

Go Into the World  
May 9, 2010  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Mark 16:15-18  
Matthew 28:18-20

Do you remember the program “You Were There”?

For more than three decades, it took Americans to the scene of historical events – from the Hindenburg disaster to the last stand at the Alamo. CBS created the series first for radio in the late 1940s. It moved to television in the 50s and ran until the early 70s. As a kid, I remember watching it in between Saturday morning cartoons.

Narrated by Walter Cronkite and other classic broadcast voices, You Were There placed the listener or viewer in a front row seat to important moments in our nation’s development. In staccato bursts of urgency in his voice, a reporter would describe the scene and then step back to let us witness history.

As we continue our series of Christ’s statements after the resurrection and before his ascendance to heaven, each of the scenes from scripture we have visited carries that same sense of drama: the angels’ heralding the good news of the resurrection, Christ’s appearance to the disciples on the Emmaus road to Christ’s appearance in the upper room. Each of these accounts has that “you were there” feel, don’t they?

If asked to think about the birth moment of the church, we often think of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descends to enliven and empower the people who form the Christian movement. But there is a moment that comes earlier – as we heard from today’s readings from Mark and Matthew, in which Christ provides specific guidance, most specific in Matthew 28, known as the Great Commission.

So, as people who seek to be the church, we might do our own version of “You Were There.” Holding the Great Commission in mind, we listen for how Christ’s instructions mold what we do here in worship and out in the world.

\* \* \*

The Great Commission includes three clear commands to us as people of God and the church:

1. Make disciples ... by

2. Baptizing ... and
3. Teaching.

On this bright, beautiful Mother's Day, we have the chance to follow Christ's command to baptize two children that are part of the Caldwell community. Baptism days make memories, not only for mom and dad but for grandparents and God parents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters. Baptism provides the family and the congregation a few moments to focus on the story of one child and watch as that child's life is changed forever in response to God's call of his or her name.

So we baptize children – and might even parade them around the church a bit – not to show them off, even if, as in Lake Wobegone, they are “all above average.” We baptize to bind these children not just to God, because God has already called them by name, but to ourselves as this part of the body of Christ. We use water as a symbol of how God has used water to save and purify creation through the ages. And, with water, God seals our salvation in Christ Jesus.

As our church constitution states:

Baptism points us back to the grace of God expressed in Jesus Christ, who died for us and was raised ... and forward to that same Christ who will fulfill God's purpose in God's promised future.<sup>1</sup>

A few lines later, our Book of Order reminds us of another aspect that we too often fail to fulfill, namely that, in baptism:

Barriers of race, gender, status and age are to be transcended. Barriers of nationality, history and practice are to be overcome.<sup>2</sup>

More about that in a moment.

And, while we most often baptize children, the baptism of an adult can be even more powerful, for the church and the person being baptized. As one of you who was baptized as an adult told me this week, “it was the first best thing” he ever did.

\* \* \*

---

<sup>1</sup> W-2.3002

<sup>2</sup> W-2.3005

Baptism is only the first of Christ's instructions in the Great Commission. The second is to teach the ways of Christ. One commentator notes how Christ seems to save this instruction for this moment in particular. Earlier in Matthew, Christ had sent forth the disciples with instructions to preach and heal. But now, in conjunction with the direction to baptize, Christ commands the church to teach.

And this is a responsibility that applies to all of us. Caldwell is blessed with devoted teachers. Elizabeth Bevan, almost single-handedly teaches our younger children. For even longer, Angela Everitt and Kimberly Shumaker have taught our older kids, ages 5 and up, along with a handful of regular assistants and co-teachers.

We simply would not have a children's education program without this small band of loyal teachers – and that is both a good thing and a bad thing. Good that these leaders give their gifts of time and talent so generously; bad because it is not fair or sustainable – to ask them to do all of our share of this ministry.

Each time we baptize a child, we commit as a congregation that we will do our part in raising that child in the ways of our God. Now, as our church grows, it's time for more of us to meet that responsibility.

So many of you have said that one of the great moments of joy in worship is watching our kids gather here in front to go to Sunday School. Every Sunday, we need the commitment 7 adults to care for our children – in our nursery, our younger children's Sunday school room and our older children's. Depending on how many kids we have on a given Sunday, not all seven may be needed. But every Sunday we need to be ready.

This morning, I ask each of you to fulfill your responsibility to these kids, our kids. On page 7 of your bulletin, you will find a brief form that I will give you time to fill out later. There is no need to fear or be intimidated. Experienced teachers will always be in the room with you. And, I'll bet you enjoy it – maybe even more than staying here and listening to me!

So, are baptizing and teaching all it takes to “make disciples?” No, true discipleship is a lifelong journey, at once the most demanding, the most adventurous and the most transcendent journey of all. In his classic book The Cost of Discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

“The commandment of Jesus is not a sort of spiritual shock treatment. Jesus asks nothing of us without giving us the strength to perform it. His commandment never seeks to destroy life, but to foster, strengthen and heal it.”<sup>3</sup>

In the end, Bohoeffler reminds us, discipleship is a road of “boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy.”<sup>4</sup>

\* \* \*

We can't consider the meaning of the Great Commission in the year 2010 without recognizing the breadth of religious pluralism around us, across America and here in Charlotte.

America is still a majority Christian nation and will be for some time. But religious diversity is spreading fast. Charlotte is a good example. Once called the buckle on the Bible belt, the faith life of our city now ranges from Baha'I to the Center for Positive Living to Christian, Quaker, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Latter Day Saints and Unitarian Universalist. And that is an incomplete list.

Just yesterday, the newspaper reported that Charlotte was chosen to host a rare Buddhist statue that will attract thousands of Buddhists from across the region. The same pages reported that more than 1,000 Mormons had recently held a massive service day across the city.

How do we, then, respond to Christ's command to go into the world and baptize Christians while showing other faith families the same respect we expect?

How do we exchange ideas about salvation, heaven, hell, sexuality, work, the role of women in society and the myriad other expressions that religious beliefs can take?

Do we claim that we have a monopoly on truth? Do we call out others as heretics? Do we acknowledge that other faiths have part of the story right? Or do we say that all practices are equally valid and all paths lead to God?

These are not easy questions. They can take years of consideration, reading, prayer, dialogue and living to decipher.

---

<sup>3</sup> P. 37-38

<sup>4</sup> P.

Danny Trapp, our intern in ministry, prepared the liturgy for this week's order of worship. I'd indicated to him that I'd be preaching on the Great Commission. Then, after I was out of the office in meetings Monday and most of Tuesday, I returned to see that he had turned up the wick a bit on our conversation.

He stayed within the pattern we've held for the last few weeks in pulling today's affirmation of faith from the Presbyterian Study Catechism of 1998. But he selected one of the more thought-provoking – if not controversial - questions in the entire document, knowing, I think, that I'd need to say something about it.

Thanks, Danny. I'll get you back.

Actually, I thought it was a great selection – because none of this is real until we put ideas on paper and we voice our thoughts out loud. Question 52 of the catechism asks: How should I treat non-Christians and people of other religions? I've used this question in teaching the newcomers class here before and found it well worth consideration. Question 52 – and several others in the same section of the catechism – boldly engage us:

“Will all humans be saved?” the catechism goes on to ask.

“Is Christianity the only true religion?”

“How will God deal with the followers of other religions?”

The answers to those questions that our denomination offers are woven from three important principles – principles I suggest we all hold in our own minds as we follow the Great Commission in an open, free flowing world of many faiths.

First, as I've said before, we should leave the salvation business to God.

Second, we should cling fiercely to humility – avoiding the use of our religion “to promote self-justification, war-mongering or prejudice”<sup>5</sup> ... because those behaviors have turned millions away from the church through the ages.

And, third, we should treat others as God in Christ treats us – following mercy, being gracious and, whenever possible, turning the other cheek out of the strength and wisdom we find in our creator, manifest in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>5</sup> From the answer to question 50 of The Study Catechism

\* \* \*

In concluding this episode of “you were there,” it’s worth noting that this story is bracketed by the hesitation of the disciples and the assurance of Christ’s presence.

In describing the disciples’ reaction to seeing the risen Christ, the scripture says some worshipped him but some “doubted.” Other translations say some of the disciples “hesitated.” Here Matthew reminds us again that the community of believers is one of both faith and weakness. I don’t know about you, but I know that describes me.

But even in Matthew’s portrayal, Jesus gets the last word.

“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

So, friends, even when you feel doubt or hesitation, go into the world and make disciples, in courage, humility and respect, through what you say, what you do and how you do it, knowing that God’s final word is one of promise and hope.

Amen.