

“Go, Make, Baptize, Teach”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Trinity Sunday – June 15, 2014

Matthew 28: 16-20

The Great Commission. It is one of the most familiar passages in the Bible. It is Jesus’ mission statement to his disciples and to his church. If we ever become lost or wayward in our focus as the Body of Christ, we can return to these closing verses of Matthew’s Gospel and be refocused and centered on what we are to do.

On this day when we honor men who have been father- figures to us, we also remember the triune nature of our God. Trinity Sunday is not a day we circle on the church calendar like Christmas and Easter. I don’t believe there are any Trinity trees in people’s homes, or Trinity baskets filled with candy for children! No, traditionally, the Sunday following Pentecost is a day to recognize that the God we worship and adore is unique because of God’s three-fold nature. We know God not just in one way; we know God in three distinct, unambiguous, meaningful ways.

And yet it can be hard to get our head around what it means to believe in the one triune God. “The great Augustine had to reduce it to a very simple illustration. He used the example of a tree. The root is wood; the trunk is wood; the branches are wood: one wood, one substance, but three different entities” (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 46). Or, another way I have explained it to children is water, ice, and steam. Those three things originate from the same substance, but they take three, distinct final forms.

In the end, however, to believe in the one triune God is to believe in a God of relationship. And perhaps in that belief we see the connection with Jesus’ Great Commission. For just as God relates to his children in three distinct ways, so to does the church relate to its world as Christ’s Body in a multitude of ways, all of which seek to transform the world through God’s boundless love.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore . . .”

Just a week ago, we marked the 70th anniversary of the Normandy Invasion on D-Day. As I thought about that momentous day and the events which preceded and followed it, I could not help but be struck by the unbelievable amount of logistical planning and on-the-fly decisions which had to be made for that specific military campaign. Whether it was on that day, or for any military exercise, the chain-of-command is essential for success. An order is given to push forward, to stand down, to engage the enemy – and the order is followed because it bears the weight of the chain-of-command above

it. There is authority behind the order, and soldiers obey that order because they know on whose authority it comes from.

Jesus gives this commission to his disciples based on the authority granted him by God. Jesus didn't make it up himself; "all authority in heaven and on earth *has been given to me.*" It was given to him by God, and through that authority, Jesus commands his disciples, and we receive that command with the knowledge of the chain-of-command that it originates from.

And that command begins, "Go." It is active and forceful. He did not say, "Stay" or "Remain." He says, "Go." Inferred in that command is that we cannot fulfill his commission by standing still or remaining where we are. As his disciples, we must go from where we are comfortable, and meet God's children in the world. Jesus did not say, "Remain here and you will fulfill my commandment." He said, "Go therefore to serve in my name."

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . ."

If I ever had the courage to suggest a constitutional amendment to the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), it would not be surrounding issues which the General Assembly will debate this week in Detroit. No, instead it would relate to G-1.04 - "Categories of Membership." Throughout the Book of Order, we speak of "membership in the church." Funny thing, though - Jesus didn't say, "Go therefore and make members of all nations." He said, "Go and make disciples of all nations."

When we say we are members of the church, it implies we've paid our dues and are part of an exclusive club with expected benefits. To be a disciple, though, means to be a follower of someone and to live your life according to your leader's beliefs. Jesus commands us to "make disciples of all nations." He wants people of all nations to be his followers, not members of an exclusive club of which he is the president. He yearns for a church that follows his lead with acts of love and grace, with words of compassion and challenge, with examples of grace and faithfulness. Our Lord commands us to make disciples who follow him not just one day of the week, but all the days of our lives. But how do we do that - as individuals and as the church?

"Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . ."

The first way we make disciples of all nations is by baptizing others in the name of the one triune God. It matters not whether someone is sprinkled, dunked, or something in-between. It matters not whether the person is a baby, a child, a teenager, or an adult. What matters is that someone wishes to become a follower and disciple of Jesus, and they confirm that decision by being baptized as Jesus was baptized.

Today we have the honor of baptizing Daisy Tawiah as a disciple of Jesus Christ. In April, we baptized four teenagers and confirmed two more as active disciples of Jesus Christ. Whenever we baptize a child, we as the congregation promise "to guide and nurture this child, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging her or him to know and follow Christ." We make disciples of all nations when we take that vow seriously, and not only

follow Christ in our daily walk of faith, but mentor and nurture those baptized in the name of the one triune God.

"And teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

Our daughter, Erin, along with Maddie Andrews and their classmates, held their final middle school band concert last week. As I listened to them play their music, I could not help but remember what that group sounded like two years earlier. As sixth-graders, their first concert was, well, a little hard on the ears. Now, to hear them play as eighth-graders was like night-and-day. Their tone, their musicianship, their ability to listen to one another was a sign of great growth and learning.

And, as is often the case with such improvement, the primary credit must go to their teacher. It took creativity to grab each of those students' attention. It took patience to work through ups and downs with each of those students. It took passion to inspire each of those students. And it took foresight to see how those individual students could grow into a cohesive, dynamic whole. I am grateful for Dan Christian, the band director at New Augusta North Middle School, for teaching those students how to reach their fullest potential. I am grateful for all who are teachers, who inspire, who are patient, and who see the good in every child they teach.

That is what the Christian life demands: that we teach others with creativity, passion, patience, and foresight. I read one commentator who compared it to being in a lifelong internship. We make disciples of all nations when we teach others about grace, justice, humility, and service. And we teach not just in the expected settings of worship and sermons and classrooms. We also teach discipleship in the less-expected ways: by inviting someone to try something new; by listening to a teenager struggling with life; by working alongside someone, despite your differences of opinion; by showing kindness and respect to someone who others dismiss. The Christian life is never perfected and aced, as a class in school. It is a lifelong internship of mutual learning, where the Spirit opens the mind and heart to forever be challenged and deepened in the knowledge of the one triune God.

The great assurance Jesus leaves his disciples and all of us are his last words: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." When we struggle to go as our Lord commands, "remember, I am with you always." When we aren't sure how best to make disciples in Christ's name, "remember, I am with you always." When we yearn for more to be baptized, "remember, I am with you always." When we don't know how to best teach discipleship, "remember, I am with you always."

Our faith is in the one triune God, who gives us everything we need to fulfill the Great Commission. The strength of God the Father, the love of God the Son, and the abiding presence of God the Spirit – that is our God, now and forever.

So go, make, baptize, and teach. And remember – "God is with you always, to the end of the age."

Thanks be to God. Amen.