

First Sunday after Pentecost - A (2023)

Trinity Sunday

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Canticle 13

2nd Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

‘And Jesus said to them.....’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.’” In the name of the Triune God, amen.

I have offered a few sermons during this past Lent and Eastertide seasons featuring the theme of “Come and See; Go and Tell.” Jesus invited some of his earliest followers to put down their nets, leave their families, and close the shades at the tax collector’s booth. Others, such as Andrew and Peter, were encouraged to follow Jesus by their teacher, John the Baptist, when he pointed to Jesus and said, “Look, the Lamb of God.” Believing the Baptizer, they began their journey with the Messiah. Nathaniel, questioning whether anything good could come from Nazareth, responded to Jesus’ invitation to “Come and see” and joined the growing cadre of Jesus’ disciples, including Philip, James, and John, the Sons of Zebedee. These twelve responded to the call to “Come and see,” but they were not alone. Scripture tells us that crowds, often large ones, began to follow Jesus throughout the countryside and among the villages from Galilee to Jerusalem. “Come and see,” invites Jesus; come and encounter that divine reality that brings true life, true joy, and true freedom even in the midst of a present reality drenched in oppression and grief. Come, encounter, and then testify to what you have seen, heard, and experienced. Come and see; As a result, life will never be the same; Go and tell.

In today’s gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus doesn’t just gently invite his disciples to their next missional task during his time with them on that mountain

near Galilee. No. He is empowering them for their new mission, known as The Great Commission. Jesus tells them of his divine authority in both heaven and earth, and that by this all-inclusive authority, he commissions them for what they might very well have thought to be the impossible of all impossible tasks. They are to go and ‘make disciples of all nations,’ not just fellow Jews, but to all nations, aka ‘Gentiles.’ They are to baptize these new believers and to teach an abiding obedience to everything that they had been taught by the Messiah. “Go therefore and make disciples.....,” Jesus instructed his trusted inner circle. And knowing that they could not accomplish this task by their own abilities, Jesus offers his encouragement, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” The invitation to “Come and see” is now intertwined with a command to “Go and make....” Go and make disciples of everyone....Go and replicate, with others, what I have done with you. They were to make new people of ‘The Way.’

When I started my study on this section of Matthew’s gospel, I initially thought about the command as one of ‘going.’ Jesus was telling his disciples to ‘go.’ This made sense to me. Jesus didn’t command the disciples to wait around for someone to show up to teach them the Christian life and subsequently baptize them. Jesus didn’t instruct the disciples on how to be excellent hosts, offering appetizing food and drink after a teaching session or worship service. Jesus didn’t tell them to pitch nice tents in the countryside or rent space in a local village. But what I found out was that I had the sentence structure incorrect, that the ‘going’ was not the imperative verb. Rather, the emphasis is actually on the phrase ‘make disciples.’ Their mission was to ‘make disciples,’ with part of the process being to baptize and teach.

This got me wondering whether part of the myriad reasons the mainline churches have seen a continuing decline in membership was that they failed to ‘go’ and were content to be good hosts to those who showed up at their doors, especially when they looked like them. However, Jesus’ command of the church was not just ‘go’ but to ‘go and make disciples of everyone,’ and this apparent lack of ‘making disciples’ might very well be at the core of her decline. The wider church has

become content with being together more as a club and not as a source of discipleship; discipleship being another word for living in a Godly fashion; a Godly life founded on Word and Sacrament, service and fellowship, learning and sharing.

So if the Great Commission's imperative is to 'make disciples,' then we better be clear as to who is a disciple. Simply put, the Bible says a disciple is a learner or student. Thomas Tarrants, in his writings for the C. S. Lewis Institute, quotes Professor Michael Wilkins when he says about disciples: "a disciple of Jesus is someone who has come to him for eternal life, claimed him as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following him." Tarrants concludes his comments, "In other words, a disciple of Jesus is not simply someone who has made a profession of faith, or even someone who has learned the teachings of Jesus, but someone who has come to repentance and faith and is seeking to follow his teaching and example." So, following Jesus and growing as a disciple is an ongoing process of learning to become more and more like Jesus. Could this be the reason why the mainline churches in America are in decline, because maybe we're not doing a very good job of 'making disciples'?

We live in a current culture where everything needs to happen 'now.' Growing as a disciple of Jesus Christ is a lifelong process, and it's one in which the need for a community of faith is paramount. Growing as a disciple requires teaching, mentoring, prayer, worship, service, and fellowship, all of which arise from a community. It's hard to be a 'solo disciple.' We need to be a discipling community. We need to be the place where seeds are planted and watered. We need to be the place where learning and praying are a part of the very DNA of the community. We need to be the place where we are encouraged, respected, and our gifts are treasured; the place of genuine caring and where God's grace and mercy are proclaimed. Where all these exist, disciples are being made, and the command of Jesus is being perfected.

I want to leave with some very good news. First, I suspect each of you is here today because someone along the way modeled the life of Jesus for you. Maybe you grew up in a Christian home and attended church regularly. Maybe it was a grandparent. Maybe it was a spouse. Maybe it was a coach or teacher. Whomever it was, whether intentional or not, you saw Christlike characteristics that helped shape who you are today and are continuing to become.

Second, you do not have to be a scholar or a renowned theologian to be a ‘maker of disciples.’ You all know the Good News of the Gospel: HE IS RISEN!! It’s why you’re here today. All four synoptic gospels start differently and with differing emphases. However, they all come to the exact same conclusion: HE IS RISEN!! This is a story you can tell that begins the process of ‘making disciples.’ Your personal testimony is how this Good News of HE IS RISEN is shaping your life today, and people are attracted to others who have a good story. The largest barrier to this aspect of discipling is fear; some of us fear what others will say or think of us, or that we’re just not very good at ‘telling our story.’ The very God who was from before ‘the beginning’, who came to earth in a manger stall as Emmanuel, and who Jesus said would be with us even unto the end of the age, is with us in this life-changing undertaking. We need not fear, for God will provide the circumstances and words for his work to be accomplished.

And finally, we do not have to be responsible for the outcome of our seed sowing and watering, our storytelling, or our mentoring. This is God’s job. It takes all the pressure off worrying about the outcome.

Friends, the environment of discipleship is evident here. I pray we will continue to invite others to ‘Come and See’ as we continue to undertake the command to ‘Make Disciples’ in sure and unwavering confidence that the Triune God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will not only empower our work but bring it to completion in the fullness of time. For his use of us at this time, we give him humble thanks.

