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Circle of Mercy Sermon
June 11, 2017

You've Got This
Matthew 28:16-20

When I was a child, we used to go to Ridgecrest Conference Center for at least one week out of the summer. Ridgecrest was for Southern Baptists what Montreat is for Presbyterians and what Kanuga is for Episcopalians – there they offered for church pastors and lay leaders, weeklong summer conferences that focused on different aspects of the life of the church.

Usually we went there for Sunday School week. For adults, there were sessions on teaching and leading Sunday School and exploring new curriculum. For kids, it was an entire week filled with Sunday School, and I loved it.

We memorized a lot of scripture passages during those weeks. When I was about eight years old, one of those passages that we memorized was Matthew 28:19-20 – the verses that conclude Matthew's gospel, often referred to as "The Great Commission;" *Great Commission* was a phrase that was tagged onto the text as a heading when the King James Version of the Bible was written. It

does not show up in the original text. And this is how I memorized it in the King James Version:

¹⁹ Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: ²⁰ Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. *Matthew 28:19-20 (KJV)*

You might have noticed the difference in the words used in the King James Version, compared to the NRSV that I read for our scripture reading tonight. The KJV says, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them . . .” and the NRSV says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .”

There was no mention of *making disciples* when I first learned about these verses. There was no explicit mention of any connection with the larger story of Jesus’s life, except for his death on the cross and his resurrection. These verses were all about right belief and the responsibility we carried as individual Christians and Christians in our Southern Baptist communities to share with others who did not know that Jesus’s resurrection after his death

on the cross could save them, would ensure their eternal destiny in heaven – if they could make a statement of faith and accept Jesus into their hearts.

This was part of the story of my understanding of who Jesus was when I was growing up, but it wasn't the whole story. As I continue to live and wrestle with these same good news stories that I've been immersed in for my entire life, what I learn time and time again is that the stories are still speaking to us and that there is no simple, once and for all, singular way to read and hear and understand them. Our text tonight is a perfect example of this.

When I saw that the Lectionary Gospel text for this week was the Great Commission, I quickly started looking to see what the Hebrew scripture was for the week. But as I have sat with Matthew 28 over the past couple of weeks, I have been reminded that the words that were written on my mind and in my heart some 34 years ago are still alive and well, that God is still speaking, that the Spirit of this good news cannot be contained in words on a page. The Gospel story keeps working on me in mischievous and mysterious ways. These words that felt so fixed in their meaning for so many years have been freed and have been thrust into the ever-expansive work of God in this wild and wonderful universe.

Even though I didn't have words for it, I sensed that there was more to the story because I watched the people around me and paid close attention not only to what they said but to how they treated other people, how they engaged in their lives, how they lived out this good news story. Early on, I sensed that this story was larger and more expansive than simply (or not so simply) convincing other people to believe the right things, the exact things that I believed.

The Gospel of Matthew focuses on teaching from the beginning. Matthew teaches us the core of the good news story when an angel came to Joseph in a dream and told him what to name the child his fiancée Mary would give birth to: Emmanuel – God with us.

These verses at the end of Matthew's gospel reiterate this very same word of good news – “remember, I am with you always.” And if I were translating a version of the Bible and freely adding my own headings to sections, I think I'd call this one “The Greatest Promise and the Best News of All.” God is with us – always. God will keep showing up. God will keep seeking us out. What better news is there than that? God does not leave us. God is with us – always!

At the beginning of this text, there were now eleven disciples, everyone who had been with Jesus along the way, except for Judas. Jesus called them together, through a message from the faithful women who had arrived to find his tomb empty. Jesus invited the eleven to meet him on the mountain in Galilee. Jesus invited them to return to Galilee; to the place where he first called them to be disciples: to the place where he taught the text we know as the Sermon on the Mount; to the place where he healed and taught and fed the masses; to the place where he was transfigured before some of them. It was a familiar and known place where they had shared so many significant experiences with each other.

When they saw him, they worshipped him, and the text tells us that “some doubted.” I am encouraged by the fact that some of them still doubted. They had witnessed everything with their own eyes. They had walked with Jesus. They had seen each other at their best and at their worst. They had made mistakes. They had messed up. They didn’t always do what he asked them to do. They fell asleep when he needed them the most. Some of them denied and betrayed him. They thought that the story was over with Jesus’s death.

This was a group of misfits who didn't have their act together. They lacked confidence. They were uncertain. They doubted. They lost hope after his death and were filled with fear. Yet, Jesus returned to them (on several occasions according to all four gospel accounts). Jesus entrusted them with continuing the work that he believed they already knew how to do: teaching, healing the sick and freeing the oppressed. He reminded them time and time again: I am with you. And he assured them that they would never be alone: "I am with you always."

It's more than just God being with us though. We can't fully understand Jesus' parting words to the disciples in this Great Commission outside the context of the Greatest Commandment earlier in the book of Matthew. When questioned by religious leaders about which commandment in the law was the greatest, Jesus responded by saying: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment." (Matthew 22:37-38) But he didn't stop there. He continued, "And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these *two* commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:39-40).

Everything that Jesus had been teaching them came back around to the same point: love – love for God, love for neighbor and love for self. That little connecting word “and” is so important. Love of God is intimately wrapped up in the ways that we love our neighbor and love ourselves. Jesus reminds the disciples and us that we come to know more about who God is and who God calls us to be in the world through encounters and relationships with our neighbors. The more we extend love to our neighbors, the more we discover about who God is, who we are and where God is showing up in our midst.

Jesus said:

- Whoever welcomes the little children, welcomes me. (Matthew 18:5)
- Just as you offered food to the hungry and drinks to the thirsty; just as you welcomed the stranger; just as you clothed the naked; just as you visited the sick and the prisoners you have done these things to me.

(Matthew 25)

This good news story has everything to do with how we are in relationship with our neighbors, how we are (or are not) living into the work of justice and love and compassion and mercy in all that we do. The discipleship to which Jesus called his friends and the discipleship to which he calls us, is not just

about obeying a rule or commandment. It is ultimately about following Jesus and walking in the way of Jesus, putting our bodies in the places where our commitment to God cannot be extricated from our commitment to the well-being of our neighbors.

When Jesus told the disciples to go and make disciples, he was saying to them: Go out and keep doing what we've been doing all along, since we first came together in Galilee, when I called you to put down your fishing nets and leave what was known and familiar to you. You have already embodied this. You have watched me. You know exactly what to do. So go and do what you already know how to do. You've got this.

What Jesus had been teaching and embodying in the midst of the disciples was not an imperialistic, dominating way of being in relationship, not a way of being in the world that forced right belief. What he modeled in their presence was love and right relationship – treating each other and all of our neighbors with compassion, respect, reciprocity, mercy, grace and kindness. In his first missional charge to the disciples earlier in Matthew, Jesus instructed them to go and stay with those who extended hospitality to them and shake the dust from their feet and move on when they were not welcomed with hospitality.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught about the upside down kingdom, about who would be called blessed. The ones who would be called blessed were those: who would be comforted, who would inherit the earth, who would receive mercy, who would see God, who would be called children of God. The blessed are not the rich and powerful. The blessed are:

- the poor in spirit
- those who mourn
- the meek
- those who hunger for righteousness
- the merciful
- the pure in heart
- the peacemakers

This is a text we need to be memorizing, writing on our hearts, impressing upon our memories, learning how to embody.

In the Fall of 2015, we spent several weeks in worship focused on the Sermon on the Mount. Out of this focus on the Sermon on the Mount, a small group developed that has been meeting monthly for nearly two years. This group

has gathered to study Matthew 5-7 and how Jesus' teaching continues to shape our lives, what questions it raises for us in our relationships, where we feel challenged by it and fall short, where we see other people living it out in the world around us. I had never really considered that the group could also very well be called, the "Great Commission Group" or to use my made up heading, "The Greatest Promise and the Best News of All Group."

But here we are, centuries later, still trying to figure out what it means to be disciples, how to recognize discipleship when we see it, how to cultivate and nurture it within ourselves and within our children and youth. We are in good company and the work of discipleship is continuous, it's not a once and for all destination.

This all brought to mind a game that we've played with the youth over the years out at Swan Mountain Farm, where the Sigmon Siler's live. It is called Beckon. The gist of the game is that one person is "it." Everyone else hides all around the farm. The person who is "it" tries to find everyone who is hiding. Once a person is found and tagged, they have to go to a home base. The goal for the person who is "it" is to find everyone and keep them at home base.

The only way that they someone who has been found can be freed to go hide again is by another person who is still hiding to make eye contact with them. Sometimes this requires the hiding person to step outside of their hiding spot. You might be seen and caught, trying to help another person get free. It's risky. But it's an essential element of the game – to help each other stay free.

What we have to do is keep seeking each other out. We have to be willing to take the risk of leaving the places that are comfortable and safe, to enter into the work of discipleship, that moves us all toward God and God's hope for the world – and ultimately sets us all free.

When I feel like I'm frozen or like I'm drowning in that shifting sea of doubt and uncertainty and unable to see any way forward, I am reminded that God keeps seeking me out. With all of my doubts and fears and uncertainties, with all of my missteps and failures and mistakes, Emmanuel still keeps showing up. Emmanuel, God with us keeps making eye contact with me and beckoning me toward Godself in the form of each of you, in the forms of people I meet each day – reminding me that we all have the power and capacity to keep finding each other in God's presence along the way as well. And friends, that is the greatest promise and best news of all.