“***Make Disciples***” by S. Finlan, for The First Church, June 7, 2020

**2 Cor 13:11–13**

11 [May] the God of love and peace will be with you. 12Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. 13 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

**Matt 28:16–20 (NRSV and Mounce translation)**

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some hesitated. 18And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

We read here the ending of the Gospel of Matthew. Is there a way we can put ourselves in the apostles’ shoes and imagine how we would receive the final message of the risen Jesus? Even though we are not apostles, we can imagine that if we were hearing him, we would *value* his last message, and look back on it as having special importance. Both the content would be important to us, and the emotion it would arouse. It must have carried that meaning for the disciples, as well.

In his final message, Jesus tells them that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, and he is authorizing them to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The main points, then, concern the authority of Jesus and his authorization of the disciples. The disciples are told to obey his words, and he also utters those comforting words, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (v. 20). The disciples, and by extension the gospel’s readers, are told who’s in charge, are given a command, and offered a word of comfort. We, too, know who’s in charge, and know that we are to baptize and make disciples. We, too, are to be confident that Jesus will always be with us.

To this, I want to add the ending of 2nd Corinthians, which also has both command and comfort. In sending his best wishes, Paul stresses the love of God, linking it with the grace of Jesus and the communion of the Holy Spirit. The three persons give us love, grace, and communion, which are what we need in the church.

So, regarding discipleship, my first question is: what does it mean to be a disciple? It means to follow Jesus as our leader and savior. It means that our most important values will be shaped by his teachings and example. We study the truth that Jesus taught and lived out. We emulate the spiritual dignity that he embodied.

What are these values? In Matthew 23, Jesus said that a true disciple pays attention to “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matt 23:23). These spiritual goals are what matter. In chapter 6, we are told to “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” rather than worrying “about your body, what you will wear” (6:20, 25). God’s goodness should be our principal focus. “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (6:33), he says. That way, we will bear spiritual fruit, not only *hearing* Jesus’ teaching, but *doing* it (5:19). This gives us the power to forgive seventy-seven times, if necessary (18:22). Goodness is an end in itself. And serving others yields great joy. In one of his parables, Jesus speaks of the Father saying to a “good and faithful servant . . . enter into the joy of your master” (25:21 RSV). This is spoken to one who invested his talents and made a spiritual profit. So it refers to spiritual growth. Growth brings joy.

Discipleship in Matthew also means knowing the Scriptures, and knowing the words of Jesus, culminating in the “greatest commandment,” for upon the two love “commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (22:38–40). Often he will say “Have you never read in the Scriptures?” (21:42; see 21:16; 12:3; 22:31). This shows that he expects believers to have some biblical knowledge.

Discipleship also means that we proclaim, at appropriate times and in the best ways, these truths about God, Jesus, goodness, and righteousness. Maybe we are mainly sharing it with our friends, rather than shouting it from the rooftops. Still, it is important, in one way or another, as it says in Matthew 10, to “proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’” (10:7). What are the ways in which the kingdom of heaven or the *way* of heaven has come near to your heart? Maybe it comes near you when you feel a certain communion with your Christian friends. Maybe it’s when you take to heart Jesus’ words on “justice and mercy and faith” or his promise “I am with you always.” Taking in Jesus’ words leads to joy, and your joy is a testimony in itself.

I will summarize and simplify what it means to be a disciple. It means we recognize the authority of Jesus and are loyal to his truth and goodness. It means we are attentive to the other, to the demands of ethics and love. We develop our spiritual talents. And discipleship means we study to learn the good news, and to share it.

Now, what does it mean to *make* disciples? It means we help those who have been reached either by the preached word or by examples of Christian living, and who express a desire to follow Jesus. After baptizing them, we should be “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (28:20). So making disciples includes *teaching* them. Of all the gospels, Matthew is probably the one that puts the most emphasis on teaching. The whole gospel is structured by five great teaching sessions, and here at the very end, the last commandment is that disciples should teach Jesus’ commandments to *new* disciples. Matthew promotes the church as a community of teaching and practice. In a line that occurs only in Matthew, disciples are compared to scribes, when Jesus says “every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matt 13:52).

Treasure in this community is wisdom—including *written* wisdom, both new and old. It may be that new members were expected to learn the teachings of Jesus in classes taught by the new scribes, probably the pastors. In our church today, we carry on this teaching ministry through the sermons, Confirmation classes, membership classes, and Bible studies. It will always be important for believers to learn about Jesus. We should also teach that Jesus has the supreme authority, and that we are his children.

Let’s be like Matthew’s community in our approach to the task of learning righteousness. Let us be like a good scribe or householder, bringing forth treasures new and old. A good householder also offers hospitality to any visitor. We should be hospitable to new disciples.

We can practice brotherly affection and encouragement to both old and new disciples. We can be good *listeners*, and good comforters, too. We can affirm that the Son of God has promised “I am with you always.” *That* is why the kingdom of heaven is nearby, because the *king* is nearby. This is a fatherly and gracious king, and a thoughtful and kindly teacher. No matter what is going on in the environment, we can be secure, knowing we have the Son of God in our hearts.

As Paul wrote, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor 13:13). Pass it on.