

THEREFORE GO

TEXT: Matthew 28:16-20

Today's reading from Matthew is so well known, that I wonder if we realize all the implications it has for us. It's message of "Therefore Go" was the theme of the 2016 Pacific Northwest Annual Conference, so it surely has a message that is current for us here.

This is such an important text in the context of Matthew's gospel. It has enormous significance as the climax of the Gospel.

The arrest and crucifixion of Jesus was a deeply disorienting experience for his followers, ruthlessly dashing in a matter of hours the great hopes and dreams they all shared. They had lost one they loved and admired to a brutal execution. To see Jesus alive after his death, which they naturally assumed had ended everything, must have been utterly astonishing. Nothing in their history or Jewish faith had prepared them for what was occurring. To say they struggled with cognitive dissonance would be a huge understatement.

Our story today is the narrative of the last recorded encounter of Jesus by the disciples and the final words of Jesus. He had directed his disciples to return to Galilee, where he promised to meet them. Once again, the disciples followed Jesus, not knowing what they would encounter. Galilee was where it all began and Galilee, it seems, would mark the new beginning. It is difficult to imagine what their journey was like, but it had to have been a memorable one. It was the ultimate road trip, and I imagine it was filled with long conversations that focused upon making sense of the mind-bending events that had transpired, wondering aloud what would happen next. This moment with Jesus would be an important time for them. They had lost everything in the catastrophic events that preceded this, and they were on their way to discover what, if anything, would be next.

We all struggle to comprehend the astonishing work of God in Christ. Having reunited with Jesus in Galilee, the disciples' response is somewhat peculiar. Upon seeing Jesus they worship. This part we understand; it makes sense given the circumstances of Jesus' resurrection, ascension, and God's sending of the Holy Spirit. But they also doubt. And this was another case where their understanding of the world and the way that God had previously worked in it did not match with what they saw before them.

Jesus' parting words are commonly referred to as the "Great Commission". These words frame the basis for the communal identity and life together for the movement that will become the church. They give us our assignments as followers of Jesus Christ.

First, The Great Claim – Jesus said that He had been given all authority in heaven and on earth. He does not simply inspire by a great example, he empowers by a great authority. This is an amazing claim. It is a life changing thing to be involved with this cause!

Jesus' statement of "all authority in heaven and on earth refers not to authorization for his earthly ministry but to authorization in relation to all nations. This is universal in scope and includes both heaven and earth.

The Second assignment is our Great Commission. Jesus commanded his followers to make disciples of all nations, and to teach them to obey all His commandments. Based on his Great claim to absolute authority, Jesus gave his followers the most significant gift. He made them (and us) a part of the greatest possible adventure life can offer. The commission we have been given calls us to examine our lives and the life of our church in light of these words. All of our activities and programs – our budget and our stewardship program – all that we do must somehow relate to these few words: *"Go - and make disciples..."*.

Jesus commissioned us not to just *Go*, we are to baptize all these nations in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Mention of baptism might strike us as unexpected, particularly in light of the modern church's restrictions on who can and who cannot do this. But the Father is the ultimate source of authority. The Son receives and passes on that authority. The Spirit enables it all to happen and it is the Spirit that is received in baptism.

We are not just commissioned to baptize, but we are to teach. Teaching was so important to Matthew. It is not that he means teaching beliefs, but teaching about God's will, how to live in accordance with God's will, how to develop the righteousness which characterizes the kingdom of heaven. And what is the teaching? Read the story! Hear the message of compassion, the challenge of judgment and accountability and observe the lowly servant. To that the disciples (yes – even us) are authorized and therefore we are authorized to authorize others. That is the church's agenda.

The most important part of the Great Commission comes at the end. I call it the Great Comfort. Jesus promises to be with us to the end of the age. There is no question about the fact that the task we've been given is challenging. How can we go about making followers for Jesus Christ? Notice that Jesus didn't appoint a chair person for an evangelism committee or select two or three who were good at the task. He appointed them all. He appointed all of us. You are appointed. I am appointed. To make followers for Christ. But the really good news is that Jesus is with us every step of the way.

OK, so here's the thing: because, as adults, we derive a great deal of our sense of ourselves from our areas of competence – at work, at home, in volunteer activities or hobbies – when we find ourselves in situations where we do not feel competent our anxiety shoots through the roof. (This, by the way, is why adults have a hard time learning new language or musical instruments – it's not that our brains are too old or hardwired to learn something new; it's that we can't stand feeling incompetent and so we quit before making much progress.) Now, think about how often our hearers have been

invited, for instance, to make connections between their faith and life, share that faith with others, or invite others to come to church. Truth be told, these folks almost never have been asked, let alone shown how, to do these kinds of things even in the relatively safe confines of church let alone in more threatening situations outside of church. Which means that most of us don't feel competent to fulfill this daunting commission.

But remember the most important part of this passage. Jesus, as Lord of all, promises to be with us, the church, always, even until the final consummation of everything. This continuing, abiding presence of Jesus is a profound promise. We are reminded of the person of Jesus in his earthly life – the one who shared space with people, lived, and was present with them, and showed us what God is like.

Surely, this commission was meant not just for those eleven individuals full of faith and doubt who gathered around Jesus. In the end, we, here in Hoquiam, were meant by God to hear these words, to receive a commission Jesus himself shared with his friends so long ago. Much has changed certainly but much also remains the same. The call to “all nations” seems impossible, implausible, inadvisable. So I invite you to imagine the contours of this call for you today. This is not just a memory of the historical Jesus; it is a vital claim over our lives. It is our authority to *Therefore Go!* and make disciples wherever we might go, for Jesus will always meet us there.

The continuing, abiding presence of Jesus is a profound promise. He will be with his people until the final culmination of the ages. This is the Good News. Amen.