

"Go, Therefore"

Matthew 28:16-20

22 May, 2005 – Trinity Sunday

the Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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."

Prayer.

"It's all a numbers game." You've heard it. I've heard it. I bought into it; but in recent years, I've backed away from it ... the numbers game.

I remember my father, the accountant before he returned to school and became a preacher, teaching me at a young age, "Lairs figure, and figures lie."

In just a few weeks representatives from each United Methodist local church in Western New York will gather with the clergy to conference together for a period of three days. We will be led by our bishop, Violet Fisher, as we discern the direction of our church for the coming year.

At conference, clergy renew old friendships and acquaintances, visit with former parishioners, and, as I have learned over the years, we size each other up, ... according to numbers. Two numbers have been drilled into our heads, and have become equated with the term "effectiveness": Average worship attendance and salary.

Pastors who increase worship attendance are on the rise. They are moved to bigger churches and receive bigger compensations. Status and ego soon follows. Of course, those congregations where pastors leave suffer from pastoral transition, but few want to talk about that. Pastors who see their worship attendance stagnate or decline, well, it's the dog house for you! Few take a reduction in salary, but many certainly get sent to remote, multi-point parishes of lesser status to serve out their years until retirement.

Pastors on the rise simply love our Gospel lesson for this morning, the Great Apostolic Commission, Jesus' final directive before his ascension into heaven. "Go make disciples of all the nations" sound like a license to kill and it's opening day of deer season. They make it sound like Jesus doesn't care who or by what method we bag 'em. All that matters is how many new disciples we can clean, gut, and tie down to the roof of our car!

All we want are the numbers. Some justify their evangelical zeal by citing our traditional and historical evangelical roots- we are, after all, formerly "Evangelical United Brotheran" some claim. (It's just too bad they they conveniently leave out our social gospel roots.)

Pastors who are on the rise gladly wear the term "evangelical" as a medal of pride around their necks. "We've gone to two services, and thinking about adding a third." "We're looking at building a new sanctuary, high tech, with video and sound." Saddlebrook, Calvary Chapel, and Willow Creek become the mantra and mecca of their desires. They dream of services that are filled with awe- carpeted amphitheatres, plasmas displays, steel and glass, accommodating kiosks, everything seeker friendly. Many are charismatic enough to sell it to their people, too.

This uniquely American brand of Christian evangelism started out in independent churches, but it has quietly been spreading into the main line denominations. Effectiveness has become all about the numbers. As an undergraduate educated mathematician, as a pastor, and as one who learned the folk wisdom from his father, this phenomena has me worried.

"Lairs figure, and figures lie."

Average worship attendance doesn't begin to reveal the working of the heart, or the movement of God. I am growing to see that discipleship has more to do with being good stewards of the people God sends our way, than with how many new people we can recruit to walk through the front door.

It's a good thing Jesus didn't believe that numbers equate with effectiveness. Because after three years of hard work and confrontational, conflict laden ministry that ended in violence, in the end, he only had eleven he knew he could depend on.

Jesus said, "Make disciples ..."

Making disciples is more than simply extending the hand of fellowship, teaching the secret hand shake, making sure everyone is baptized, and adding more names to the rolls. Disciple making is a life long process, a journey that allows us to descend into the very center of God's being. Discipleship is a process of being drawn into a relationship with God and the community God has surrounded us with. Disciple making only begins with a call, with a confirmation, or with a baptism. It's the life time of discipleship that follows that Jesus insists is just as important.

Jesus didn't simply stop with "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." He continues with "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28: 19, 20). Teaching and learning the ways and commands of Christ is a life long commitment, a commitment to growing the spiritual life both deep and wide.

To the disciple, the only numbers that are necessary are the numbers 1 and 3, 7 and 70.

Jesus commands us to forgive not just 7 times over, but 7 times 70. That sermon will have to wait for another day.

The number one; one birth, one baptism, one Lord; one God to come to know, worship, thank, and to be awed by. We believe in a God that is not limited by numbers; who so far exceeds our comprehension, that words and language and numbers become meaningless. The sheer largeness, the wonderful otherness, and the delightful, overwhelming awe of God defies our ability to quantify or limit God.

We would like to make God our personal pal, and keep Him all to ourselves. But that would be chopping God down to our size ... and ignoring, for example, the feminine characteristics in God's history. We would like to confine God to our own imagination; Jesus the white, Anglo man, who lived 2,000 years ago; who is the Way, the only way to salvation. Yet that would exclude the reality of the Spirit at work today, the possibility that God reveals God's way in other cultures differently. If it were up to us, we'd box up God and learn all that there is to learn about Him. But that apple has already been eaten.

The number 3 is necessary for all disciples of Christ, for this is where we begin to approach the holy throne, with the truly Holy sense of God's awe. Three is simply the beginning of understanding of the fullness of God's reality; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This being "Trinity Sunday" all disciples are invited to draw closer and explore more extensively God at work in our lives, through awareness in the

Trinity of God.

The Priestly class was moved by God to create the first chapter of Genesis, to speak about the wonder and beauty of the Creation, and God's hand in it. The Father of Creation gives Law to live by, ordering our society according to justice and righteousness. He makes with us a covenant, to meet and keep with Abraham and his descendent's, a relationship and blessing through the end of time. The Father of God transcends the gap between heaven and earth, speaking through prophets, preachers, and priests, to bring about fidelity to His Covenant.

Yet, God understood the Creative Father approach needed to be modified. So God broke into this world, by becoming flesh and dwelling among us, in the life, ministry, suffering, and death of Jesus the Christ. He laid down his life out of love for us, to atone for our sins. He rose from the grave and ascended into heaven, bring salvation to a world enslaved by the chains of death.

Yet, we still needed Divine attention. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, God in Spirit came to the limp, wimpy disciples cowering behind locked doors. God's Spirit filled and empowered them to go out and spread the Church to every corner of the world, to seed it deeply enough that it thrives and continues 2,000 years later. That Spirit is still with us, guiding and directing our lives, individually and corporately as a community of faith.

And there is so much more. There is so much more to God than any one of us will ever know. So much more than we will ever begin to understand.

In my experience, of a living and growing faith in Jesus Christ, of the Holy Spirit working in and through my life, with God it's not about the numbers. The only absolute about God is the absolute and unconditional love God shows to every member of this human village.

God created you as His loving child. Jesus sacrificed his life for you. The Spirit never abandons you. God knew your need before you were aware of your need. God meets your needs for love and forgiveness. And God exceeds your needs for guidance and strength on the journey of faith you are presently undertaking.

Go today; go forth and make disciples of Jesus. Don't just bring them in the door. Let us join together our commitment to teach them – deep and wide – the fullness of Christ, to teach them the way of the cross, to love them just as God first loved us.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.