

Shawnee Presbyterian Church
“God on the Move: The Great Commission”
Rev. Thomas Bartha
Sunday, July 26, 2020

Matthew 28:16-20

It was a gift from my Uncle Bill 60 years ago--a little red Buddha incense burner. I still have it--packed away in some box. Here is Buddha with a faint smile, serenely seated, eyes closed, hands resting upon his knees. On his large belly a flat surface on which to place the cone of incense. As the smoke curls, it is a picture of peaceful contemplation.

No Jesus incense burners to my knowledge. Jesus is full of energy and action. Teaching, healing, praying, feeding a multitude, up a mountain then down again. Moving closer to his fate in Jerusalem, encountering conflict and opposition at every turn. Even after the crucifixion, the angel at the tomb says: "*You are looking for Jesus who was crucified? He is not here. He is risen, and has gone ahead of you, to Galilee...*" No cone of incense to rest upon Jesus. God on the move.

The last time they had all been together was the night of Jesus' betrayal and arrest--before the crucifixion. Now, sometime after Easter, the eleven disciples go to this unnamed mountain to which Jesus had directed them. There is no previous mention of Jesus directing them to any mountain. It may well be where the Sermon on the Mount was preached, or where Jesus went by himself to pray. It is on the mountain that the eleven meet Jesus." Judas is no more; his betrayal still hangs in the air. Yet Jesus is not done with his small group.

"God has authorized me to commission you," he says. "*All authority on 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 I have commanded you.*"

Hugely significant. "Go, make disciples, baptize, teach, obey." These are the final words of Matthew's gospel--the end of the book. So this is where the work of the church begins: to spread the love of God, to make disciples, followers of Jesus. A task every bit as demanding as loving our enemies, turning the other cheek, forgiving seventy times seven times.

Yet before we unfold this charge, check the posture of the disciples: "*When they saw Jesus, they worshiped him; but some doubted.*" Doubted. The literal translation is, "And they worshipped him and they doubted." It is a portrait of the church, isn't it, with our mixture of worship and doubt, certainty and confusion, fear and joy. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth..." Absolutely... "And I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, and his coming kingdom where every tear will be wiped away, and death and sorrow shall be no more." Yes. But some days I believe it more than others. There are those flickers of doubt: exactly how, God, and when? Why the delay? "I believe that all things work together for good for those who love God, and who are called according to God's purpose." But then we see those contending with such misery and sorrow, and we shift uneasily in our pews, choking back that acid taste of doubt.

"They worshiped him, but some doubted." But it is Jesus' next words that grab hold of my heart. The presence of doubt does not seem to phase Jesus. He receives both their worship and their wavering. Notice--He does not divide the disciples into two camps, sending the worshippers in one direction to go, make disciples, baptize, teach, and obey, and the doubters back to discipleship school to work on these things.

No. Christ calls us forward, with a task, so "*that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*"

Every tongue. Every knee. Jesus will not let our doubts stand in the way of the Good News. He sends us out in every direction with a job to do: Go. Make disciples. Baptize. Teach. Obey."

Making disciples is a lifelong calling -- inviting others to walk with Jesus. The sense of the word is, "disciple people." It is a verb. How do you disciple people? The same way Jesus did: you love them, you listen, you have patience, you assist. Live your faith in a manner that is genuine to who you are, to how God created you. Help others meet Christ. This is no hit and run, impersonal affair. Disciple-making takes time. It takes perseverance and effort to build Christian community. Jesus invested three years with his disciples, listening, teaching, loving, correcting.

Nick was a pastor in Michigan—still is—who had a gift for making disciples. "Yeah, the plumber was at church this morning. We had coffee and I led him to Christ..." "I had a delay in the airport. I pulled out my Bible, and lead three passengers to profess faith in Jesus."

I always felt somewhat inferior around Nick, who also had the gift of exaggeration. But no doubt God used him. Some people do possess remarkable gifts for sharing their faith. Then again, I return to 1976 and a co-worker who remarked to me, "You know, you ought to go to church sometime. Don't go to my church," she said. "It is boring. But go to"...and she named a church. I visited, and God used that invitation. Faith took hold in a way it never had before. Jesus has enough faith in you and me that he entrusts us with his message--not to coerce or force our faith upon anyone. Making disciples is done by giving people room, to ponder and think and respond. Our part is to draw them in.

. It takes time. Now Jesus sends them out, as he sends us, to equip others with what we have learned, risking and caring and loving. A disciple is a student, a learner, who shares what we have learned, to equip and encourage others. One beggar showing other beggars where to find bread. Jesus began with twelve, who became eleven. Be certain to keep the vision before us... that the wandering can come home, that those living apart from any faith can come to a saving knowledge of Jesus,

that God answers prayer,

and that Jesus delights in working through any group of followers who allow him to use our particular mix of gifts and flaw. There are untold numbers of people within a short drive from this church, or where you live who are currently neutral to our Lord.

"Baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Baptisms are always wonderful. "And teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." "We cannot remember everything you taught us," the disciples say. "You will remember enough."

Eleven disciples, believing and doubting, charged with a worldwide mission, crossing boundaries and barriers. It must have sounded ludicrous to them, impossible. So, what kept them from simply fading away at the enormity of the mission, or shrinking back in fear.

What kept them? That final, enduring promise from Jesus. "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The eleven took that promise to heart. They came down the mountain, back into Galilee, and spoke about Jesus. Their words took root, and grew in other' lives. Then they went on to other regions, and choked out what Jesus meant to them. Some people were interested and some were not. The church grew. Simply, Christ's presence flowed through them. Other times they were so depleted, and suddenly hope was restored. Because Jesus was with them, to strengthen and guide.

Jesus never promises success at every turn, people always hungry to listen. There are roadblocks and reversals and rejection. But also receptiveness, and new hearts won over to Christ. Every single day! If there is something more rewarding than helping someone fall in love with Jesus, you tell me what it is.

"The church," one scholar said, "is a community of worshipping doubters, and they always make the best evangelists. We can only testify to Jesus as a people who do not have it all together, as people whose lives are still a bit of a mess." God loves working with raw materials.

So, there is the task. This is what Jesus asks of the church: to go and make disciples, expand the kingdom. Go with fear and joy. Go with faith and doubt. Go with secure footsteps and with shaking knees. Jesus desires others to know who he is, and he puts that in our hands, and on our lips, and in our faithfulness to his great commission.

"Go," he says, and remember: "I am with you always." Amen.