

With You Always

from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Matthew 28:16-20

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. 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.”

Of the four gospels, only Matthew has what we might call a proper, definitive ending. The endings of Mark and John were changed by later editors who added tidier closing statements to the original texts, and Luke doesn't end exactly, but continues in his sequel, the Acts of the Apostles. Only Matthew comes to a real moment of closure, and it is a powerful way to end a gospel.

Matthew summons the hearer to a final appearance of the Risen Christ who gives a bold charge and benediction: "Go therefore... and make disciples of all nations." The Great Commission we have come to call it, and for centuries the church grew and spread by acting on these imperative verbs: Go, Make, Baptize, Teach, and Obey." From the early days of Christendom on, the vigor with which people heeded this charge, admittedly may have caused the church to lose sight of the benediction, the good word in the text, the blessing.

Charge and Benediction are meant to go together. What the Risen Christ is saying to his disciples is: Spread the love of God, welcome all of the world's children into the Kingdom of God, a sacred realm made known by love and grace, by justice and peace. Which is no easy task according to Matthew – but as ethically demanding as – loving our enemies, turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile, forgiving seventy times seven, and giving our worldly possessions away!

These are not easy lessons for any one of us to live into, much less to take to the ends of the earth. However, I imagine few passages of scripture fueled the fires of previous missionary movements as much as this one. And this is when the charge mistakenly failed to take the blessing with it.

While some of that missionary movement did spread the grace of the gospel – centuries ago that missionary zeal also carried forth systematic cultural and religious and racial oppression. Christianizing Native Americans meant they were forced from their land by our white European forebears; their obedience required abandoning their native

languages and destroying any artifacts representing their beautiful cultural heritage.

At the founding of our nation 400 years ago, a religious zeal was used to take the gospel to Africa, and much of that resulted in putting black bodies in shackles, cramming them into the lower levels of ships, bringing them to this country to work as the enslaved property of another, all the while misusing Biblical texts to justify the economic exploitation and oppression of human beings made in the image of God.

For the Mayans in Central and South America, “Go, make disciples of all nations,” meant requiring indigenous people leave behind their reverence for nature as they assumed the new cloak of Christianity, a gospel that was also too often wielded with a sword and the overpowering of a people for the economic exploitation of their land.

Friends, the civil unrest we are living through today has deep roots not just in the economic and government-sanctioned conquest of human beings. The civil unrest we are living through today has been in large measure an outgrowth of white people taking this very text from Matthew’s gospel and misusing it to abuse and oppress black and brown people, God’s beloved human beings, God’s children deemed to be of lesser value by the color of skin.

Today, many wise people are saying that following the brutal killing of George Floyd – on display for all the world to see – we have reached an inflection point; that this may be the moment when we turn toward substantive change in our country to stem the rising tide of racism.

I hope that is true. But I also hope that as people of faith we have arrived at a significant point of confession. Only if we are willing to acknowledge our history, and admit our complicity, will we be able truly to hear the experience of our black and brown neighbors and partner with them for meaningful change.

Pastor of Metropolitan AME church in Washington, William Lamar said in response to the President's photo-op in front of St. John's church – "From the founding of this nation, the church and the Holy Scriptures have been used by the state with the church's permission to dislocate people, rain violence upon them and declare the sovereignty of American empire and white male flesh... The challenge before American Christianity now is to find the courage to disentangle itself from America's imperialist impulses and among the first steps toward this courage is truth telling..."

If American Christianity is to embrace God's earthly reign, the church must be committed foremost to structural change. The power we must build is to exert unrelenting pressure such that all human beings – especially those whom Jesus referred to as 'the least of these' – have full access to quality health care and education, can earn a living wage and afford safe housing.

The reign of God is incomplete unless the prison industrial complex is abolished, fair tax structures are enacted, employment opportunities are available equitably to all humans, and our economy is one based on the value of what we produce with our labor rather than what we simply extract from others."¹

Friends, this is how we need to re-purpose the Great Commission for the good, and rediscover the meaning of its benediction.

The good news is the text itself drops a big clue as to how contemporary Christians can reinterpret and respond to this gospel's closing Charge and Benediction. It comes when Matthew describes the posture of the disciples. "*When the disciples saw Jesus, they worshipped him; but some doubted.*" At first hearing, it sounds like most of them

¹ William H. Lamar IV, "Trump's Stunt at S. John's is the Result of American Churches Bowing to Power," nbc.com, 6/3/2020.

recognized Jesus and worshipped him, while only a few of them had doubt. But the original words are actually better understood, “They worshipped and they doubted!”

Biblical scholar Mark Allen Powell notes that Jesus neither rebukes the doubt, nor does he divide the disciples into two camps, sending the worshippers in one direction to spread the gospel, and the doubters back to discipleship school. Rather, Jesus receives both their worship and their wavering, their awe-struck reverence before the Risen Lord and their uncertainty about what his Risen presence means.

Powell notes, “The church in Matthew’s gospel is a community of worshipping doubters, and they always make the best evangelists. We can only testify to Jesus as people who do not have it all together, as people whose lives are still a bit of a mess.”²

I think this is very good news for us, because we know we do not have perfect faith. If we are honest that our worshipping life is intended to include our doubt, then we will live out our faith with a measure of humility. Humble Christians – I believe – are not as likely to use our faith in abusive, oppressive, coercive and exclusive ways.

I am not suggesting we cease to be a community of faith seeking understanding. But isn’t it refreshing to hear from Jesus himself that our questioning uncertainty about matters of belief do not have to get in the way of faithfulness to his charge.

We can take this Great Commission every bit as seriously as previous generations have, but maybe now we can hear it filtered through greater humility knowing that Jesus himself doesn’t let our doubts stand in the way. The only word we need to strengthen our resolve and send us out carrying the gospel, is the word of Christ: *‘And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’...*

² Mark Allen Powell, *Loving Jesus*

If we take this gospel Charge and Benediction seriously, we can do what Congressman John Lewis is fond of saying:

We can say to our black and brown neighbors:
“I see you, and I hear you. I know your pain,
your rage, your sense of despair and hopelessness.

Justice has, indeed, been denied for far too long...
So it is time to get into Good Trouble.

Organize. Demonstrate. Sit in. Stand up. Vote.
Be constructive, not destructive.”³

Amid all the bad news these days... this gospel word is
commanding us to get ourselves into Good Trouble heeding the call of
Christ to spread the love and justice of God to the ends of the earth.

AMEN.

³ “Why the Nation’s Civil Unrest is Good Trouble,” yahoo.com, 6/4/2020.