

Sermon Title: "The Great Commission"

Sermon Reference: Matthew 28:16-20

In 1948, there are two particular things that happened. One, there was a guy named Kent Keith who was born. Two, Mother Teresa turned 38 years old. At the age of 38, Mother Teresa founded the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta, India. Through that charity, she established what was called the Pure Heart Home, which was basically a home for hospice care, a place for people who were dying. She later expanded that work to open a place for those with leprosy and then later establishing the children's home - the orphanage. Fast forward to 1968, Kent Keith had grown up and made his way to Yale University and at almost 20 years old, he penned a poem, which caught the attention of Mother Teresa. So much so, that she hung the words of Kent Keith's poem on the walls of the children's home in Calcutta. Because she shared these words so much, most people assumed they were written by Mother Teresa herself.

That poem went like this:

"People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind,

people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful,

you will win some false friends and some true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

Honest and frankness make you vulnerable

Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building,

someone could destroy overnight.

Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness,
they may be jealous.

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today,
people will often forget tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have,
and it may never be enough.

Give the best you've got anyway.”

Today’s Gospel brings us to the final words of the resurrected Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. These are not just farewell words. They are commissioning words. Sending words. Movement words. The kind of words that stick with you like a poem hanging on the wall that you will remember. “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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The disciples had traveled to a mountain in Galilee because Jesus told them to go there. And when they went, they went searching for God, but instead, God met them right where they were -there on that mountain, through Jesus. And when they arrived, Matthew tells us something fascinating:

“When they (the disciples) saw him (Jesus), they worshiped him; but some doubted.”

What an honest line. Some doubted!

Not after the crucifixion. Not before Easter. After resurrection. They see

the risen Christ standing in front of them... and still, some doubted. A fun fact because some of you love to learn fun Greek words in scripture. The greek word here for doubt is distazo (dis-TAD-zo), and it literally means to “stand in two places,” or “being of two minds.” The only other time this is used in all of the new testament is when Jesus asked Peter to walk on water (Matthew 14:31) to meet him and Peter doubted. He had faith and doubted all at the same time. When Peter, or the disciples, found themselves standing in two places of faith and doubt, Jesus called them anyway.

Peter’s doubt, nor the disciples doubt disqualified them from being used by God, nor does it disqualify us!

Jesus does not shame these disciples. Jesus does not say, “It would be great if you could come back when your faith is stronger.” Instead, he commissions them anyway. And maybe that is the first thing the church needs to hear today: God has always worked through imperfect people. The Gospel has never depended upon flawless faith.

There are people in churches every Sunday carrying quiet doubts as some preacher stands up to say “let’s go share the Gospel!” There are people

wondering if prayer matters,
wondering where God is in suffering,
wondering whether hope can survive another difficult week,
wondering if love is stronger than fear and hate.

And yet here we are.

Still singing. Still gathering. Still showing up. We worship and we also have doubts at the same time. Good news! Jesus has some experience with people who worship and doubt at the same time. :-) When we doubt, we worship anyway. The church is not a community of people who have every answer. The church is a community trying our best to follow Jesus together.

Jesus says to these uncertain disciples: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all

nations..." Notice what Jesus does not say.

He does not say:

"Conquer all nations."

"Control all nations."

"Win every argument."

He simply says:

"Make disciples."

Disciples are not made through coercion, manipulation, or force. They are formed through relationships, through compassion. Through teaching. Through mercy. Through community. Through love embodied in everyday life. Just as Jesus modeled for us. Too often Christianity has confused discipleship with controlling others, telling them exactly how to live their lives, trying to dominate and dictate how each person should act and be, how people should vote, who is allowed to preach and teach, controlling who others are allowed to love and marry, how people should dress, and on and on and on.

Jesus never commanded the church to seize power. He commanded the church to embody love, just as he had done among them. Jesus gives a commission - an assignment, a charge - and it was Great - as in big, bold, vulnerable, risky, and totally worth it.

The Great Commission is about expanding beloved community. It is about creating spaces where people know they are seen, valued, welcomed, and loved by God.

And notice something else: Jesus says, "Go." Faith was never meant to remain still. The church was never meant to become a fortress hiding from the world.

We are sent outward with this Great Assignment, this Great Commission - with all of our hopes and doubts.

We are sent outward toward neighbors. Outward toward pain. Outward to call out injustice. Outward toward those who are lonely. Outward toward people the world ignores.

The Gospel - the Good News - is always moving beyond walls. Sometimes we think "mission" - or fulfilling this commission - means traveling far away. And sometimes it does.

But often the assignment begins much closer.

It begins in the ordinary places

Like on mountains, in sanctuaries,
the kitchen table,
the hospital waiting room,
the classroom,
the office,
the text message,
the grocery store, the social media post,
the difficult conversation,
the grieving family,
the exhausted friend.

When we bring our full selves to these spaces, wrapped in the promise that God has given us through Jesus, then we start to see the Great Commission come to life.

Every time we choose kindness over cruelty, truth over fear, welcome over exclusion, hope over despair, we are participating in the work of Jesus that he has called us to do.

Jesus says: "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you."

And what did Jesus command? Things like...

Love your neighbor.

Love your enemy.

Feed the hungry.

Forgive.

Welcome the stranger.

Care for "the least of these."

Practice mercy.

Seek justice.

Do not be afraid.

And then comes the promise at the end: Jesus says “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The disciples are about to enter a difficult world. A world of violence, division, empire, poverty, and uncertainty. Honestly, it sounds familiar.

And yet Jesus says: “I am with you.”

Not: “I was with you.” Not: “I might be with you.”

“I am with you always.” Through the very presence of the Holy Spirit.

Christ is present in every act of courage.

Christ is present in every meal shared with someone in need.

Christ is present beside hospital beds and gravesides.

Christ is present as we watch and read the news wondering what the day will bring.

Christ is present in communities working for peace.

Christ is present wherever love refuses to give up.

The church does not carry the Gospel by itself. Christ goes ahead of us.

And maybe we need that reminder right now.

Because many people are tired.

Tired of conflict in the world

Tired of bad news.

Tired of division.

Tired of carrying burdens that feel too heavy.

Sometimes the future of the church feels uncertain.

Sometimes the future of the world feels uncertain.

But resurrection people have always lived with uncertainty and doubt - and that's okay. The disciples themselves did not know exactly what would happen next. They simply trusted that God had always been there, the risen Christ was already ahead of them, and the Holy Spirit would be right beside them.

And perhaps that is faith: not having every answer, but we go on the journey anyway.

Worshiping and doubting anyway
Hoping and fearful anyway
Believing and asking questions anyway
Yet – still we GO anyway

As the staff kept asking me what the sermon title would be for today (y'all know we like to print those far in advance!), I didn't submit my title until this past Monday. As I said to David, I think I want to keep it simple.

This text already has a name: The Great Commission. Maybe the call of this text is simpler than we sometimes try to make it.

Go love people.

Go tell the truth that every human being bears the image of God.

Go practice mercy in a cruel world.

Go with your questions and your doubts.

Go create communities where nobody has to earn dignity.

Go remind the lonely that they are not forgotten.

Go remind the suffering that despair is not the final word.

Go toward reconciliation.

Go toward justice.

Go toward kindness.

Go toward hope.

Go live as though resurrection is real.

And do not forget: you do not go alone.

The Christ who met frightened disciples on a mountain still meets us now.

Still calling. Still sending. Still loving. Still saying: "Remember, I am with you always."

Our lives didn't overlap with the disciples like Mother Teresa and Kent Keith's, but who the disciples were and the way they lived their lives is still impacting us today in how we understand who Jesus is to us.

The Great Commission asks us to give our full selves to follow Jesus and sometimes that feels scary and overwhelming and vulnerable. Go anyway. Sometimes we doubt if our story matters in the grand scheme of things. Share it anyway. Go therefore to all the nations to share the Good News. "But I'm scared!" Go anyway. Sometimes I doubt what you have called me to do because I don't think I have the right gifts and talents. And God says "Go anyway!" "Yeah, but my story is so unique. It might scare people off." Share it anyway! We are called to a great, a bold, a big, a risky task - charge - assignment. And together, we're going to go anyway and share the Good News. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - Amen.