

As We Go Among
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Scriptures:

Matthew 28:16-20 (NRSV)

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."

Sermon:

To date, the best we can say is that the Gospel of Matthew was probably written in Antioch, Syria around 80-85 C.E. The author and his church are themselves second and third generation believers. In addition, with some correcting and amplification of Mark's Gospel along with including his own traditions about Jesus, Matthew's Gospel is believed to have been used as a teaching manual for discipleship in the early church. We see this focus on Jesus as a teacher, one like Moses only greater, in five long speeches beginning with the Sermon on the Mount. Also, Jesus' at various times sends his disciples out among Galilean, Israelite villages with the commission to continue his healing work and renewing Israel's covenant with God in opposition to Israel's leadership's understandings. We can see all this summarized in our passages today; where in, the disciples are to go among the people, teaching them to obey all that Jesus has taught and commanded.

Jesus taught that he came not to abolish the Laws of Moses but to fulfill those laws. In fact, Matthew paints a picture of Jesus as being the Law of Moses incarnate, meaning that Jesus not only kept the Law but taught and lived out of the over-plus of the Law, which was God's love for God's people and God's demand that the people love one another.

In Matthew's mind, it appears that Jesus understood that this divine spirit of love had often been lost or neglected in the keeping of the letter of the Law. Furthermore, Jesus teaches that his followers' righteousness as well as their relationship to God and to others must surpass that of their religious leaders and teachers in both quality and quantity to the degree of addressing even their thoughts and intentions.

Growing up when and where I did, our text today was often used to encourage people to go into the ministry as missionaries or to financially support missionaries in foreign nations. These folks in foreign nations were considered heathens and in need of the soul saving Western Gospel along with western civilization. On occasion, the preacher, evangelist, or visiting missionary would say that if we, American Christians, did not go, send, or support missionaries in the "nations", their people's unsaved souls would be on our heads come judgment day.

Therefore, let me hopefully lay before you the power and purpose of our texts in Matthew's Gospel without the guilt of 19th century misguided Western, Christian Manifest Destiny, which terrorized a 14 to 16-year-old boy.

Remember the author recalls Jesus commissioning his disciples to be teachers. In what I believe is the best understanding of the Greek, they are to go "among" or as they "go among"

their world of the Jews, they are to teach others what Jesus taught. This is an important point, let me explain further: Jesus and later Matthew are telling the disciples to go among fellow Israelites, living "among" the nations. These Jewish disciples were to teach fellow Jews what Jesus had taught, make disciples of them, and then baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this process, especially in the face of resistance from other Jews, Jesus would always be with them. This is an important point also because in Matthew's Gospel there is no report of Jesus' ascension into heaven. We are simply left with Jesus' word that he will always be with the disciples even until the end of "the" or "their" age; however, the age was understood.

An important side note for us non-Jews: by the time the author of Matthew writes, his church was having to come to grips with how to meld into one community of faith, people of different Jewish backgrounds and understandings as well as a growing number of pagan God-venerators associated with the synagogue, who within their own world views were now confessing Jesus as Lord. In addition, let us note that in Matthew's Gospel, the same Spirit that baptized and commissioned Jesus at the beginning of his ministry is extended to all his disciples. Baptism then becomes a sign that a person has fully embraced God's revelation in Jesus and are now a part of the Covenant Community of God.

The cornerstone of Matthew's understandings of evangelism was proclaiming that Jesus, the resurrected, wonder-working rabbi from Nazareth was and is truly the Messiah, Son of God; therefore, believe in him and follow his way. But, it is important that I point out in our text today that many in Matthew's community of faith did not believe, therefore, did not go or tell. They either didn't believe that Jesus had been resurrected; they didn't believe all authority in heaven and earth had been given in contradistinction to their rabbis and tradition, or believe they were to be proactive among other Jews and share the Good News.

To properly context our scriptures, imagine yourselves waking up one morning believing that as you went about your day you were to be spring loaded, highly primed, for opportunities to address fellow Christians of different faith expressions that have either missed the boat in their faith life or their faith life is seriously lacking. However, you have the answers, your understanding of Christ will set them free from all their doctrinal constraints and certain aspects of their misguided religion. Given the misunderstandings and interpretations over the years of these passages, it seems that this was what Jesus was commissioning his disciples to do. That is, as you go among your fellow Jews scattered about the world tell them God's latest and greatest understanding and demands for covenant relationship are as I have commanded you. However, either because universal, Jew-to-Jew evangelism failed or because the world of Judaism was a far, far too small, the world of the Gospel got much, much bigger.

Let me point out that the Gospel of Jesus Christ spread across the Roman Empire not by some well-organized institutional program of Jesus' disciples, who believed God had raised Jesus from the dead as validation of his Messiahship, and then went about systematically storming the synagogues and accosting fellow Jews in the market places or street corners. In fact, we don't have a clear understanding of the separation of what would become known as Christianity, with its highly, evangelistic focus, and Judaism, with its dogged insular efforts, until the third or in some parts of the Ancient Near East until the fourth century of the Common Era.

Initially, people simply shared what they had seen and heard about Jesus and the effects these things had had in their lives and the lives of others. Primarily, they shared their hope and faith that Jesus as God's Christ would soon return to usher in the kingdom of God on earth, bringing peace, justice, prosperity, and healing in covenant renewal with God's faithful and fulfilling God's promise to Abraham to bless all the nations. It is in these moments of faith and

hope that those second, third, and later generations of believers had an encounter with the presence of the "Living Christ with us" that changed their lives, changed their world, and under the Spirit's leadership helped create what we know today as our Christian world. The Spirit continues its revelatory work among the peoples of the nations as we look forward to a future when all human hearts and minds live in and seek the will and ways of God made known in Jesus the Christ.

Giving witness to God in Jesus the Christ started out very simply and remains a very simple thing to do, which is, nothing more than a person going about his or her daily life primed to share with others not only their hope in God but what God in Christ means to them at the deepest levels of their humanity and how the Gospel has and is changing their lives, equipping them to be kingdom citizens. This is all there is to it. It is the way the church grew as uneducated, hope filled peasants in ancient Palestine shared their hopes in God found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As social creatures, we spend a major portion of our lives in relationship with and communicating with others. We talk about any number of things great and small, mundane and profound. As some maintain, our sophisticated and highly evolved abilities to communicate both verbally and non-verbally lie at the heart of not only our species' survival and development, but our almost limitless potential.

However, be that as it may, do you know what the dominate topic of communication is among human beings, out of all the ideas, events, and things we could talk about? Yep, you guessed it - our own thoughts and experiences; that is, most people spend about 60% of their time talking about themselves, 80% if you are on social media. Given all the things we could talk about and discuss, why do we spend so much time talking about ourselves? Sophisticated brain scans in a Harvard study in 2013 indicated that those areas of the human brain that register pleasure and reward, light up or show significantly increased activity, when we talk about ourselves, thus talking about ourselves makes us feel good.¹ But, not only that, talking about ourselves has the added advantage of making real self-analysis, self-insights, building rapport with others, enhancing cooperative activities, emotional or spiritual catharsis, and in certain situations promoting intimacy.

Therefore, rather than laying some emotional, guilt ridden trip on you this morning about "getting up" even slowly and creakily for some of us or being propelled from our Easy Lift chairs and "going out" into to the world and proclaiming the Gospel, I want us as we go about our daily lives "among" families, friends, acquaintances, or those we chance to meet, to be spring loaded to share our stories of faith with them, if and when the situation allows or calls for it. I don't want us to go "to" anyone with the intent of converting or correcting them. And, please, please, don't let the disparity between what you have been told are the ideals of personal piety or the Christian life squelch your heartfelt sharing of your faith with others. I can tell you that some of the most powerful witness and testimonies for God's power and presence in a person's life that I have heard wouldn't pass muster in polite society, but they changed lives for God. Folks, we are not called to use someone else's story or dress up our story with language and

¹Adrian F. Ward. The Neuroscience of Everybody's Favorite Topic. Scientific American, a division of Nature America, Inc. Jul 16, 2013.
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-neuroscience-of-everybody-favorite-topic-themselves/,6/07/2017>

terms not our own or use some contrived and well-rehearsed bit of Christian propaganda. Such things often ring false and shallow and have their own pitfalls.

Therefore, the next time a friend, family member, or a stranger you may meet in the doctor's office, on a plane, a train, a bus, etc. starts telling you about themselves, listen carefully; make sure you understand them and any pains, doubts, anxieties, and hopes they have. Then, do what we enjoy doing most, talk to them about you, share with them that in times like theirs your faith in God made known to you in the Gospel of Jesus Christ has helped center you and energize you toward finding courage, hope, help and comfort. Tell them about the consolation that prayer and scripture have in your life.

Pay attention to those you meet - the store clerk, the wait staff in a restaurant, the person in line at the grocery store, the MVD, etc. Look at their faces, their body postures, do they seem down, angry, tired, discouraged, depressed, frustrated - hold them up in prayer. And, if it happens that in the normal course of things you engage them in conversation, ask them how they are doing, then be prepared to listen to them, really hear them, because their non-verbal communications - 85% of all our interpersonal communications, may have intuitively told you they may be hurting in body, mind and soul. In being really present to others as they share, you offer them encouragement as one person to another. As you leave them, tell them you will pray for them. And, if by chance, they share with you the power and joy of their faith in God, then with a simple smile signal your mutual joy.

If you discern they need help at a professional and practical level, refer them to anyone of a hundred agencies in town or the state that help people with their needs or concerns - there is a list of these agencies in our church directory. Be prudent, safe, concerned, and helpful, but always be spring loaded to be the presence of Christ wherever you go and in whatever you are doing.

Such things not only proclaim the healing teachings of Jesus in word and deed, but they give Christ form and substance in this world as we go "among" those we know and meet, who may be hurting, lonely, lost, confused, scared, and in need of personal affirmation by another who cares.

So, share your story when appropriate, including your doubts, fears, and yes, perhaps some of your lapses and failures - but be careful here. Please, don't get locked into someone else's story or some evangelistic spiel that is unnatural for you full of buzz words and insider cliques. However, let there be no doubt about it, we must share; we must give witness to Jesus the Christ, it is not an option. Our witness for Christ maybe a dynamic, heart-felt, and a positive witness or one of benign neglect or indifference toward a larger understanding of the world that God loves so much. The very source and power that brought us to our faith in God is as outwardly oriented as it is inwardly directed. Failure to share our faith in God, I think, means we have experienced only half of the joy of our encounter with the Living Christ.

In addition, Christ has promised to always be with his disciples - Matthew indicates he hasn't gone anywhere, he is here with us - as we go about sharing how God has touched our lives as we touch the lives of others with the healing spirit of his teachings even to the end of our age and beyond.

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