

## Authority for Mission

Matthew 28:16-20

June 11, 2017

Lansdowne UMC

The passage that we read from Matthew's Gospel contains what is called "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."

In the late 18th century, a man named William Carey wrote about this passage of scripture. He argued very convincingly that Jesus is speaking here to all Christians, and not only to the Twelve apostles. In doing that, he essentially launched the modern missionary movement. In other words, we owe the global spreading of the Gospel in the last several hundred years to this passage-- even as we acknowledge that the message has not always been shared in a Christ-like manner. Yet the commandment remains. Go... make disciples.. Baptizing... and teaching them to obey.

Having just returned from a missions trip in the Dominican Republic, I've been thinking about this passage a lot. We do some wonderful good when we travel. This year, conservatively speaking, we provided medical care to more than 300 people. We gave away 2000 pieces of bread and nearly a ton of dry rice and beans. We ministered to hundreds of children. We fitted nearly 100 people with prescription eye glasses. And yet when it comes to *making* disciples, my first thought is always that the Dominican Republic makes *us* into better disciples. The Gospel is alive and well in the Dominican Republic, and certainly in

many other countries. And every time I visit there, I am reminded how much we have to learn from these brothers and sisters in Christ.

At the same time disciples are being made, and we get to be part of that. Katie reminded me of a boy that she had seen in medical clinic a few years ago who she was afraid had lymphoma, and if that were the case then we couldn't really do anything about it there in the clinic. And so we were able to provide one of our friends with some money to take him to a nearby hospital. The parents of the little boy said, "why are you doing this?" And one of our Dominican brothers and sisters who was there was able to explain to them the good news, to tell them about Jesus. And as a result of the love that was shown to them, the father came to belief and then the whole family.

In any event, as majestic as this passage is, however, this great commission passage doesn't stand by itself. Jesus says, "Go *therefore*." Whenever we see a "therefore" in the Bible, that's a cue to us. It means, of course, that what has been said before provides the basis for the statement that's about to be made. So what did Jesus say before? He says "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore." Jesus' disciples *go* and carry out Jesus' mission under the authority of Jesus.

But what does that really mean? What's this authority stuff all about? Quick show of hands: raise your hand, please, if you've flown on an airplane in the past 15 years. Here's authority for you: the Transportation Security Administration (the TSA). They're the people that we hope keep another 9/11 from happening. And largely speaking, so far, so good. But, wow, they do have some authority, don't they? They have the authority to rifle through my things. They have the authority to tell me to remove my shoes and belt. They have the authority to pat me down. They have the authority to take my stuff if

they don't like it. And they have the authority to permit me to fly on an airplane. But it's not just me. They've got this authority over movie stars and members of the military. Over foreign diplomats and CEOs of multinational corporations.

How did they get that authority? Well, broadly speaking, the Executive Branch of the government gives it to them. But the Legislative Branch funds them. And the Judicial Branch affirms their existence by upholding their legal, constitutional authority to do the work that they do. So in essence, there is one mission that each branch of government participates in in particular ways in order for the TSA to do what it does.

Furthermore, to do its work, the TSA has to have three things. First, it has to have its mission. It has to know what it's there to do. It's there to protect people in America from those who want to do them harm by means of mass transportation. Secondly, it has to have the right to do its mission in a particular domain. A TSA agent can't just start frisking people in the Walmart parking lot. People would get very unhappy. They must be operating in a very specific set of circumstances. And 3) the TSA has to have the power and the ability to actually do their mission. They need the personnel. And the personnel need the proper equipment and training.

Maybe you see where this is going. As the church, we have to know our mission. That's why I remind us every week that our job as the church is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." That's not a mission statement that I just cooked up in my recliner at home. It's straight out of this passage of scripture. It comes to us from Jesus. It's also the stated mission of the United Methodist Church. We need to be about the business of making disciples, and we need to know that that's our business. Authority isn't authority if it

doesn't have a purpose. It's just raw power. But our purpose is to make disciples.

Let me say this a different way. Jesus didn't want to make 12 disciples and have it end there. Jesus doesn't just make people who follow him. He makes people who lead others to follow him. Jesus makes disciple-makers! That is *our* mission. We need to be making disciples-makers. How does that play out? At the very least, I think it means that as a church, the act of making disciples isn't pinned on one person. It's not just the Outreach Team's job to make disciples. It's not just the pastor's job to make disciples. It's not just for people who are outgoing. It's not just for people who are especially articulate. It's *all* of our jobs to make disciples.

Ok, so we need to know our mission. But like the TSA, we need to operate within a particular domain. Just like the TSA doesn't operate out of the Walmart parking lot, the church doesn't operate from the kingdoms of the world. The church is only sanctioned to do its mission from the kingdom of God. What do I mean by that? I mean that our mission of making disciples must be done with the right heart, through Christ-like means. We don't force conversions. We don't seize people's stuff that we don't like. Instead we bring the reality of God's kingdom to the people where they are. We bring God's healing, mercy, and justice. We bring the good news of God's forgiveness in Christ. We embody faithfulness and truth and goodness. In other words, we operate from beginning to end with a posture of humility and love. We are servants, holding our the good news of Christ to the world. We're making use of all the grace given to us to do it with the right heart and by the right means.

So 1) we know our mission, and 2) we operate out of God's kingdom. Thirdly, we need to have the power to do our mission. Having

the head knowledge isn't enough. Being in the right place isn't enough. To truly use the *authority* that Jesus gives us, we need the power that Jesus gives us for me. We need the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We need the fruit of the Spirit-- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We need the gifts that the Spirit for the edification of the community and as a witness to others.

That's authority. It's knowing what you're about. Doing it in the right place for the right reasons. And having the ability to carry it out. And with that, we do it. We "Go and make disciples." We invite people to follow Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We share the love of God and invite people to experience this Love for themselves.

When they turn away from their sins and turn toward Jesus, we baptize them. We soak them-- drench them, with God's cleansing water. And in this, we initiate them into God family-- the Kingdom of God.

And what do we say as we do that? We baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Sound familiar? Our language for baptism comes straight from Jesus in this Great Commission. And once we're baptized, we ourselves are plunged into the mission of God, to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We're cleansed in the waters of baptism in order that others might be cleansed. We are blessed... to be a blessing.

And we don't just leave the baptized to themselves. We teach them how to do what Jesus says. We teach one another how to do what Jesus says.

This mission isn't just the mission of Jesus. It's also the mission of God the Father. It's also the mission of the Holy Spirit. Unlike the American Government, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in complete agreement about who the mission is to be carried out. They're also

constantly unified in working through their people to bring about the fulfillment of the mission.

Today is Trinity Sunday. We usually assume that people understand what we're talking about when we talk about the Trinity. It's one of those things that's in the background all the time, but rarely talked about explicitly. But it's absolutely fundamental to Christian belief. The way that we talk about God as a Trinity is the fruit of a long labor of love by the church to come up with a way to compactly describe how God is portrayed in scripture. For example, we baptize people in the *name* of the Father, and of the Son, and and of Holy Spirit. We don't baptize people in the name of the Father, and in the name of the Son, and in the name of the Holy Spirit. We don't baptize people in the names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Why? Because there is only one name. The name that is above every name. The name of the Lord-- Yahweh.

So how do you make sense of that. One name who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Well in one sense, you don't. We simply affirm as a church that there is One God, who is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's it. Analogies can be helpful for imagining how three can be one, but ultimately they all fall short. God is not three branches of government-- although maybe that helps someone understand one way that three can be one. God is not three parts, like three slices of a pie, or three leaves of a clover. God does not take on different forms at different times, like ice, water, and steam. We simply say that God is three persons, each of whom fully possess God-ness. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Spirit is God. Not three gods. One God, in three persons.

Even though "Trinity" is not a term that appears in the Bible, we see it throughout. Our scripture readings for today are some of the most obvious places that it shows up. Have you ever noticed the Trinity in the

first three verses of the Bible? It's right there. In the beginning, God created. That's God the Father. Then it said the wind from God, which can also be translated the Spirit of God, swept over the waters. That's the Holy Spirit, there there at the beginning of the Bible. And then it says God spoke, "Let there be light." That's the Word of God. That's God the Son. And through the Word of God all things were made. That Word of God became flesh in Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God-- the Word of God in the flesh.

It is this very person of God who gives us authority to make disciples. He gives us a mission. He gives us the kingdom to operate within. And he gives us the power to do it. Let's use all the grace God gives us to make it happen, for the glory of God. So that all people might follow the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Amen.