

Sermon: The Great Commission Matthew 28: 16-20
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Let's be honest with each other for a minute. This passage I read from Matthew today is a really tough. It's probably engendered as much shame and guilt as any passage in the Bible. "Go and make disciples."

Who of us here really feels equipped, gifted for, or ready to go out and do that? Heck, it's in my job description and even I feel a pang of nervousness in my stomach at just the thought of going out and glad-handing with a bunch of strangers, trying to convince them to become followers of Christ.

If you are an introvert like me, the last thing you can imagine yourself doing is approaching people you don't know and asking them "Do you know Jesus?" And even if you are an extrovert, the idea of evangelizing others into the faith probably rubs you the wrong way. We are too aware that in the history of the Church, this passage has been abused and twisted. Christians have used this phrase "Make disciples" to justify convincing individuals to accept Christ through coercion, argumentation, manipulation, fear, guilt, shame, indoctrination, even violence. And, rightly enough, we want nothing to do with that brand of Christianity.

And so, this passage, often called the "Great Commission" instead becomes, for the mainline and progressive church, "The Great Omission" as we sit on the sidelines and leave this "making disciples" business to other people, other churches, mostly because the idea of "making" people into disciples sounds way too much like religious brainwashing and arm-twisting. But is there some way we might reclaim this text so that we can stand in solidarity with those disciples, on that mountainside, receiving the charge from the resurrected Christ to "GO!"

In the last few weeks, we've explored the post-Easter experiences of the disciples in the other gospels. In John, we experienced the multiple resurrection appearances. In Luke, we saw Jesus ascend into the sky.

Today, we come to Matthew, and his story seems to be the simplest of all.

The disciples meet Jesus on the mountainside. Now, any time in scripture that we find ourselves on a mountainside, we know a God-thing is about to happen. Mountainsides were seen as one of those thin places where the fabric between heaven and earth becomes transparent.

Jesus appears to the eleven. They worship him. Matthew even takes time to mention that some of them doubt -- even now, in the presence of the resurrected Jesus, they have doubt. For Matthew, doubt is just a part of faith. And, even in the midst of their doubt, Jesus gives his instructions to the eleven. They are very simple, very clear: Go and make disciples.

Just as Moses stood on the mountainside to give the law to the people, now Jesus stands on the mountainside to give them their new marching orders -- to go out into the world to baptize, teach and invite others into the family of God.

But do you notice what Jesus does NOT tell them to do?

Jesus does not tell them -- he does not tell us -- to make "Christians." He did not call on us to convert others to our faith (That, after all, is the work of God and the Holy Spirit.) He does not call upon us to make church-goers. He calls us to make disciples -- students and followers of the way, God's way. He calls upon us to teach others what he has commanded.

And what did Jesus command?

We don't need to look any further than Matthew 22 for the answer. Jesus says it simply and plainly: To love God, love yourself, and to love others.

We try to make it complicated sometimes, this whole discipleship thing, but maybe it's just as simple as that: love. Jesus wasn't building an institution, he was inspiring a movement. Jesus wasn't starting a club, he was declaring a new reality, one in which we are called to help others become people who love as God loves.

And it's clear in the gospels that he calls us to do that not by persuasion, not by enticement, not through fear, not by who has the best religious argument -- but to lead by example. We draw others into the family of God through our willingness to simply "Go" and be a witness to God's love by the way we live.

And, lastly, we are called to go to all the nations -- in other words, to the whole family of God. This requires a radically open welcome to all who might join us in our mission of love. So let's be honest: We, the Church universal - We have some work to do in this area. For too long, too many people have seen too many examples of the Church not as a place of welcome but as a place of judgment and condemnation -- of division.

Just a couple of weeks ago, the Westboro Baptist Church visited our town to witness to their condemnation of our gay family members, our gay friends, our gay children-- condemning them to hell simply for who they are.

Just this week, the Southern Baptist Convention approved a resolution at their national meeting, openly condemning transgender persons, and they did so by invoking the call of the Great Commission -- the very text we have before us today.

Last week, leading evangelical John MacArthur posted a YouTube video, offering this advice to parents of what he terms "unrepentant" gay children: "You have to alienate them, you have to separate them, you can't condone [who they are] ...because it's inconsistent with a profession of Christ. So you isolate them. You separate yourself from them. You turn them over to Satan, as scripture says."

This kind of rhetoric, is unfortunately, what most people outside the Church associate with Christianity. Every recent poll that has asked 20-30 somethings why they are not in church has shown the same results -- young people consistently name what they perceive as the Church's intolerance of LGBT persons to be one of the top reasons that they have left the church or never had an interest in it to begin with.

Though we have before us a today a text that clearly calls us to Go and draw others into a community of God's love and welcome, what many young people hear us declaring is division, isolation, and exclusion.

I hope by now you know that I am no soap box preacher. It's not my way to stand in front of you and preach about every justice issue of the day that I feel you ought to give your time to -- I think we each are called to discern what issues are most important to our lives and to have the passion to respond and do what we can. And I know that there is no getting around the fact that I personally have a "dog in the hunt" when it comes to the acceptance of LGBT persons.

But, in reality, don't we all? Doesn't the Church?

Will this not be seen as one of *the* defining issues of the Church in the early 21st Century? In truth, this is *the* issue that those outside the Church look to as a litmus test to see if we are truly welcoming. "If they welcome my gay friends and family," many reason, "Then maybe they will welcome me, too."

And I fear that if we don't get this one issue right, the future of the Church in America is tenuous at best.

Our call from the gospel this morning, clearly, is not to stand guard at the doors of the Church and protect what we have, carefully screening who is allowed into our midst. Our call this morning is not to stand at the gates of the Church waiting for others to figure out if we are a place of welcome or for some to be brave enough to take a chance and try walking up our front steps. Our call is to "Go" - to be a witness to others of a radically different way to be in the world -- God's way of love and grace for all people. We are called to invite, gather in, teach and be family with all who would join us in following Christ's way of radical love and welcome.

Next weekend, many of us in this church family will seize the opportunity to "Go" and be a witness to God's love at the 2nd Annual St. Joseph Pride Fest. This is an opportunity to Go and be a witness to God's welcome not only to the LGBT community, but also to their friends, to their family members, to their coworkers, to their neighbors. I hope we are blown away by the number of this church family who take time to be part of that festival.

There will be people there who will be shocked to see a church participating in a pride festival. There will be those who will be suspicious of us, and with good reason. But there will also be those who will be intrigued, inspired, and perhaps even encouraged that there is a place for them in the Christian faith, simply because we take time to be

there, to show up, to witness in how we welcome those attending the festival.

We will likely be one of only two or three churches in this town willing to make that kind of witness. In fact, we are one of only 6 DOC congregations in the whole state of Missouri that are officially open and affirming - publicly welcoming of all people. That means that we have a unique, special witness to make not only to this community, but to this state, to our denomination, the church as a whole.

This church has a long, long history of being a progressive voice in this community, in our denomination, and in the wider Church. Our call today is to continue to be that progressive voice. We have a unique calling from Christ to Go and live out the witness of that radical welcome, that radical calling to love all of God's children, and to invite others to be part of that welcome, part of that love, part of that mission to heal the brokenness of the world.

The truth is, We will not accomplish this kind of welcome through rhetoric, by shouting louder than the fundamentalists, or by preaching sermons. The call from Jesus is to "Go!"

LGBT persons know that injunction well. We know that life is one long process of coming out of the closet - of going forth and being the people God created us to be. Well, the time has come for progressive churches, for progressive Christians, those who believe that God welcomes all people unconditionally, to come out of the religious closet.

Because the truth is, if you are a progressive Christian, to the majority of people you are like a unicorn: they've never seen one and they are pretty sure they don't exist.

That is no exaggeration.

In fact, I read a post on the internet this week of a litany of inclusion not unlike the one our group shared this morning as our call to worship. The litany described a church where people in all their diversity, were welcome. A number of people commented on that post saying: "I wish there was a church like that, because if there was, I'd be going to it."

To put it plainly, most people have no idea that churches like ours even exist. The progressive church, the welcoming church is the best kept secret in Christendom. We've become masterful at hiding inside the walls, like we were part of some spiritual scavenger hunt, waiting for others to stumble upon us. The gospel message today calls on us to blow our covers as Christians who believe that love --not condemnation, not division -- is what it's all about! The time has come for all of us to come out of the religious closet!

To go outside the walls of the Church and declare, in word and deed, God's welcome to the whole human family -- and to share that welcome particularly with those who have

been beaten down, left out, excluded or told the lie that they have no place in the mission and ministry of the Church.

And here's the good news for us in today's gospel: We don't go as perfect people or even as perfect Christians. We go as human beings, even those with doubt, those who still have questions, those who even at times disagree perhaps on what the Christian faith ultimately is all about.

And we aren't sent out alone. We go together in love. And Matthew's Jesus promises us that as we go, he goes with us.

Let us pray.