

"The Great Commission"

Matthew 28:16-20

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Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Prayer.

It would be easy to focus on the big target in today's Gospel lesson, as will, undoubtedly most of my colleagues from around the world: the great commission. But to do so would neglect a more subtle, but equally important, message located in this text.

If you are at all like me, and I tend to believe that we have much more in common than what is different, then you would reluctantly agree that doubt is a very real presence in your life. You might not say it out loud, or admit it to your children, but behind closed doors, just about all of us wonder, at times, with an element of doubt, "do I truly believe?"

All of us manage a delicate balance of faith and doubt in our lives. Too much faith makes the Christian disciple gullible, likely to go off the deep end of cultish religion. Too much doubt makes the Christian disciple rigid and unmoving, even in the presence of the mighty wind of the Holy Spirit. The problem with most of us Christians is that none of us like to recognize the existence of doubt, let alone suggest that it is a necessary characteristic of faith.

"Whew! I thought I was the only one!" I've heard many confess, when I have shared that there are certainly elements of doubt in my life and faith. It is kind of like the relief that is felt in a twelve-step program when one witnesses to their reality, believing themselves to be the only one suffering in the world, when, low and behold, they find themselves surrounded by everyone else in the group who is bearing the same cross or burden.

Too often, we tend to make doubt a black or white, all or nothing, proposition. I may have a little bit of doubt, but the first thing out of my mouth is "do I truly believe?"

Doubt isn't all or nothing. If you have a little bit of doubt, it doesn't make you an atheist.

I would suggest that a little bit of doubt is a good thing. It gives us a moment of critical reflection, of cautious analysis, serving as an extra layer of protection from a predatory world. As disciples of a Wesleyan heritage, we can use that extra time of critical reflection to ask "is this consistent with scripture, tradition, reason, and experience?"

On what ground do I make these assertions? You may ask.

The issue of doubt is raised in the Gospel lesson this morning. At least three times the resurrected Jesus had been revealed to the disciples since his death and burial; possibly many more. They had seen and touched his hands and his side, walked with him to Emmaus, visited him cooking breakfast on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Today they come to the mountain that Jesus had directed them, and worshipped him, all-the-while it says "some doubted."

The New Testament scholar at Fuller Theological Seminary, Richard Beaton, reflects on this phrase saying, "The text here does not so much focus on doubt in the sense of unbelief as it does on the cognitive dissonance that arises from unusual, even unbelievable, circumstances. This is one case where their understanding of the world and the way that God had previously worked in it did not match with what they saw before them."¹

Cognitive dissonance is a fancy way of saying, "I can't believe my eyes!"

What is experienced is so different from what one expects, based on previous experience, that we are left taking a second look and with a healthy dose of doubt. "It is the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, standing right in front of me!"

Pause for a moment of critical reflection. Take a deep breath. Let's catch our bearings. Time and again, Jesus has taught us that it doesn't take much faith to be saved. Size doesn't matter, as is the case of the mustard seed. All that is necessary is the presence of faith. Even the slightest amount of faith can offset the weight of immense doubt.

And isn't that our experience?

The most resistant parent, the most Saul-like persecutor of the church, faith, and organized religion, comes to church to hear their son or daughter in the youth band, or

¹ As found at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=5/18/2008#

to see them perform in the Christmas pageant, and something captures the imagination and sparks their faith. They are reduced to tears, praying: "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!"

It never ceases to amaze me that, in my case, in spite of all my doubt and recognizing the smallness and inadequacies of my own faith, that Jesus grants to me, as he does to you, "all authority."

When I was younger and full of spit and vinegar, newly ordained and ready to take on the world, I believed I had all authority, and could wield it as I saw fit. Today, I look back and attribute that to the hubris of youth. The older I get, the less worthy I feel, and the more humbled I am to be given such a gift. But, love it or hate it, whether we swing it or sheath it, with this authority comes responsibility: the responsibility to follow the command and directives of Christ.

Jesus doesn't make many commands, so when he does, we should pay attention. The command in today's Gospel is to make disciples, baptize them in the name of our Triune God, and to teach them everything that has been taught to us regarding the ways of Jesus.

We have the authority and the responsibility to make disciples. Our catchment area is all the world. Making disciples means expanding our size, increasing our numbers, but it also means growing them deep. It isn't enough to stamp out shallow clones of an influential preacher, evangelist, or leader. The responsibility is ours to teach them everything – EVERYTHING – Jesus has taught us. Leave nothing out. Don't allow the message to be watered down with what's popular, entertaining, or of topical concern of the leader. Stick to the words of Jesus. Teach the importance of following in his example, and don't let anything steer you wrong.

No one understood more than Jesus that content matters more than numbers. Throughout his ministry, Jesus only attracted a dozen or so disciples that he grew deep enough for them to move on in their apostolic commission. All the crowds, the want-a-be disciples, scattered to the four winds. But it was the few, not the masses, the few who faithfully followed this commission who went on to grow the church around the world.

As we reflect upon Zion, look around, and realize how small we are, consider this: we have at least five times the number of disciples of Christ, than the first twelve that Jesus called. Large, mega-churches today wish they had what we have when it comes to nurturing and teaching their people in the ways and example of Jesus Christ. When it comes to growth strategies, we can rely upon the faithful attention to our core values – worship, music, prayer, and mission – to serve as our casting net, our evangelism effort, as opposed to a more overt, self-serving membership drive, as is

the case in growth driven, modern mega-churches.

Finally, I would add that when it comes to teaching one-another to obey everything that I have commanded you, it doesn't mean we teach an absence of doubt. Jesus doubted in the garden. He wondered if he was following the will of the Father, and if that will was correct. The human nature of Christ allows us to approach with doubt, just as those disciples did on the mountain top 2,000 years ago.

Coming around full circle, the important thing to remember from today's lesson, beyond the overt great commission to make disciples, is not that we are bad because we continue to have lingering doubts throughout our faith journey, rather that we are more closely united with Christ precisely because we have those doubts. And though we have those doubts, even in spite of those doubts, we have his assurance that Jesus is with us, even to the end of the age.

"I can't believe my ears." That's OK, some of the miraculous stories of Jesus make me wonder, too.

"But how can it be?" I don't know. All I can do is assure you, that you stand in good company, and that Jesus will always be with us. Perhaps one day, this, too, will be revealed.

Amen.