

24 May 2020

Witness: The Commission
Matthew 28:16-20

For the past three weeks (and, really, for most of my ministry) I have been trying to define the Christian life as a life of growth, transformation, and change. Specifically, I've been arguing that being Christian is the process of growing into the likeness of Christ, into the Image of God. Being a follower of Christ is not a thing that we *are* but a thing that we *become*.

That process of becoming, I have argued from scripture, is a slow process, because every enduring change takes place over time. This is why Jesus consistently described the Kingdom of God as being like a seed – the beginning of a process – and why he spent his own earthly ministry focused on planting those kingdom seeds in a few disciples. For the disciple, this process involves a lifetime of choices, each one potentially representing a step forward. Or not. We have talked about making choices for the sake of others and for the sake of future generations, not for ourselves. We've talked about choices regarding how we spend our time, how we use our gifts and talents, and what we do with our material possessions. Indeed, following Christ touches on every area of our lives, because we were created to *become* the Image of God, not have it available as a outfit to wear on Sundays.

Today we conclude this series with one more question. If our faith is by definition a long process of transformation, what then is our witness to the world? And so, for our scripture today, we read the Great Commission that Jesus gave to his disciples after his Resurrection. It is found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 28, verses 16-20:

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹As you go, therefore, 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.'

This final speech of Jesus will be familiar to all who grew up in the church. We use it in mission emphasis Sundays and at the commissioning of missionaries and so on. Many of you may have memorized it at some time. It was the prime directive for the great missionary movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is a call to evangelism. So let's look at what it actually says.

To begin with, those who did memorize it one time probably noticed a change from the words that you know. I didn't say, "Go ye therefore" but "As you go, therefore." This is because that's how the Greek original reads. The verb "to go" in this verse is not a command – "Go!" – but a participle – "going" or "as you go." This is important. Jesus' command is not to "Go!" but to "Make disciples" wherever we happen to go. Yes, some are called to go to other places to make disciples – that's the "of all nations" bit. But the Great Commission is not just for them. It's for all of us.

In fact, "make disciples" is the *only* command in the Great Commission. All the later stuff – baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to do all that I have commanded – those are all participles, too. They aren't further commands; they are explanations of what the command to make disciples involves. So, an

expanded translation of this verse might read, “So as you go about your lives, wherever that takes you, *make disciples of Jesus Christ*. Here’s what that entails: baptizing them and teaching them everything that I spent my life teaching you.”

It’s all about making disciples. So what is that? A disciple is a learner, a dedicated follower, one who has committed herself or himself to imitating the Master, an apprentice Jesus. Do you notice how this changes the way we usually read the Great Commission? We usually treat it as a call go out and convert people to Christianity, but it doesn’t say, “Make converts” or “Make church members” or even “Make Christians.” It says “Make disciples.” The Great Commission doesn’t tell us to convince people to agree with our beliefs regarding Jesus Christ; it calls us to persuade people to join us on a journey of transformation into the likeness of Christ. The good news we are entrusted with is not “if you decide to believe this now, you can go to heaven” but rather, “if you join me on this road – which is often hard – you can start to become like Christ and discover the person you were created to be.”

Now some of you, hearing this, are shuddering. How are we supposed to do that? It was bad enough to be told to go out and “witness.” How are we to persuade someone to start a lifelong journey that we can’t promise will always be pleasant? And you’re quite right. We can’t. Not with words, anyway. People don’t make decisions like this based on a sales pitch. But let’s think about it differently. Parents, teachers, grandparents? How do you teach your children to become people of integrity? An inspirational poster and a speech on “honesty is the best policy” won’t do it. Integrity’s hard. How then? There’s only one way. By living a life of integrity yourself and letting them witness the choices you make and the effect of those choices on you. How do you teach integrity? By example in relationship, over time. And how do we teach our children compassion? Example in relationship, over time. Unselfishness? Example in relationship, over time.

How then are we supposed to make disciples? Yeah, that’s it. For the important stuff, a sales pitch is just insulting. This is why I think it’s so important to understand that first phrase in the Great Commission as “As you go.” Most of us aren’t sent to go to some place and tell people something to get them to do a thing. We are told, “wherever you go, make disciples” and the only way to make a disciple is by example in relationship, over time.

For those of us who are already disciples of Jesus Christ – all at different stages along that journey – this understanding of our witness is hard. There’s no time off; an apprenticeship is a full-time commitment. But in another way, it is also very good news, because it sets us free from some impossible and frankly puzzling expectations that have been placed on Christians over the past couple of centuries – such as sales-pitch evangelism. As I said, many see the Great Commission as a command to “make converts”: get people to sign up and join our group. To that end, we’ve made it as simple as possible – just walk this aisle, pray this prayer, agree to these four verses from Romans. We have trained people in techniques for getting under people’s guard, copying our evangelism training from sales seminars, because we were told that it was what Jesus wanted us to do. It is a most peculiar thing, though. If you look at the Gospels, you realize that Jesus himself *never* did that sort of thing, never manipulated people and never made following him easy. In other words, we who have been through those evangelism sales seminars were being told that Jesus wanted us to behave exactly opposite from the way he himself behaved. How does that make sense? There’s a stunning passage at the end of Luke chapter 9, where three different people come to Jesus asking to join his group, and to all three he lays out

the hardships they will face. They change their minds and leave. Jesus doesn't want converts. He wants apprentices.

But if this is so – and it is – that means we're going to have to rethink our theology of salvation. The reason that we developed quick-response, EZ-pass evangelism is because of the teaching that most of us absorbed from our youth, that only those who have "accepted Christ" go to heaven. Anyone who isn't a "Christian," defined as someone who agrees to our doctrines, goes to hell – eternal torment. So obviously we have to get people quick, before they die and it's too late. We don't have time to dilly-dally around with this "example in relationship, over time" business. Manipulating people into converting to Christianity with memorized speeches might not be the sort of thing that Jesus did himself, but he doesn't want people to go to hell, does he?

But that's not what the Bible teaches. Yes, the Bible mentions hell, but never as the consequence for having wrong ideas. Indeed, the vast majority the references to hell in the New Testament come either in parables or the Book of Revelation – writings that we agree should not be read literally – and no one picture of hell agrees with any of the others. Most of all, hell is never used as an inducement for salvation. The Apostle Paul – the great evangelist himself – in all his writings mentions hell maybe once. If his reason for spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ was because it was the only way to avoid eternal torment, then it was extraordinarily careless of him never to mention that, don't you think?

No, Jesus' example and Paul's evangelism agree. The goal is to make disciples, apprentices, planting those imitators of Christ in the world to begin a long-term transformation. The God who planned that is a patient God, and that patient God is not going to condemn people to eternal damnation based on getting a few doctrines wrong during a few short years on earth. Such an idea is incoherent. A God who creates people as eternal souls and then decides their eternal fate based on their beliefs in the first few decades of that eternity is a God of unimaginable cruelty and has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. No, the only thing that makes sense to me is that the patient God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is interested in our growth and transformation as long as it takes, sets us on a journey that transcends this brief life and never gives up on us.

So what is our witness to this God? Example in relationship, over time. Lives of growth and transformation as we choose love over hate, acceptance over division, integrity over success, faithfulness over deception, faith over fear. This is our witness. This is evangelism – good news telling. And when the church of Jesus Christ consists of that example, over time, we won't have to market ourselves. The Spirit of God, who is already at work in the lives of people all around us, telling them that there is more to life than they are yet experiencing, will send them to us. Then we will truly be making disciples for the transformation of the world. May it be, Lord. Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, who laid your life down for us,
we give you thanks today.

And on this Memorial Day, we remember all those who have fought for the sake of others,

on distant battlefields, in distantly remembered wars,
standing to protect those whom they did not know,
even to the point of death.
And in this new battlefield, we remember those fighting a different war,
in different uniforms,
no longer in foreign lands,
but still risking their own lives for others.
On all these we ask your blessing, for you know them.
You are the one who taught them courage,
and you stand beside them today. Amen.