

What Is Our Purpose?

Matthew 28:16-20 Trinity Sunday

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Be honest. When you hear this passage, what do you think? What do you feel? Do you feel comfortable with what we are being asked to do? Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the names of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit?

In a pluralistic society it can feel complicated. We value the right of all people to believe as they desire.

Throughout the years since Jesus is reported to have said these words, known as The Great Commission, people have taken them to mean different things.

Certainly this was the directive which prompted the missionary Christian movements throughout the Church's history. Mission boards from every church denomination sent people to do what they felt had been mandated by Jesus himself. As history has shown, that, of course has had good and bad outcomes. The church DID spread around the world. Many did find faith, but as has been recognized in more modern times, it was often at the expense of local customs and culture.

Over the last decades, there has been a shift. Missionaries are now call mission co-workers in most major denominations. They work alongside local leadership. And missionaries are now being sent to the US from other countries.

But the mission movement by US folks to our own has been in existence for years. Back in college, I went with a campus ministry group one summer on a mission trip to Daytona Beach, Florida. A dozen or so groups went to different places around the country. We landed there. A group of 15 of us lived for 10 weeks or so in a local hotel. We all worked jobs during the day (I worked at Denny's Restaurant), and participated in Bible Study, fellowship and evangelism in the evenings and days off. By evangelism, I mean going out in groups and witnessing to people on the beach. We would go up to strangers and strike up a conversation and then talk about the saving and redeeming love of Jesus.

Many of the students there with me would come back afterwards with amazing stories about how people had been so grateful to hear the Gospel message and made decisions right then and there to follow Christ.

That wasn't my experience. I was uncomfortable. I was self-conscious, and it didn't feel authentic to me. I didn't feel this type of evangelism was built on relationship, because it wasn't.

Now don't get me wrong. There are many people in this world who have heard about the love of God in Christ through a chance encounter of one sort or another, and their lives have been forever changed. And quite honestly, I do not know if any of the people with whom I spoke on the beach throughout that summer ended up encountering the living, loving God, or saw God anew. I hope so.

What I do know is that the Spirit of God will move as it will. It's not about me, my words or my actions. When someone is ready to have their heart softened by God, far be it from me to stand in the way. But it's an honor to be part of someone's faith journey. That's part of why I'm in ministry. I love to see God at work in people's lives. My call to this place, WPC, allows me to participate in that incredible vista, and I am extremely grateful.

But Jesus tells those gathered right after his Resurrection to GO and make disciples. Just what does it mean to make disciples? That's the job of the church, you know: to help people learn about the life of Jesus, the mystery of God and the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives; to help them grow in relationship with God; to discern their God given gifts; and then to go out and serve.

This congregation does well with some of this mission, but we can do so much more. One late afternoon this past week, I dropped back by the church to pick up something. There was a woman parked in the lot waiting for her child to be dropped off from the school bus. She was out of her car, and I introduced myself to her, telling her I am the pastor of the church. She said...you're the congregation focused on outreach. Pleased by her comment, I said yes, we have been known for that. Then she asked me something which startled me. *Do you have worship services too?* She asked. I briefly explained...that indeed we did and invited her to join us some Sunday.

But it all got me thinking. You can have great outreach, even meaningful outreach, but if it's not rooted in the mindset that we are doing it out of our passion for God and the command to love God, neighbor and self...we become just another social but philanthropic organization.

The scripture says: All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me....go and make disciples and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. It's our *raison d'être* (reason of being), if you will. Our purpose.

Perhaps one of the reasons we stay with the church is expressed in this story a colleague cited from English Preacher Leslie Weatherhead. He asks us to imagine ourselves aboard a luxury liner sailing softly on the Caribbean. Life has never been better. So plentiful is our food that we're embarrassed to look at it. There are four bars on board, and each has its own combo

playing so we may dance to our hearts' content. Our rooms are elegantly appointed, graced with fresh fruit every morning and French chocolates every night. Life is good.

Then one day while we're sunning on the deck, lathered in sunscreen, the Captain comes onto the loudspeaker with the following announcement:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm pleased to announce that during the night we were visited by a supply ship and our pantries have been completely replenished. We have a fresh supply of movies for the ship's theatres and three new bands have arrived for your dancing delight. The Chief Navigator informs me we'll have perfect weather for the next three weeks which is as long as our fuel supply will last. And that brings me to the main purpose for this announcement. I've decided not to make for port. We're simply going to cruise around and around in huge circles until we run out of fuel and then I'll sink the ship. Bon Appetit!"

Crazy right? But is it so much different than a comfortable life with no real purpose except for our own pleasure? Regardless of our standard of living, all of us are destined for an ending someday. No of us knows when that will be. When Weatherhead considered the announcement of the crazy ship captain, he wrote, "For the passengers, the next few days would appear just the same as those which preceded them. Only one thing would be different. The captain's speech would have snatched from every mind the concept of purpose, meaning and goal. And in his opinion, very soon afterwards, on a dark night, first one and then another passenger would jump overboard. For the human mind hates meaninglessness."

Jesus gave those who were listening then and now meaning in this life and the next. Remember this passage comes right after the Easter story in Matthew, when the bonds of death were broken and love was shown to reign supreme. It was the ultimate act of grace. If ever there were a message to be shared, it was in the wake of that reality! Meaning now bathed all he asked them to do!

We do outreach not because it feels good, even though it does. We participate in service to others because Jesus showed us **that** is the way we should live. He transformed lives through love and grace, meeting their very basic needs. He healed the sick, he aided the poor. He released those who were in bondage in every way. He tells us we have the power to do the same. He also spoke truth to power. He spoke against injustice and stood for the marginalized in society. He tells us to do the same. And if we feel any hesitation or fear? He reassured people time and time again what he says here at the very end of this passage...I am with you ALWAYS. In fact, **it is the Spirit** who does the ministry **through us** to create the transformation. We just show up and serve as willing participants. That prevents our egos from getting in the way.

But to be a faithful community of disciples who are effectively serving from a heart of love for God in Christ, we must be aware of our context—an understanding of our place and purpose in the larger world in which we exist. We live in postmodern times. That refers to a time in which the truths our parents trusted are now, at least, suspect. Among scholars, literature, including the Bible is viewed with some suspicion. We're told, and rightly so, we need to understand the

bias of the authors. And EVERY author has some bias. Additionally, we now take into consideration the context in which something was written. The potential problem is, that we water down the message and negate its impact upon our lives. Whereas our parents may have seen directives from Scripture, we can tend to intellectualize those same truths and may be prone to keep them at an arm's distance, for better or for worse.

In our greater society, we have learned to be suspicious of the motivations of those who have something to gain in business, politics and society. People are skeptical...even of the church. And they should be. People who say they are doing things on behalf of God have been responsible for some horrific acts both in the past and even in our current state of affairs.

One of the responsibilities of bodies of believers is to discern the movement of the Spirit and to name those actions which are NOT of God. That is one of the strengths of the Presbyterian form of government. There is a system of democracy, if you will, of check and balances at all levels to discern the Spirit's actions and to prayerfully act and make declarative statements as further study is given as to how God is revealing Godself in this time in history.

That is what allowed us to move to change the denomination's stance on ordination and marriage within the LGBTQ community, for example. At the last General Assembly, however, delegates came up short when asked to apologize and repent of the harm and damage we as a denomination have caused in our treatment of our LGBTQ friends and colleagues through history. In this month of PRIDE...I say here, we are sorry. We were wrong. We stand together.

The denomination also has statements which give theological basis for the compassionate care and treatment of refugees and the environment, which are extremely pertinent today.

Finally, as we discuss this idea of evangelism, I confess, that my earlier beachfront days have left me with some baggage which has yet to be discarded. I am wary of people who are overly zealous with their faith and who want to share it with me. Actions speak louder than words...But I also confess I have hidden behind my title to do some of the talking for me. When people know I am clergy, they make all sorts of assumptions about me...for good or not so good. But they assume that I am in this profession for a reason, because I love God. And THAT makes me lazy. I don't HAVE to use my words. The virtual collar does it for me. It also keeps some people away. I need to do better to let people know why I am doing what I am doing and not be ashamed of my love for God, the work of the Risen Christ or the movement of the Spirit in my life.

How about you? Do your friends know about why you come to church and how you feel about God? Would co-workers be surprised to find out what your faith means to you? Sure you have to earn the right to be heard. But when you have, I encourage you to tell your story.

And remember, the Risen one says, "I will be with you until the end of the age."