Peace and we preach a message of inclusion, brotherly and sisterly love, forgiveness and grace. We preach that in Jesus of Nazareth there is no longer black or white, male or female, rich or poor. In him, we all stand before the throne of God as redeemed, forgiven, and accepted sons and daughters of God. This is not any philosophical or political statement. This is the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah we follow, the only Savior of the human race.

Our world is hungry and thirsty for the love and peace only he can offer. The world is in need of disciples who take seriously their baptismal vows which we renewed last week. Last week I asked you all, "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" and we all replied, "I will, with God's help." These are not new words developed by some new-age thinker. These are the very foundations of our Christian gospel. We are to strive for justice and peace. This is part of our vocation as Christians. This is part of the "Go therefore and make disciples" mandate of Jesus of Nazareth. We must reconnect with this truth today.

I invite you this morning to think about all the people with whom you already have a relationship. I want to encourage you to pray that God would give you the opportunity to introduce the Gospel of Jesus to them within the context of your relationship. There are people in your life who are hungry and thirsty for the Gospel of Jesus. I pray that today will be the day you choose to share him with them. He is the answer to what afflicts the human heart. With him in our lives there is joy and abundance of life. Without him all we have is confusion and chaos. May he continue to bless you, today and always. Please remember that I am available for conversation and prayer. May he lead us into his peace which surpasses all understanding. Amen!