

PREACH

Proper 5A | June 11, 2017



A journey through life in active relationship

The book of Acts begins with an end.

These are the last words in the gospel of Matthew. Words which are often referred to as “the Great Commission.” A name which has parallel and perpendicular resonance with another teaching of Jesus’s often called “the Great Commandment.” One says to go make disciples and the other says to love God and neighbor as yourself. Christians have long struggled to determine which one is the “real” mission.

When we read the end of Matthew, we often hear only Jesus’s words at the very end. Usually we ignore the most important elements of this story. We’re in such a hurry to get to the Great Commission, to hear what Jesus was telling us to do, we skip the rest. We go straight to the

goods. That’s what we want to know. Like the answer on a standardized test. Like God won’t give us a diploma if we fill in the wrong bubble on the Scantron.

So we think:

The “right answer” is those last words of Jesus in Matthew of course! Words which have guided many a Christian in their present age throughout history. Good Christians like Christopher Columbus, whose postmillennialist vision of the faith meant you had to get everyone saved. So of course you must slaughter the ones who refuse. Or a right answer which has led to other right answers found in altar calls or threats to “turn or burn.”

“Right answers” which often lead to such faulty actions. Even the “answer” itself is representative of a faulty action to a misguided question. As if our commissioning of the Great Commission was ever Jesus’s true intent.

Let's instead look at what our pursuit for a "right answer" has us miss.

Some Doubted

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.

Here in Matthew, they don't stay in Jerusalem, they go back to the ministry fields where it all began. They return to Jesus's adopted home to be reunited with him again. These remaining disciples who only see Jesus again because they heard the messenger, heard the proclamation from Mary Magdalene, a woman most trusted to deliver on a promise. A woman most capable of delivering the message of Jesus's death and resurrection to the world.

There can be no Great Commission if Mary weren't commissioned to proclaim this gospel.

They go there expecting what? Another chance at Rome? Another chance to chill with Jesus and walk around some more? What did they think they'd find?

When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

They worshipped *him*! The one who taught them to love God as the only God and they are worshipping him, like he's the one who did it, like he's the icon. Or like he is the manifestation of God. But not all of them. Some doubted.

Matthew is a particular gospel. Unique here in it's relationship to doubt, more than the other three. The writer doesn't hide that some of them didn't dig on this moment. That some were still hesitant. Not just like Thomas, this is eyewitness stuff: as in they doubt even as they see.

The evangelist makes room for doubt, like he made room for it in the empty tomb. There he brings up the specter that these Christ followers might make up a disappearance story. That they might make it all up so the people would be fooled! (You can find that at the end of chapter 27.) That the evangelist would even write that

and scribes would leave it in is miraculous! If you're trying to build confidence and certainty, why inject doubt? Why bring up the doubt people are already feeling?

You leave it in if you believe doubt is valuable!

Bad Disciples

And that's the same reason you have example after example of bad discipleship. Of disciples misunderstanding the purpose and the hope. All throughout Matthew, the evangelist gives us examples of insecurity and false bravado in the disciples. But nowhere more prominent than in those three Passion predictions, where Peter plays the role of Satan to tempt Jesus and prevent him from his mission.

Or maybe the one where James and John's Mom tries to get these two disciples connected in the revolution as commanders, to go down in a blaze of glory and rise to heaven as Jesus's glorious number 2s.

And in Matthew, this bad disciple motif is played off challenging parables which confuse and confound us to this day, like those found in chapter 25. Images of cruel masters and wicked slaves. The kind, when played as if these were allegories for God and creation, we would come to see God as a monster and creation as bad, corrupt, perhaps even demonic. In deep contrast with Genesis 1 when God looked at all of creation and said it was good.

Tools for Discipleship

When we read this gospel, we're reading a manual for discipleship—it's just opposite our expectations. Which is fitting, isn't it? That the upside down economy, kin-dom flipped dream of God would come in God's way rather than ours.

If you've ever read a Dummies book or Ikea instructions, you get the sense someone is trying to make this as easy on you as possible. And if you've ever written a training manual of

any sort, you know how specific you have to be. Or how precise those pictures have to be.

So we make that mistake and we retroject that view of a manual on our Bible. But it is nothing like that. And every time we do that, we create pain for people. We create more oppression and dysfunction. In other words, we put a stumbling block before Jesus.

But an anthology of poetry, stories, narrative nonfiction, persuasive essays, and letters? That's a manual for life which continues to speak long after we learn "the right way" to read them. Long after we take our classes and study and hear sermons each Sunday.

Poetry which reveals, not only who God is, but who God is not. What we are to do and what we are not.

And if we look at those disciples and see *how* they learned from Jesus, not only *what*, we can see our own discipleship is *dependent* on it. Dependent on our trust and faith.

"I AM with you always."

Now jump to those last words of Jesus:

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

This isn't a throw away line or some measuring stick for faith, but a promise *and a reminder*. A reminder of who God is and what God promised. What God promised those ancestors in the desert before they escaped Egypt and before the waters parted and before they spent a generation wandering in the desert: I AM. A promise of presence. Always present. Always with them, us.

But it isn't a promise only for us right now, but for future us and our children and our children's children. That God will be present then too. It is about the now and about the future because that is who God is.

God is here and God will be there howsoever God will be there.

And Jesus makes that same claim.

Not because he thinks he's God, but because that's the very nature of God: to be in relationship. Relationship within the godhead, with Jesus and the Spirit. Relationship with the people and the blessed community. And even relationship with us as individuals.

Jesus didn't teach them things to memorize, but a way of life so that they would know the way to life.

To be disciples today is to be in relationship. With God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit: the Trinity: God, the great mystery, in all the ways God is made manifest with her people. To be in relationship with one another as a blessed community; children of God. And to be in relationship with our neighbors, friends, family, and ourselves.

And to be blessed like Jesus describes way back in Matthew 5: the Beatitudes. Blessed to be peacemakers, Shalom-makers, children of God.

My brothers and sisters, inheritors of kin-dom joy and the very grace of God, may we all heed the call to discipleship no matter what place on that journey we may be. May we follow Jesus in truth and hope knowing that it is our relationships which breathe life into our bones. And may we share God's great gift of vibrant life with confident hearts of love.



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Worship times:

Sunday at 8 & 10 am

Thursday at 12 Noon