

Sunday February 27, 2022
Lesson 13: The Great Commission
Scripture: Matthew 28: 16-20

Context:

Today concludes our section on “Wonder” as we look at all the ways God invites us to reflect on God’s presence in our lives. As we have adored our Lord and given thanks for God’s grace, we have also heeded the invitation to grow in our walk with Christ. Today’s passage closes with words from Jesus before he ascends to the heavens in the gospel of Matthew. The lesson today will explore what it means to make disciples.

The scripture passage for today’s lesson is called “The Great Commission,” as found in the title of these verses. Each gospel deals differently with the resurrection appearances of Jesus and focuses on themes emphasized in the ministry of Jesus. In this case, Matthew places the primary resurrection appearance for the disciples on “the mountain,” referencing the Messiah’s inaugural address connected to the Sermon on the Mount.¹ While some commentators reject this claim for lack of evidence, there is something important for the gospel writer to connect the teachings of Jesus to the lives of his disciples, and what better place than an allusion to where Jesus emphasized doing the will of the Father as in heaven.² This also ties to the theme of Jesus as the new Moses, a parallel throughout the gospel.

At the mountain, Jesus gives several important statements to emphasize his identity and his mission. For Matthew, Jesus is not waiting passively in heaven for his glorious arrival as judge and king but is already exercising his Lordship as God’s plenipotentiary Son as he states: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”³ Jesus asserts his Lordship which allows him to give direction and counsel on what he expects from those who follow him.

The commission Jesus gives his disciples is for them to focus on others. While most translations state “all nations,” the translation of the word is actually “all the Gentiles.”⁴ An interesting note though is how little instruction comes with the commission. There of course is the focus on baptism and then Jesus instructs them to teach others to obey everything he has commanded them to do. Those who are converted will not be brought into the faith by a philosophy, but to a unique way of living together in the Messiah’s community.⁵ Before Jesus ascends, he promises to be with the people always, promising the disciples he would never forsake them going forward.

¹ Hare, Douglas R. A. “Matthew.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 332.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 333., Matt. 28: 18.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 334.

Application

Have you ever thought about the difference between the word membership and discipleship? In recent years, I have given a great deal of thought to the differences between the two especially when it comes to the body of Christ. Some of the consideration of the terms comes from behavior I have seen in the church and some of the reflection comes from my own walk with Christ, where I have been both encouraged and challenged.

Before Jesus ascends to the heavens, he has his disciples before him. If we've done our reading before this scene, we know the disciples have not always been the most adept practitioners of following Jesus. Even as they come to the mount, there are still those who wonder if it is him despite his constant teaching on his death and resurrection. Even still, these are the ones Jesus has chosen as the ones to lead. And they will be the ones to go on and found the early church as the Holy Spirit continues to guide them. They had a new path in their walk with Christ and this time they weren't going to have him holding their hands in the same way.

So often I think this story speaks to where most of us discover the difference in being a disciple of Jesus and a member of a church. In many ways, the two should go hand in hand with one another. Being a member of a church should lead us as we make the vows to join the body of Christ to keep seeking ways to being transformed and being opened to how we can grow as disciples.

Yet what often happens with membership is we begin to turn it into something akin to a social club. We become the members and then we assume the institution, the church will always be there. At times, we can even begin to think the institution owes us something because we are members. "Well, I pay my tithe; this means I should be on this committee, or I shouldn't have any rules when it comes to using things." We complain if things don't go our way, because by golly as members, we should have a say when our needs aren't being met. In some cases in the North American church especially, we've even see people use membership as a way to demand change and passive aggressively get one's way.

If we pay attention to Jesus' words on the mountain and the great commission, we might realize we have missed how discipleship demands something of us. Yes, we are members of the church and because of this fact we should want to seek the ways to continue growing and flourishing in our obedience to Jesus. We should strive to see how we can give back to God in all the ways we have promised. For those in the United Methodist Church, we promised to serve God with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. All of these are beautiful vows and they are things which we can all grow in whether we are a recent sixth-grade confirmand or we are an eighty-one year old saint who has been at this their entire lives.

In my own walk with Jesus, I think I have learned so much from older clergy and laity in my life who have taught me about how to be a disciple and thus how to lead others to become disciples. It comes from the Lay Leader who tells me they are good at professing Jesus Christ as their Savior, and yet they are going to strive even more to make Jesus their Lord and give their all to him. The clergy who is a spiritual director teaches me new ways to pray and helps me to find new ways which God is speaking to my life. The mentor trains me and answers my questions about how to lead a congregation to talk about generosity and the importance of giving back to God what already belongs to God.

As we go through this life, we are called to make disciples not only with membership classes and forms of radical hospitality. We are also called to make disciples by examining how we live our own lives and nurture our souls so we might follow Jesus. We are not just members of a glorified country club expecting the church to meet our needs; we are disciples of Jesus

Christ, a part of a living body seeking to honor God with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. We are called to go forth and walk the journey with others, giving ourselves so others might come to see and know our Lord.

What is the difference between a disciple and a member? How can these terms complement each other? What spiritual disciplines help you grow in your walk with Christ? Who are the people who you see as disciples, seeking to grow in obedience to Jesus? What are ways you would teach a new disciple in how to follow Jesus?

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