

Advent Lutheran Church
Being and Making Disciples
Matthew 28:16-20
July 21, 2024

Introduction

Around twenty years ago this summer while serving a congregation here in the DFW area, I led an adventurous group of high school students on a mission trip to Mexico. For many of these young people this was their first time to leave our country.

The preparation for the experience was considerable. This was an outside of our comfort zone effort to live out our faith. And, it was an act of obedience that seemed to fulfill the first part of the instruction in this morning's Gospel lesson, which is a passage that many call the Great Commission.

Go. Go and make disciples of all nations. The instruction begins with a call to leave our country of origin and travel to another.

The world has changed a great deal in the 2,000+ years since we received this guidance. And this means one no longer has to travel nearly as far to encounter a very different world.

A few years after that Mexico experience, while I was serving a congregation in Southwest Florida, I led a high energy group of middle school students on a summer mission trip to South Carolina. For many in our group this was the first time they ever traveled outside of Florida. This interstate experience stretched the participants just as much if not more as the international one.

In recent years, I've been on the receiving end. In my work as the CEO of White Rock Center of Hope, I welcome a number of students throughout the summer every summer who are away from home engaged in some form of an urban mission trip. While some participants are from other states, those traveling from within Texas who live in rural or suburban settings are more surprised by and far less familiar with the lived experiences and challenges of being economically poor in an urban context.

Rethinking “Go”

I wonder if Jesus were reissuing this part of the commission today how he might revise or update it. In authorizing disciples to carry on his ministry in the world what might he say?

Perhaps 21st century Jesus would say “Whether you are staying put or going, wherever you find yourself, remember that you are surrounded by diverse people from all the nations of the world with very different lived experiences. As my disciples you cannot live unto yourselves in a Christian bubble, instead you are called to build relationships with those you encounter.”

In other words, the “go” component is not something only our youth groups do nor is it something only done in the summer nor is it something only done in other nations or states. As we go about our daily lives, we are called to live into our identity as disciples by living in relationship with others.

Recognizing Context

That may sound reasonable, however, no sermon on this passage would be complete without mentioning the ways Great Commission Christianity has done harm.

Did you know that the name “Great Commission” is a modern term first offered by and ultimately popularized by missionaries? Have you ever considered how this name shapes our perceptions of the passage? Did you know that for many it helped create an “us” versus “them” mentality?

And that mentality has led many people, acting in the name of Jesus across the centuries, to use this passage to engage in colonialism and to resort to violence. Sadly, these troubling tendencies aren’t limited to the past.

Our Christian efforts to go and share must never become a quest to remake others into the image of our nation or culture.

Reimagining Baptizing and Teaching

Put positively, the passage instructs followers of the Way – disciples of Jesus – to be and make disciples. Our Gospel lesson says that the disciple making includes baptizing and teaching.

Let's pause here to consider an important question: how does someone who isn't a Christian become one?

While each person's story is unique, a common framework may be helpful.

Most of us grew up understanding there was a logical sequence: belief, behavior, and belonging.

For those born into a Christian family, our parents answered the belief questions on our behalf at our baptism. Then, in Sunday school and children's ministry we were taught what to believe.

As we got older, we were invited into the sanctuary for worship and socialized in other ways to engage in Christian behavior like praying, singing, and acting kindly.

Then, likely as a teenager, we were called to complete the triad with a ritual of belonging. In confirmation we not only affirmed our belief and committed to continuing our behavior, but became members – formally belonging to a given local congregation.

And, this kind of approach is why when adults change religions or move to a very different denomination, their new stories often start at the beginning: with belief. They left behind one way of understanding Christianity and transitioned to another because those beliefs more closely aligned with their own.

The Great Reversal

Diana Butler Bass, a popular author and widely recognized expert on American Christianity, helps us rethink the model I just shared. She invites us to consider what she calls “The Great Reversal” – a reordering of these 3 “B” words.¹

She suggests that the order I just reviewed with you was prevalent for around 500 years. It, however, was neither the pattern of the early church nor will it be the pattern of the future church. The ancient church and the future church both start with belonging then move to behaving and only after exploring both get to believing.

Diana Butler Bass says this pattern can be found in nearly everything we might choose in our lives outside of religion. To help us think through this she uses knitting as an example.

Imagine someone like me who knows very little about knitting wanted to become a knitter. I would not be served well by studying the doctrinal distinctives of various knitting styles. Instead, I’d do better to begin by going to a local craft store or by asking my friends if they knew of any nearby knitting groups. Then, I’d start attending the group.

I’d want to join welcoming group that was okay assisting a newcomer. I’d need them to show me how read a pattern, hold a needle, and how to move my hands.

Slowly, over time, as I sat alongside other knitters I’d make scarves, hats, and perhaps some mittens. And, I’d begin to form my own ideas about knitting. My beliefs about knitting would only really make sense after belonging and behaving.

¹ *Christianity without Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* by Diana Butler Bass, Chapter 7. Also available online as “The Great Reversal” in the Winter 2011 edition of Lifelong Faith at https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/great_reversal_-_bass.pdf

So What?

So, knowing this, perhaps your anxiety about the Great Commission has been greatly reduced.

This passage of Scripture is important. It is given by Jesus as a way of empowering his disciples – including all of us here at Advent – to continue his ministry.

More than anything, it is an invitation to lead highly relational lives and a call to be authentically ourselves in all relationships. For those of us who follow the Way of Jesus, being Christian is a core part of our identity.

Thinking back to the many mission trips I've been on, including the ones I shared this morning, I'm thankful they provided the participants with considerable opportunities to practice building relationships with people they may otherwise have never met.

This morning, I'm interested in questions of belonging.

I wonder about how it is you came to be a Christian and wonder even more about why you remain one today. And, I wonder about how it is you first came to Advent Lutheran Church and wonder even more about why you are still here.

It is my hope and prayer that you have found a deep and abiding sense of belonging in the family of God and in the life of this congregation. May you have the courage and compassion to share your faith in highly relational ways, including by inviting others to come and see.

Amen.