

“THE GREAT COMMISSION”

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Scripture: Genesis 1:1-4, 12:1-4; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28: 16-20

Here is a photo of the “Great Commission” window at First Presbyterian Church in Lockport. Like many similar depictions, it is beautifully drawn as a dramatic moment in time. And yet . . .

“The scene [described in scripture] is one of near-comic irony. Jesus says, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,’ but nothing in the surroundings seems to support such a claim. If Jesus had been speaking to vast multitudes, rank upon rank stretching toward the horizon as far as the eye could see, with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir humming the ‘Hallelujah Chorus’ in the background, perhaps it would seem plausible. However, Jesus is on an unnamed mountain in backwater Galilee with a congregation of eleven, down from twelve the week before, and even some of them are doubtful and not so sure why they have come to worship this day.

“What Jesus tells them presses credulity even further: ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.’ (‘Nations,’ by the way, does not mean ‘nations’ in the modern sense of nation-states, but something more like ‘foreigners,’ ‘tribes of people who are not at all like you,’ or to put it succinctly, ‘Gentiles.’)¹

One writer notes that “Telling this little band of confused and disoriented disciples that they were to herd all the peoples of the earth toward Mount Zion in the name of Jesus would be like standing in front of most congregations today—many of them small and all of them of . . . uncertain convictions—and telling them, ‘Go into all the world and cure cancer, clean up the environment, evangelize the unbelieving, and, while you are at it, establish world peace.’”²

And yet, this one passage has been heralded down through the ages as the weighty final command of Jesus to all of us — to baptise in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and to teach. Surely we are just as doubtful as some of those 11 rag-tag disciples . . . if we were to take this literally to heart, what are we supposed to do? Drag every non-Christian down to the Delaware River for a dunking, and then read scripture to them? No, I don’t think so. In fact, this is one time when I’d invoke the phrase, “You are the only Bible some people will ever read.”³

Yes, the scene that has been memorialized in windows such as the one at the Lockport church, was probably not nearly so idyllic as we like to think. And for such a short and well-worn passage, there are two things that warrant a fresh look for us today.

First, the scene takes place in Galilee, where many Gentiles lived.⁴ It is over a hundred miles from Jerusalem, and it is a clue to what Jesus is asking of the eleven. In just three sentences, Jesus uses the word “all” four times. All authority, all nations, all things that he has commanded, and all the days (translated “always”).

The people of Israel knew that their special relationship with God was in order to bless all nations . . . all Gentiles. We heard in what Kathie read from Genesis, that the Lord told Abram, “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” But, still, these eleven never imagined that it would all be up to them!

The task Jesus charges them with is impossible. It is as impossible for us today as it was for them. And so

this forces them – and us – to rely entirely on the mercy, strength, and power of God; to recognize that all authority is not in the church or in any preacher, doctrine, or ideology, but has been invested solely in Christ, the second person of the Trinity.

And after this impossible command, Jesus assures them that, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, he will be with us always — with us for ministry when all we can offer is faithfulness.

And yet, that does not release us from accountability. Here-in lies the second thing I'd like to lift up from this passage today.

Earlier in Matthew (chapter 10), Jesus has sent out the twelve to cast out unclean spirits, heal the sick, and proclaim the good news. But in the Great Commission, he charges the disciples — and us — to teach. Throughout Matthew, Jesus' teaching ministry has been emphasized, and now he sends his apprentices out to continue that work. He refers to all he has taught the disciples, and we have the bulk of those teachings right here in the Gospels.

But before we can teach, we must first be educated ourselves. This is an unabashed plug for our Christian Education. From cradle to grave, we need to be involved in learning, in order to be able to teach others.

You may think a child is too young, but I happen to know the story of a young child who pulled out the Bible to reassure a friend during a particularly violent thunderstorm. She pointed to what she had learned in Sunday School . . . “Don't be afraid.” No child is too young to begin to learn from observing the kindness of a teacher or the welcome of the worshipping congregation, or to learn a Bible verse repeated in class. And not one of us is old enough to put Bible study and adult education classes behind us. We are called . . . we are commissioned . . . to teach. So we had better be learning!

Today is Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is a very hard concept for us to learn or teach. The references in our New Testament passages are really unrelated to the doctrine of the Trinity as it was developed centuries later. But I learned some new perspectives on the Trinity as I studied for this sermon — some things that I think may be relevant to each of us in our daily lives.

You see, it's not so much about memorization or compartmentalization or diagramming. The Trinity helps express the action of God . . . action that was present even in the first days of creation when God the Creator spoke the Word and God's spirit hovered over the water. The Trinity is dynamic. It is descriptive of the Living God. As was often repeated in my Episcopal upbringing, “As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.” It is not lodged somewhere in the past. One of my colleagues posted this description which I just love:

“It is in the nature of God to be Trinity. God is Creator and continues to Create. God is Savior and continues to Save. God is Sanctifier and continues to make holy. . . . When we become most genuinely human we too Create, Save and Sanctify; thus we become companions and co-workers with God in All that is Holy in The Trinity.”⁵

And one last note. Just as Jesus left the disciples with an assurance of his eternal presence as a benediction and a comfort to them, Paul closed his second letter to the Corinthians with the blessing that I use almost every Sunday to close worship. Paul wrote, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

As my former boss and dear colleague, Carl Wilton, has written, there is no “if” in this statement. “It's a certainty that sometime during the coming week you will receive a little bit of grace, experience the love of

God, have your life touched by transforming fellowship. Blessings are the stuff of daily life, if we will but open our eyes to see them and our hearts to receive them!”⁶

That is the Trinity . . . that is God in Three Persons involved in every day of our lives.

ENDNOTES

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1. Thomas G. Long, “Homiletical Perspective” on Matthew 28:16-20, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, ed. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, 47, 49.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. Anonymous. If you Google this phrase, you come up with a modern parable in various forms, for which this is the closing sentence.
 4. In his *SermonWriter* commentary on this passage, Dick Donovan notes: “Galilee was known as Galilee of the Gentiles (4:15) because it was home to many Gentiles. ‘So Galilee for Matthew marks a stage of separation from the ‘purity’ of the holy city and as such represents the Gentile world that lay beyond.’ (Pfatteicher, 12).”
 5. Paul Bresnahan, on Facebook, June 18, 2011.
 6. Carlos Wilton, *Lectionary Preaching Workbook*, Series VIII, Cycle A, 219.