

Matthew 28:16-20 [NIV]

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

We're in Matthew, Chapter 28, today, if you'd like to turn there again with me – Matthew 28, the last five verses of the book.

My grandmother had this little phrase I remember her using from time to time: *famous last words*.

As a kid, I remember her saying it to me on certain occasions.

For example, she'd ask me something like, "Would you please go get me this or that from the kitchen?" or, "Would you go out to the garage and ask grandpa... [some question]?" And I'd say to her, "I will in just a minute," probably because I was playing with something or was somehow otherwise occupied.

And she'd look at me and laugh and say, "You will in a minute, huh? Famous last words."

I must admit, I had no idea what she meant – then – by saying it.

Unfortunately, I do now. It meant that she knew me better than I thought she did.

Famous last words.

They're what you're remembered for – which, in my case with Grandma, was not flattering.

We're taking a few weeks here and looking at the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, and in doing so, we're effectively considering Jesus' *famous last words*: things He told his disciples that He wanted them to remember – the things you say when you know your time is limited and you're on your way out – or, in Jesus' case, on your way *up*.

Last week, we looked at Jesus communicating to His disciples how important it was for them to leave Jerusalem and go to Galilee, because that's where they would see Him – that's where they would meet up with Him.

I'm sure they didn't really know what to expect of that trip and meeting, but they knew enough of Jesus – they trusted enough *in* Jesus – to know that Jesus doesn't send people places for no reason.

So, they went where He sent them, and we said last week it's important that we do that, too. It's important that we go where He sends us.

We may not know why – we may not understand all, or even any, of Jesus' logic or rationale. But He asks us to trust Him – with even our geography – because only He

really knows the places we need to be in order to receive what He has for us, and to accomplish what He wants us to do.

So, if He's sending you somewhere, even if you don't know why or how or any of the other details that, of course, we all love to know – if Jesus is sending you somewhere, go where He's sending you, because that's really what it means to *follow* Jesus.

You know, for all the things the disciples *didn't* do in following Jesus through their years with Him, they *did* do this: they went to Galilee. And lo and behold, Jesus did meet them there, just as He said that He would.

In Chapter 21 of John's gospel, we're told how Jesus met some of them – Peter and Thomas, James and John and a few more – there by the Sea of Galilee, when Peter decided to go fishing. That was the meeting that brought restoration to Peter, and I'd imagine to some of the others there as well.

We talked about that encounter a few weeks ago.

Maybe it was there at that meeting that Jesus told them to meet Him on a certain mountain. We're not sure of that. We're not even sure which mountain. People have tried to guess, but in the end, it doesn't really matter. We know it was in Galilee though. He meets them where He told them He would be.

And at this meeting on the mountain, a summit, we're told there were eleven of the disciples, which we presume to be the original twelve minus Judas, of course.

The Apostle Paul talks about this moment, too, in First Corinthians 15.

Now, there may have been more there, since women and children were not always counted in the number reported in those days; we can't be sure. But the traditional view is that this was Jesus' meeting with His closest disciples to give them their commission – their "great" commission.

Since they proved able to go where He sent them, now Jesus will see if they'll do what He says, and what He said for them to do was, in a nutshell, *make disciples*.

Make disciples. That's what Jesus commissioned His followers to do.

What does that mean?

Well, the truth is, the Church through the ages – ever since that summit – has struggled with exactly what making disciples really means.

Through the centuries there have been, literally, thousands of different philosophies, approaches, methods, programs, curriculums and checklists, all trying to get at what it involves – what it means – to make disciples.

Some of them accurate; some not.

Some effective; some not.

Some enduring; others just for a time.

About making disciples, some have claimed that there is only one way – which, coincidentally happens to be their way. I’m not convinced about there being only one way. It seems to me that Jesus would be pleased with just about any honest, sincere effort toward making disciples. I don’t think anyone has exactly cornered that market.

Jesus did, however, give us some parameters to guide us.

Notice first that, according to Jesus, making disciples involves *going*, as verse 19 there tells us. Making disciples always involves a follower of Jesus *going*.

Now, that doesn’t necessarily mean going far – but it does necessarily mean *taking initiative*. Because if Jesus’ followers don’t initiate – if we don’t act with intentionality and purpose, then disciples don’t get made.

It’s our job to go: across the yard or across the street or across the state or across the world. Where and how far we go depends on what the Spirit specifically says to you and me. But we are all responsible for taking the initiative – for pushing the processes forward.

There are a whole lot of Christians who spend their lives in classes, conferences, training, church, all that. They invest tons of time in the “ready and aim” parts of disciple-making, but they never fire. They never actually initiate. They never actually go.

According to Jesus here, to make disciples is, first of all, to go.

Jesus then mentions the scope, the breadth, of that going – the breadth of our initiative – again in verse 19, as, “all the nations.”

There are lots of “alls” in this passage. Did you notice that?

All authority given to Jesus – verse 18.

All the nations – verse 19.

And two instances in verse 20: “*All* [everything] that I [Jesus] commanded,” and then He says that He is with us *always* – which is literally translated, “*all* the days.”

To include that many all-encompassing terms says something about the work, and about Jesus, doesn’t it?

Here, again, it’s the scope – we’re to go to all the nations.

Now that’s an expansion of something Jesus said before.

Back in Matthew 10 and 15, we read how Jesus had *already* sent His followers to take the message of the Kingdom to *Israel*.¹ To their own people.

Now, He’s widening their task, you see? He’s opening their message of His redemption to the rest of the world. That’s what “nations” – the word *ethne* – means when it’s used in the New Testament, and especially in Matthew: the non-Jewish, gentile world.

Of course, Israel is still included too. Jesus isn’t *replacing* the mission to the Jews. But Jesus is grafting non-Jews into His family tree, you see? The apostle Paul also talks later about this in Romans 11.

This is the expansion of the offer of redemption to the whole of the world.

And although this would have been a new idea for the disciples there in that moment, the concept is nothing new to God. God has always thought this way about redemption. He’s never been out for just one nation or one people or one ethnicity. God’s goal has always been to redeem the whole world, “whosoever will.”

So, this business of disciple-making involves our *going*, and our going to *all – anyone – everyone*.

Then, Jesus mentions two specific components of the making of disciples: translated here *baptizing* and *teaching*.

And listen, there have been libraries written on exactly what these two words involve, and of course people way smarter than me have vastly different opinions on what these words mean.

The church has argued, actually, about baptism and its significance. There’s no doubt that it is part of becoming a disciple – Jesus makes that clear.

But what part it plays has been widely debated.

In our tradition, being baptized does not reflect some divine, salvific happening so much as it is an act of obedience that ritualizes a person’s decision to become a Christ-follower, or a parent’s decision to raise their child as a Christ-follower. Baptism, then, declares to the world that we are no longer part of the old, fallen family of Adam, but are now a part of the new, redeemed family of Jesus – the family of God.

And one place we get that idea is from the text here, where Jesus is saying, literally, “baptize them into the name of God.”

Baptism is the declaration that we’re taking a new name, you see?

One who is baptized is one who is now allied with God – and who is immersing himself or herself, not so much into water, but into the name and life and reality of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Baptism is God’s ritual of union with Himself, something like membership is the ritual of union with a church, or the wedding ceremony is the ritual of marriage between and man and woman.

In membership, we pledge allegiance to a body of believers.

In marriage, we are pledging our allegiance to our fiancé.

In baptism, we are pledging allegiance to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are taking His name; we’re coming under His person. We’re taking His identity as our own.

So, making disciples involves everything about leading others to make that decision, that pledge, that alliance, with God.

There’s certainly much more that could be said about that, but in a nutshell, that’s what Jesus is after in baptism – not how many people you might push under water. He wants us to help people know Him such that they’ll want to share His Name and to be part of His family.

That’s what it is to be about baptizing people.

¹ Matthew 10:5-6; 15:24

So, according to Jesus, *making disciples* is about *going: taking the initiative*, going to *all people*—not just those we know or like or who are like us.

Baptizing – inviting people to share God’s name.

And then—Jesus says making disciples is about *teaching*.

Now, teaching is an easy enough thing to grasp, especially in this town, and in this church. We have teachers coming out our ears around here, no offense intended. We know what teaching means.

But really, I think it’s the qualification *about* teaching that Jesus mentions here that’s really important.

Jesus says that making disciples involves teaching people *“to obey everything I have commanded you.”*

Followers of Jesus are to pass along to others, with our words and ways, the words and ways of Jesus—and not just *some* of them either. Jesus says *all* of them. We’re to help other people become obedient to Him.

Now, there are two words in this sentence of Jesus’ that many people find offensive, although few would just come out and admit it: the word “obey” and the word “command.”

I’ve mentioned this before. It is part of our fallen nature, and it is also part of American culture to push back against those words. We tend to recoil—we tend to have a negative reaction to being told that we must obey, or that there is any such thing as a command.

Yet Jesus uses these words freely. He lays out His expectations clearly, and receiving those is part of being a disciple, because you see, *discipleship*—taking on the name of God—involves undergoing a major change in our normal character and disposition.

We were born into rebellion. We were born pushing against God and against His way, and of course that leads to death. This is why Jesus came: to save us from death by turning us from this ongoing rebellion against God.

And you see, there’s only one way to get out of rebellion, and that is to get into obedience. That’s what repentance is—it is changing direction. To repent is to go the opposite way.

In our relationship with God, repentance is turning from rebellion and toward obedience. It’s a radical difference. We have to jump from one ship into another, you see?

That’s what being baptized means. That’s what pledging allegiance to God means. We’re going to start doing things His way instead of our way, and in order to do that, we’re going to have to know what His way is.

And that’s where the teaching comes in.

Teaching, where Jesus is concerned, is not just about conveying information, so that we’ll know something about God up here [point to head].

Teaching in discipleship is meant to change lives from rebellion and disobedience to obedience and, here’s another word that people don’t like, *submission*. Submission to God’s commands.

That’s where Christian teaching should lead—to realize what God wants so that we can make what God wants the reality of our lives.

You see, a disciple of Jesus is not a casual hanger-on, like those who looked to Jesus just for healing and then went away without even saying “thank you.”

A disciple is not a mere groupie or fan, like those who followed Jesus around hoping to get a free meal.

A disciple is not someone who picks and chooses what they will do and how they will respond when Jesus speaks.

A disciple is someone who, when they find out what Jesus wants, will do as He says—eagerly, quickly and joyfully, realizing that, even if they don’t fully understand the why or the how, Jesus still knows best.

And so, the job of existing disciples is to present this reality about discipleship to others: that to be a disciple of Jesus means knowing what Jesus commands and then embracing His *commands*—*submitting* to Jesus through *obedience*.

And that is the great challenge of discipleship. And frankly, it’s why Jesus said that those who choose His path are few. Most people simply cannot get past the idea that to follow Jesus means actually obeying Him.

There are a lot of people sitting in churches today who simply will not accept that idea that discipleship actually means doing what Jesus says.

“Sorry, I’m just not a rule follower. I do my own thing my own way. I don’t just listen to people, even Jesus. He wants me to do something, He’ll have to prove His logic. I don’t think the Bible really says that. I think it says...”

Jesus knew that it is not an easy thing to turn a rebel around. Jesus knew this would be an issue—even here.

I mean, consider this: here on the mountain, in Jesus’ commission, look at what’s missing. Amazingly, there is no call to preach the gospel in the Great Commission. Neither is there here any call for faith.

Why leave things like those out? I think Jesus probably took for granted that His people would proclaim the good news and call for faith. Those are relatively easy things to proclaim.

What Jesus did not take for granted, though, was that people who were interested in Him would take seriously His moral demands—and especially gentiles, non-Jews.

Jesus knew that, if left to our own devices, we would try our best to take Jesus *and* our sinful lifestyles too.

So rather than stress preaching and faith, Jesus stresses here the fact that to be a disciple means, first, *knowing* and then *doing* the will of God.

That’s what a disciple is: *not* someone who is baptized, who’s a church member or attender, who gives X number of dollars or hours to ministry, or who has this or that education or degree.

A disciple is someone who actually follows Jesus in doing the will of God.

And people have to be taught how to know what God’s will is, and then they have to be taught that they have to do it—to be obedient, to do what Jesus says.

That’s what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

People used to talk about following Jesus in terms of “conversion.”

Christians, especially new ones, were called new “converts.”

That sort of language has fallen out of political correctness, even in the Church, but you see, a *conversion* is exactly what Jesus is talking about here. Choosing to follow Jesus is a radical change of thinking and direction. It’s a conversion to a new way of living—a way that is dictated by God.

And that’s how God wants to redeem the world, you see.

When people of all nations become disciples – when people all over the world start submitting themselves to God and learning His commands and living in obedience to those commands, a new humanity begins to be formed.

You have a pocket of people here and there and over there – all these little pockets of people all over the world, who are inviting their neighbors to join them in discipleship and in choosing God’s ways and in living in obedience to God’s design: that’s how God’s Kingdom grows on earth, until we have this whole network of people who are doing what Jesus says.

That is the Church – or, at least the real Church: this world-wide network of people from all different backgrounds and ethnicities and nations who have chosen to do what Jesus says.

Those are disciples.

Are we making them?

Are we one ourselves?

Are we encouraging others to do what Jesus says to do?

Are we, ourselves, doing what Jesus says to do?

I think that’s really what Jesus wants us to consider today.

Prayer: Lord, show me if I’m representing you.

Am I *going – taking the initiative* I need to take?

Am I going to all people and not just those I know or like?

Am I *baptizing*? Am I inviting others to take and share God’s name?

Am I *teaching* – showing others how to receive and obey Your commands?

Jesus, am I doing your will? Am I doing what you’re telling me to do?

Closing Song: *Trust and Obey* (vv. 1, 4, 5)

Benediction:

In the hours and days to come, may the Spirit of God reveal to us where we need to trust and obey Him more fully:

- in order to become the *disciples* Jesus died to create;
- to become the *disciple-makers* Jesus commissioned His own to be;
- in order to simply do what Jesus says to do.