

As you go...
Matthew 28:16-20
Julie M. Hill
April 16, 2023

Today we come to the very last words in the Gospel according to Matthew. Last week, of course, was the Resurrection of Jesus. As you recall, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus appeared to the women at the empty tomb. He told them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee, where he would meet them. Today's reading is that meeting in which we hear what has come to be known as the Great Commission. Our scripture reading is Matthew 20:16-20. I am reading from NRSV Updated version.

I admit, I have always had a level of discomfort with The Great Commission:
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.

I can't help but think of Nathan Price when I hear it. Nathan Price is a fiery Baptist preacher in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*. He hears God calling him to a new ministry through these words of Jesus in the Bible and he moves his family from rural Georgia to the Congo to save souls for Christ.

Unfortunately, the attitudes and beliefs he carries with him to Africa are wildly inappropriate to the environment...and his behavior is not very Christ-like. When welcomed by the village men, bare-chested women, and naked children, singing their own versions of Christian hymns, Price delivers a sermon about God punishing sinners for their "nakedness." The villagers turn away dismayed.

Nathan is one of these stereotypical old-time missionaries who is totally rigid in his religious zeal...and he is completely committed, obsessed even, with baptizing as many people, particularly children, as he possibly can. For him, that is what the Great Commission is all about. Yet, no matter what he does, no matter how he tries, the villagers do not bring their children for baptism in the river that runs near the village.

On Easter Sunday, Nathan stages a grand pageant to encourage baptism. Attendance is sparse, even on Easter, and the few who are there, refuse to let their children be baptized. His wife, Orleana, has an idea for how to win them over. She fries up chicken and passes it out to the village. It works. At least they show up. But still no baptisms. Taking his cue from his wife's success, poor Nathan tries his own version of enticement. He sets off dynamite in the river to kill fish for the villagers. Perhaps this will inspire them to join the church. He's willing to try anything. So many fish are killed, however, that the day of abundance becomes a day of waste, sadness, and bewilderment since there is no way to preserve the fish that are not eaten.

It is only after 6 months and yet more long sermons on baptism and impassioned but fruitless pleas to come to the river for baptism, that Nathan learns that the river is a place of danger for the children. Some have even died in that river recently. Poor Nathan has been so fixated on his plan of saving souls and baptizing children, that he

failed to listen to the villagers' concern: there are crocodiles in the river where he wants to "save" the children.

Nathan Price is, of course, a caricature of the worst of the missionary movement that was birthed from the Great Commission. Yet we know that the church has been guilty of disregard, insensitivity and paternalism in its missionary efforts. We know that there have been times in the past when colonialism and national interests have pushed aside the values of the gospel. That is certainly an abuse of this commission yet those stories still make me uncomfortable.

Of course, there are wonderful stories as well. I remember the missionaries who would visit my church every couple of years while I was growing up. These men spoke of hospitals and schools built in Christ's name, access to nutritious food and clean water made available for the suffering poor, and lives changed and made richer by the gospel of Jesus Christ, shared in loving ways. I saw these missionaries as super-Christians. I imagined their faith to be rock solid and their commitment unwavering. They heard God's voice call to them through the Great Commission and they obeyed...in big, bold ways...and like Nathan, they each left their homes to go to faraway lands.

Even stories of the wonderful things that have been wrought by missionaries leave me uncomfortable...more with myself than with what they were doing. Having never felt the call to live and work and preach in a faraway land, I am left to wonder: What does the Great Commission have to do with me? Are we all called to venture to lands unknown for the sake of the gospel? Or is the Great Commission just for some Christians, the super-Christians? Maybe the problem is with me. Perhaps my faith is too weak or I am not trusting enough or I am too fearful to hear God's call to Go! You might say that the visits from these missionaries left me feeling a bit like a second-class Christian, through no fault of their own. I wonder if I am the only one who has ever felt that way. After Bible study this week, I think not.

"Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them." "The eleven"- there is sadness in that word...their number is no longer complete...they are not twelve but eleven...the treachery of Judas still hangs in the Easter community...Their dream is over...They don't know what comes next now that Jesus is not with them. Still, they go as the women had told them. Upon seeing Jesus, we are told that "they worshipped him but they doubted" as the updated New Revised Standard version translates. It is unclear whether the Greek here is indicating that some of them worshipped while others doubted or if, within each of them, there is a sort of mixed bag- worship mixed with doubt, prayer mixed with puzzlement... Isn't that all of us?

Two things are clear: First, even with their doubt, the disciples show up. Second, Jesus is not put off by their doubt. He does not move away. In fact, Jesus draws near. I take comfort in this. Make no mistake, there are no superheroes standing before Jesus. These are the same disciples who betrayed, denied, fell away and failed Jesus during his passion. Still, moves toward these disciples and tells the eleven that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. And now, on the basis of that authority, Jesus commissions these worshipping, doubting, flawed disciples... all of them...to make more disciples. This is what comes next...for them and for us.

And that is just what the disciples do. In a context in which few people knew about this Jesus of Nazareth, the disciples went out and told the good news of Jesus. From the Book of Acts, the writings of Paul, and the fact that we are sitting here today, we know that word spread, and the church grew. Praise God!

Yet, perhaps the growth and spread of the early church is one of the reasons Nathan Price was so fixated on converting and baptizing as many people as possible, as quickly as possible. Perhaps the experience of the early church has distorted our understanding of the Great Commission. Jesus does not commission the disciples to make more church members. The goal is not “making converts” per se. It is not to see how many people will profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is about so much more. It is about inviting people into a way of life that is different from that of the empire- an alternative way of life that lifts up the most broken and lets the oppressed go free. It is about making disciples, students of God’s will, and that is a lifelong process.

In studying these verses, I discovered something that has changed how I hear The Great Commission, something that helps me better understand its claim on my life. I have always been hung up on the Go! part. Yet, in the Greek, there is only one verb, one imperative in these verses and it is not “Go!” It is “make disciples.” “Go” is not a command as our English translations suggest. It is a participle. ⁱ

The tense of the word “go” might be better understood by saying,

As you go, or as you are going, make disciples.
As you are living your life in the world...
As you go to school...
As you go to work...
As you attend school board meetings...
As you volunteer with Love Feast on the Streets...
As you stand on the side of the soccer field...
As you move around in the world, you have a purpose,
and that is to disciple people, to nurture people in the faith.

You do not have to leave here and go somewhere else or do something different. This is part of everything you do. Wherever you are, this is part of your DNA. Yes, I believe that we must learn to share with words our understanding of who Jesus is. Yes, the church is called to welcome people into the community of faith through baptism. But the emphasis here is on “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” In Jesus last words in this gospel, Jesus doesn’t talk about belief. He talks about a way of living.

And what did Jesus command? Love your neighbor as yourself. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. It is about living in community in ways, and with values, that are different from that of the culture and of the empire. It is about being transformed by the Risen Christ. The church is called to be salt and light and leaven in the world. **We** are called to be salt and light and leaven, to show forth a different way of being in the world. How else will others know that there is an alternative way of living in the world to the cut throat, “look out for number one” way of the world?

There is a well-known provocative question that asks, “If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” I might ask it a bit differently. Does the quality of our life together, how we live together with our families, in the workplace, and yes, in our politics, suggest that we are living as those transformed by the love of Jesus Christ? As we go, do others see us going to the places and people Jesus went- to the outcast and the hungry? As we go, are we crossing boundaries and building bridges? As we go, are we loving others as Jesus loves us?

We are commissioned to disciple others. Surely that begins with modeling the way of Jesus in our lives and in our life together as we go about living. It begins with committing ourselves to a life-long process of being students of Jesus and his ways. If we really do that, I expect others will be curious about our life and our choices.

It is true that we will mess up. At times we will betray, deny, fail, and fall away from the ways of Jesus. At times, we may lose sight of our mission...we may fall into the trap of thinking it's all about getting people baptized or getting new members with the goal of saving the church. Jesus knows that.

The mission to which we are called is not jeopardized by our weakness or our failings, nor is it limited by our doubt. Jesus simply and profoundly invites us to take part in an activity of THE Commissioner, whose power for good we have seen in action. We are not called to save the world. We are called to witness to the one who can, the one who promises to be with us day after day after day.

So as you go...as you go to work...as you go to school...as you are living your life in the world, seek to follow everything that Jesus has commanded. And if we do that, even amid our doubt and our failings, others will become curious about our lives and the choices we make and we may have the opportunity to say:

“Let me tell you about this man Jesus.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ This was first brought to my attention by Rev. Dr. Scott Lumsden in a recent Bible study on ZOOM.