

Being and Making Disciples
October 27, 2013
Matthew 28:16-20

This morning's reading comes from the twenty-eighth chapter of Matthew. It is a passage that contains what is commonly referred to as the Great Commission. Listen now to the final words in Matthew's Gospel.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

May God bless the reading and hearing of these familiar words.

Let us pray . . . On this Reformation Sunday, help us to celebrate the past, accept the challenges of the present, and live into the future as your disciples. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

The Great Commission is about disciples making disciples. It is a call to be authentic followers of the way of Jesus, and to share that experience with others.

When it is lived out as Jesus envisioned, growth happens naturally. The number of followers increases, and those who are already his disciples grow as well. As disciples help make other disciples, they grow in their faith.

The Great Commission is for the whole world, but it is always personal. It always happens to and through real people.

When you think of what all is involved in carrying out the Great Commission, the church must play an important role. That role has remained the same, even as the church has changed.

Like any multi-national organization that has been around for any length of time, the church has undergone many changes. Many of these changes are ones we may have learned about years ago, but don't think about on a regular basis.

Let me help you remember. If you are not all that familiar with church history, let me help you find your way.

The date was October 30, 1517. In the city of Wittenberg, Germany, a monk, university teacher, and preacher named Martin Luther decided the time had come to share a list of his concerns about the doctrines and practices of the church.

Luther knew that salvation was not for sale, no matter how creatively agents marketed the sale of indulgences or how readily people purchased them. He had already used his preaching and teaching to draw attention to this problem.

Finally, the time came when he knew he needed to escalate his protest. Exactly 496 years ago today Luther put a printed copy of his concerns on the only sort of church bulletin board that existed back then: the church door.

His act of nailing his "95 Theses" to the church door in Wittenberg is now widely recognized as the start of the Reformation.

While Luther's act is in the spotlight, it didn't happen in isolation. Historically speaking, change was happening in many places. As protesting the troubling practice of the established churches spread the term Protestant emerged.

The Protestant Reformation changed the church forever, and opened up the possibilities for existence of new associations, denominations, and networks of churches that were not affiliated with either the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church.

This new kind of church was energized by five statements. Originally in Latin these remarks all contained the word *solus*, which translates as only or alone. They are

- by faith alone,
- by Scripture alone,
- through Christ alone,
- by grace alone, and
- glory to God alone.

Some say the Protestant Reformation continued for the next 150 years. Whether that is the case or not, it is clear that a central tenet of the Reformation that lives on. At the heart of the Protestant Reformation was an affirmation that "the church is always reformed, always reforming."

This morning, as we strive to understand what it means to be about the work of being and making disciples, I want us to think about some of the changes in Protestantism during our own lifetimes.

United Church is connected to two traditions: the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches and the United Church of Christ.

Did you realize both groups are younger than most who are gathered here this morning?

The date was November 10, 1955. In the city of Detroit those gathered from Congregational Christian Churches around the country voted to give birth to The National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.¹

This new association was committed to "the continuance and growth of those Christian purposes and practices which have been the historic and accepted characteristics of Congregational Christian Churches."²

Now, nearly 60 years later the association's current mission statement is "bringing together Congregational Christian Churches for mutual care and outreach to our world in the name of Jesus Christ."³ Put differently, the association seeks to help congregations in the work of being and making disciples.

The date was June 25, 1957. In the city of Cleveland those gathered from around the country voted to give birth to the United Church of Christ. This newly formed denomination was created through a merger of two groups: The Congregational Christian Churches and The Evangelical and Reformed Church.⁴

¹ "Articles of Association of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches of the United States." <http://www.naccc.org/CMSUploads/790_PostStrategicPlan2011ArticlesandBylaws.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. <<http://www.naccc.org/>>

⁴ "Short Course in the History of the United Church of Christ - The United Church of Christ." <<http://www.ucc.org/about-us/short-course/the-united-church-of-christ.html>>

Each of those two groups was created about a quarter of a century earlier by mergers. In other words, this new denomination brought together what had not long before been four separate traditions.⁵

This new denomination was focused on Christian unity - an emphasis made clear by the diversity of the groups that became one in order to form the denomination.

Now, nearly 60 years later the denomination is best known for its decade long "God is still speaking" campaign.⁶ In various ways, Stillspeaking has been a reminder that "God still has a lot more to say."⁷ Whether you are familiar with it or not, hopefully you have heard the Gracie Allen line "Never place a period, where God has placed a comma."⁸

The date was July 2, 1968. Here in the city of Marco Island this community of faith was legally incorporated.⁹ Our original charter consisted of 52 members.¹⁰

The date was March 26, 1972. We owned our own property and had completed construction. On that day we dedicated the new church.¹¹

The date was March 2, 1980. Our enlarged sanctuary and new classroom space was dedicated.¹²

The date was February 18, 1996. The beautiful 500 seat sacred space in which we are presently gathered for worship was dedicated.¹³

The date was October 26, 1997. Our majestic pipe organ was dedicated.¹⁴

The date was May 10, 2013. Our new steeple was installed.

⁵ "Short Course in the History of the United Church of Christ - An Ecumenical Age."

<<http://www.ucc.org/about-us/short-course/an-ecumenical-age.html>>

⁶ "The Still Speaking Campaign." <<http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/>>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Frequently Asked Questions About Still Speaking."

<<http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/about/faq.html#26>>

⁹ Florida Companies. "The United Church of Marco Island, Inc."

<<http://www.florida-companies-info.com/the-united-church-of-marco-island-inc-2i9a1/>>

¹⁰ "A Short History of the United Church of Marco Island." Church historical records.

¹¹ "United Church of Marco Island Background Data." Church historical records.

¹² "The United Church of Marco Island: A Friendly Family in the Heart of the Island." Church historical records.

¹³ "United Church Announces Dedication," Marco Island Eagle. February 14, 1996.

¹⁴ Eric Tiansay. "A Musical Blessing," Naples Daily News. October 22, 1997.

The date is October 30, 2013. The Reformation continues. The Great Commission remains.

We are thankful our congregation is affiliated with the NACCC and the UCC. We celebrate the strength these connections offer for our mission and ministry, especially as we live into our calling to be and make disciples.

The date will soon be November 2013. Before long it will be December 2013. We must understand our context in order to prepare for our future.

Earlier this week, I read an article about the big shifts in the global religious landscape.¹⁵ This piece offered many significant facts based on the Pew Research Center's recent comprehensive demographic study of religion in over 230 countries and territories.

Their research finds that 84% of all people in the world today practice a religion.¹⁶ Christianity is the world's largest religion, and it is a majority religion in 157 countries.

Despite these seemingly positive measures, there is cause for concern. This challenging reality is especially true the closer we get to our own geographical location.

Consider the recent remark by *New York Times* best-selling author Frank Schaeffer who critiqued both the evangelical and progressive forms of Protestant Christianity stating that "The problem with North American Christianity is not the window-dressing - it's the whole package."¹⁷

Consider the current summary of the state of the American church by someone who oversees research about the topic as the President of LifeWay Research. Ed Stetzer recently wrote that the church is not dying as some suggest, but is in a time of transition.¹⁸

¹⁵ Yasmine Hafiz. "10 Facts About the Transforming Global Religious Landscape."

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/22/10-facts-global-religion_n_4117341.html>

¹⁶ "The Global Religious Landscape." <<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>>

¹⁷ Greg Smith. "North American Christianity is Broken."

<<http://sowhatfaith.com/2013/07/09/north-american-christianity-broken/>>

¹⁸ Ed Stetzer. "The State of the Church in America: Hint - It's Not Dying."

<<http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/october/state-of-american-church.html>>

Consider the latest Gallup survey. The results show that nearly 4 out of every 5 (77%) respondents believe that religion is losing its influence on American life.¹⁹

Consider the rise of the religiously non-affiliated - the group frequently referred to as the nones. In 30 years they have grown from 7% to around 20% of the population.²⁰ Even more significantly, age matters. The younger the age cohort considered, the higher the percentage of nones. 1 out of every 3 (32%) young adults (those aged 18 to 29) are nones.²¹

Our world is changing.

The Southwest Florida community is changing.

The neighborhoods we call home are changing.

The date will soon be 2014. Currently many of the leaders of this congregation are planning for what is to come. Some are dreaming dreams, others are crafting early drafts of budgets, and yet others are just starting to feel the gently blowing winds of change.

As you think ahead, remember the rich story of our past. Celebrate the Reformation. Give thanks for our congregation's affiliations, and for the many milestone moments in our history.

As you think ahead, ponder the possibilities of the future. Remember that the work of reforming is never done. Remember that the call to be and make disciples will be as important in the months ahead as it has ever been.

Start imagining how we as a church will seek to fulfill the Great Commission. Start imagining your role.

Imagine a new year that includes many new faces and new relationships.

Imagine a new year that features new educational offerings and an additional service of worship.

Imagine a new year that welcomes a new minister and new ministries.

And while you are imagining, be sure to imagine what it will mean for you to be a disciple and to help make disciples. Amen.

¹⁹ Greg Smith. "Religion is Losing Its Influence." <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2013/05/30/religion-is-losing-influence/>>

²⁰ Greg Smith. "Rise of the Nones." <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2013/09/07/rise-of-the-nones/>>

²¹ Greg Smith. "US Jews = Less Religious." <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2013/10/12/us-jews-less-religious/>>