

“Making Disciples”

Matthew 28: 16-20

Sunday, May 18, 2008—Trinity Sunday

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As most of you know, I spend a weekly time with the 2, 3, and 4 year olds in our daycare center, during which I tell a Bible story and we sing Christian songs. Before I tell the story, I usually try to put it in its context—did this take place before Jesus was born? During his life on earth? Or after his death and resurrection? A few weeks ago, as I was going through what I thought was a brief explanation of this nature, one of our four year olds admonished me to “get to the point already”. My first reaction was shock, but as someone who has always admired the honesty of children who have not yet learned to hide their true feelings, my second reaction was to wonder how many people are thinking the same thing on Sunday mornings.

Well, for those of you who wish I’d get to the point already, we have a great scripture text this morning. If you want to know what the purpose of the church is, here’s the Cliff’s Notes or the Reader’s Digest summary. It’s found in Matthew’s version of Jesus’ last words to his disciples; we call it the Great Commission.. It takes 15 chapters in the Book of Acts for the disciples to grasp what Jesus says in these three verses in Matthew’s Gospel. It’s this: The purpose of the church is to go out to the world and make disciples.

Now if you think that means we’ve been commissioned to tell the world that anyone who doesn’t believe in Jesus is going to hell, please put that thought aside. And if you think making disciples means going to Africa and teaching the natives to dress more modestly, please put that thought aside too.

So, what is a disciple, anyway? This past year, a few of us did a Bible study called “Disciple”, where we spent 34 weeks studying both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and learning what they have to teach us about discipleship. In the interests of getting to the point, I won’t try to summarize everything we learned, so here’s the Cliff’s Notes summary: A disciple is someone who is committed to a life-long, life-changing process of becoming more like Jesus Christ. That’s our calling, to make more disciples. And since Jesus gave this calling to all of us in the community we call the church, it follows that the process of making disciples of all nations begins in the church, with all of us..

By all accounts, the church is not doing all that well at making disciples. The Bible tells us that God gives all of us spiritual gifts to be used for the benefit of the community. Being a disciple involves using our gifts to serve the church. But in most churches, the 80-20 rule applies. That means 20% of the people do 80% of the ministry of the church. The Bible also tells us that we are not owners of our material possessions, that whatever we have is on loan to us from God, and that we are to manage what we have on God’s behalf and in accordance with God’s purposes. The biblical standard for giving is ten per cent of income, and the financial problems of pretty much every church, including our own, would be solved if all members gave at that level. But studies show that twenty per

cent of the people also do 80% of the giving to the church, and the typical Presbyterian gives about 2% of income to the church. When it comes to spiritual growth, studies show that only about one in six adults who attend Christian worship services is involved in any sort of process designed to help them grow spiritually. Only about one in five have any specific goals related to their spiritual development. The Bible pictures the church as a community whose way of life is radically contrary to the culture; but today, most people who go to church don't look much different from those who don't.

I think if we want to understand why we are not doing very well when it comes to discipleship, we should start by looking at the first words of the Great Commission. Jesus starts with a statement about authority. He says, "All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me" (28: 18). Authority—that's a bad word for a lot of us. It brings to mind the teachers who threatened us with a trip to the principal's office if we didn't quit whispering and passing notes in class. It brings to mind the parents who answered our questions with "because I said so, that's why." The fact is, Americans are big on freedom, not authority, and our view of freedom tends to be "I'll do what I want when I want to, and no one has the right to tell me otherwise." That's not the biblical understanding of freedom. The biblical understanding of freedom is not freedom from being told what to do. When we say that Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives, that means we accept his authority. We agree to look to him, and not elsewhere, when we are figuring out how to live. If Jesus Christ is our Lord, then Caesar is not, the platforms of our political parties are not, popular American culture is not, and our own personal whims and desires are not. Paradoxically, it is only in making Christ Lord, in accepting his authority over our lives, that we are truly free--free to live fully as the human beings we were created to be.

So how do we become disciples? Jesus talks about two parts of the process: baptizing and teaching. We are to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and we are to teach obedience to what Jesus has commanded. Baptism is important because it marks the beginning of the Christian life, a life lived in commitment to the authority of Jesus Christ, as part of the community we call the church. Baptism is the sign that God has claimed us in love, and called us to respond with love, gratitude, and commitment. Baptism has neither meaning nor purpose for those who are not committed to living the Christian life and teaching it to their children. It is not a magical rite that automatically confers salvation on anyone who asks for it. When we dispense it that way, when we allow people to make promises at baptism that we know they do not intend to keep, we not only trivialize discipleship, we dishonor the one we call Lord.

Making disciples also involves teaching, and learning, what Jesus has commanded. Neither is simple. Research shows that while a majority of people in this country have a high opinion of the value and importance of the Bible, few of them read it with any regularity. Even among those who attend church regularly, the level of biblical literacy is disturbingly low. Obviously one cannot be a disciple without knowing something about the key stories, themes, and characters of the Bible. We can't live a lifestyle we don't understand, much less can we communicate the joys of that life to others. We do a good job in the church of teaching our children the stories of the Bible, but we have a tendency

to assume that the process stops at confirmation. This is a fundamental misunderstanding. Becoming a disciple is not like learning multiplication tables. It involves much more than acquiring a finite body of knowledge. If the church is truly to fulfill its mission of being a disciple making community, we need to begin to understand discipleship as an ongoing, life long process of transformation. We need to understand that the process of growing in our discipleship does not happen in solitude. It happens in the context of relationships, relationships that are not superficial. The reason I encourage Bible study is not just so we can learn what the Bible says, it's so we can form the kind of relationships that help each other grow spiritually and live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Who can be a disciple? Today, living in a culture that reveres experts, there's a tendency to think discipleship requires special qualifications. We think it's only for pastors, or for those with exceptional gifts of spirituality, or those who enjoy spending long hours in silent meditation. Perhaps you're familiar with the following spoof on the advice Jesus might have received from one of today's management consultants about the people he picked as his first disciples.

Dear Jesus: Thank you for submitting the resumes of the 12 men you have picked for management positions in your new organization. We have reviewed their credentials, have interviewed each candidate, and scored their vocational aptitude tests. We believe that most of the candidates lack the background education and aptitude necessary for the type of work you plan to undertake. They have little sense of teamwork. Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and has temper tantrums. Andrew has absolutely no leadership qualities. The two brothers, James and John, sons of Zebedee, place their personal interests ahead of organizational loyalty. Thomas has a questioning attitude that will tend to undermine morale. The other James and Thaddeus definitely have radical political leanings, and both score high on the manic depressive scale. One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a good business mind and contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious and responsible. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right hand man. We wish you every success in your new venture.
Yours sincerely, Jordan Management Consultants (adapted from Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, p.77)

The first disciples didn't have any particular credentials. They were ordinary people, lacking any special experience or education. There were lots of things they didn't understand very well. They made plenty of mistakes. The good news was, it wasn't all about them.

It's true that Jesus has set high expectations for those who would be his disciples. But then, who could have higher expectations for us than God, who created us in God's own image, who made us a little lower than God and crowned us with glory and honor, as the Psalmist puts it? Who could want more for us than Jesus, who gave his life so we could have life, and have it abundantly? I am convinced that high expectations, communicated in love, are a gift and a blessing, not a burden. Unfortunately, there's a movement afoot in churches that says churches should be places of low expectations, because low

expectations are the way to get people in the door. So you'll hear it whispered: Don't tell people that God is interested in your whole life, not just the hour between 9:30 and 10:30 on Sunday morning. No one has more than an hour a week for God, so don't make them feel guilty about it. Don't tell people that Jesus cares how we spend our money, that's too private and personal, people will be offended. Don't talk about forgiving others 70 times 7 or tithing or loving enemies. No one can do those things, it will just turn people off. Offer baptism to everybody, whether or not they want to be a church member. Let's just make the church a friendly place where we try to please everyone and everybody's free to do whatever floats their boat.

Every once in a while someone will ask me why certain churches are growing and what we can do to be more like them. One thing I can tell you for sure is that the churches that are growing are not places of low expectations. Quite the contrary. They tend to be churches that emphasize Jesus' call to make disciples, and they understand that discipleship is all about high expectations. You see, I think people come to church because they want to hear who they truly are—people of infinite dignity, value, and worth, created in God's own image. And then I think they want to hear how they can live into God's image, how they can have lives filled with meaning and purpose. Because I think people want to give their hearts to something bigger than themselves. They want a place where they can learn what it means to be God's partners in healing and perfecting the world. They want to be around others who will encourage them to learn and grow and become who they truly are.

So let's go and make disciples of all nations. Let's start right here, right now, with ourselves.

Jesus said: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." And that is the point.

Thanks be to God. Amen.