

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor  
First Christian Church  
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## Go!

Matthew 28:16-20 NRSV Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Over the centuries, people have been making compilations of the last words of folks. Some of those last words are funny, some are poignant, some are sad, some are incomprehensible. Jack Daniel, of the whisky that bears his name, uttered these last words: *"One more drink, please."* Conrad Hilton, founder of the Hilton chain of hotels reportedly said in his last earthly words: *"Leave the shower curtain on the inside of the tub."* One radio producer and announcer, the voice behind a number of 40s and 50s radio dramas said this *"And now a final word from our sponsor."* 18<sup>th</sup> century British writer Joseph Addison said these moving words: *"Now see in what peace a Christian can die."* The 11<sup>th</sup> century Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, said *"I am ready to die for my Lord, [in hopes that] the Church may obtain liberty and peace."* General Ethan Allen, though, during the American Revolutionary War was not quite so sanguine in his last words; when told by the doctor attending him that the angels were waiting for him, Allen said *"Well, let 'em wait!"*

Today's scripture portray the last earthly words of Jesus as the Gospel of Matthew records them. And before we go further in exploring the meaning of these "last words" it's important to remind ourselves of something: each of the four gospel writers is writing to a very different audience. Each of the four is making use of different stories about Jesus that were handed on to them. None of the four were eyewitnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but are in fact writing, virtually all scholars

concur, thirty to fifty years after his earthly life. What does all that tell us? Several things: first we need to be careful, if we are truly wanting to understand a particular gospel's point of view of Jesus, not to simply mentally run all of these stories together. We sometimes do that with the Christmas stories, combining into one story the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the angels, the shepherds, the wise men, and that wonderful phrase about Jesus being the light of the world which the darkness can never overcome. Now, we cherish all the details of the life of Jesus as they are sometimes differently portrayed in each of the gospels; but sometimes it is the case that our faith can be instructed and deepened if we also make sure that we pay attention to the very distinctive ways that each of the gospel writers tells the story of Jesus.

So, let us spend our time this morning learning a bit more about how Matthew saw and understood Jesus, and we shall learn why it was crucial to Matthew that he made sure he captured these particular words of Jesus. So, first a bit of background: Matthew was probably the second gospel written, following Mark, around the year 80 or so. . And Matthew's gospel is aimed primarily at those who came as Jews to believe in Jesus as their Jewish Messiah. By way of contrast, the Gospel of Luke was likely written to Roman-educated folks who had never been Jews, and so Luke tells his story of Jesus in a way that such an audience could grasp better.

Okay, that's all very abstract, but what does it have to do with what Matthew is trying to tell us about Jesus through this passage, these "last words"? Well, let me get at this with what will sound like an odd, but nevertheless apt comparison. How many of you have watched Sesame Street? There was a time long ago in the last millennium, when our children were young, that I could name all the characters, their personalities, and sing all the songs. And even today one of those songs has become a cultural classic; I'll bet all of you have heard it: "One of these things is not like the other....." The song is a very simple way of teaching children to think, and what is alike and what is not

alike is probably the most fundamental thing one needs to be able to do in order to think. After all, if you can't tell the difference between the door and the window, you might be tempted to exit from the second story. If you can't tell the difference between things you should put in your mouth and things you shouldn't, you run the risk of some unpleasant gastrointestinal consequences. Well, Matthew's gospel turns the Sesame Street upside down. Instead of "One of these things is not like the other," Matthew's entire gospel is fashioned around one central belief: "That one of these things **IS** like the other." What do I mean? Well consider this: what Matthew does throughout his gospel seek to tell the story of Jesus as a **new** Moses. One of these things **IS** like the other! Think about it. What did Moses do? He was the teacher, the giver of the law and the Torah. Where did his most important teachings? On a mountain – from where the Ten Commandments were brought down. Where is Jesus' most central and extended teaching? In the sermon "on the mount." Where was Moses when he died and what was he doing? He was on a mountain overlooking the Jordan into the Promised Land but he did not get to go there. And where is Jesus in the conclusion of Matthew's gospel (our story for today)? On a mountain, offering his last words, last instructions to the disciples before they head off towards Pentecost and the public birth of the church. What does Moses say to the people he had led through forty years of wandering? "Go!" And what does Jesus say to his disciples, some 40 days after his death and resurrection? "Go." "Go!"

Let's dig deeper. In the English translation, there are four verbs here: go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. But in the original there is only one of these words that is actually in the form of a grammatical imperative: "make disciples."<sup>1</sup> And so a much

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<sup>1</sup>Dick Donovan, *Sermonwriter* for May 22, 2005. [www.sermonwriter.com](http://www.sermonwriter.com) p "Jesus commands his disciples to 'make disciples.' In the Greek, 'make disciples' is the only imperative verb. Going, baptizing, and teaching are participles and are subordinate to 'make disciples.' The mission is to

more cumbersome, but perhaps more accurate translation might be: “Disciples, it is your job to make disciples. Make disciples. And to do that you will have to go out, you will have to go baptize, you will have to go teach people about me. Go.” Now why would Jesus put it this way? Well, I think that it is a recognition that everyone single one of us, every single person in the world, is going to be a disciple of **something**. As Bob Dylan put it in the name of one of his songs, “You Gotta Serve Somebody.” And that’s true, isn’t it? That’s a description of your life and mine: it’s not an option; we **will** be the disciple of **something**, we will wittingly or unwittingly, serve and learn from **something**. Jesus is telling us, then, to “go” and serve the right thing – which is the good news of a God of grace.

But we have to admit, that too many in our society, it seems to me, have gone and become disciples instead of an either/or, black/white way of thinking that inevitably leads to angry and oversimplified positions and tends to demonize those who seem to disagree with us. We don’t have to look far to find examples, even in church life. There are churches on the right and the left that will insist that there is only one true Christian position on certain issues. One of the things that I am most proud of about both our wider Disciples tradition and about this congregation has been our insistence – when we are at our best, anyway – that such thinking is not the way to follow Jesus, that such thinking is not to “go” in the way that he told us to! I am glad that we have refused to make certain positions on theological or social or political issues any sort of test of whether someone is truly Christian, knowing that we are called to have a certain humility about claiming to know exactly what would Jesus do. I am glad that we have not given in to a view that says that God is first of all an angry ruler always looking to make sure that you don’t stray and eager to punish you when you do. Because there

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‘make disciples.’ To accomplish that mission, disciples must go, baptize, and teach, so there is an imperative quality to each of those participles -- but the only imperative verb in this commission is ‘make disciples.’”

really are churches that live their lives in fear of God's anger instead of in the joy of God's grace, and they are the people outside our doorsteps and they are the people that we have so much to give to.

But there are other temptations to "go" in the wrong direction, to serve the wrong thing, to be disciples of something other than a God of grace. Maybe your temptation – I know mine sometimes is – is to be the disciple of a consumer culture that in a hundred different ways every day tells you and me that unless we buy more stuff, have more stuff, and – most importantly – always **want** more stuff we are somehow "out of it," and the object of pity for not getting it. But, as with any master, being the disciple of our consumer culture is hard work and it is a demanding taskmaster. It's instructive, isn't it, that the gospels record Jesus as saying not one word about, for example, sexuality (which our culture is so obsessed with). And yet one in five of Jesus' statements have to do with money and the overwhelming temptation that you and I have sometimes to put our time and talent and treasure into the service of something other than "all that I have commanded you." More and more "stuff," and the endless wanting of yet more stuff that our culture teaches will not make us happy, it will not save us, it will not even make us content – and more "stuff" isn't anything close to the good life, a life Christ would call good!

When all is said and done, what these "last words" of Jesus are reminding us is that we are called to put all of our energy, all of our urgency, into "going into all the world" to show the world – and ourselves! – that it is only in being Jesus' disciples – not the disciples of consumerism, or of an oversimplified talk-radio approach to life, or of sports, or of anything else that wrongly says "come, follow me" – that there is life and hope and peace. But where do we begin to "make disciples" of Jesus in a culture that so powerfully demands that we be disciples of something else? How do you and I

“make disciples” of the Prince of Peace in a society where a child is killed by a handgun every 100 minutes?<sup>2</sup> How do we “make disciples” in a society where there continues to be too many children who go to bed hungry every night? And how do we disciples, who hate the word evangelism and who are loathe sometimes to witness to our faith because we don’t want to be intrusive, because we think that we don’t know the Bible well enough, how do we go into all the world?

Well, there is good news and there’s bad news here. First the bad news. The Bible really isn’t very specific about many of the very specific things that make up our lives and situations, about many of the things that may bedevil us as a culture or as individuals. Jesus had nothing to say about abortion or homosexuality. He doesn’t have anything to say about how much time you spend surfing the internet versus doing other things. He didn’t say which shows you should and shouldn’t watch, what organizations you should and shouldn’t give to. He has nothing to say about how a church’s bylaws should read or whether we should use the word committees or teams. Now, there are people who sometimes can claim to infer what Jesus thinks about any of these things, and a whole lot more. But I’m skeptical. And I think the Jesus as Matthew portrayed him in his gospel, the one who would be a new kind of Moses, a new kind of teacher, is one who gives us some **principles** and honors the minds that God gave us by letting **us** work out the details. You know, principles like: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and your neighbor as yourself.” “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” “You who are without sin, cast the first stone.”

As we “go,” as we follow Jesus’ command to make our way into the world to teach, baptize, and make disciples, Jesus doesn’t tell us exactly, specifically how to do those things. But he does suggest, no, he commands us, to tell folks what we know.

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<sup>2</sup>Physicians for Social Responsibility Los Angeles [www.psrla.org/gunviolence.htm](http://www.psrla.org/gunviolence.htm)

He commands us to go and tell folks that here at First Christian Church we seek to be a congregation where you won't be judged or told what you "have to" believe, to go and tell folks about a summer of mission and music that will delight our ears and hearts and do good for those who are literally starving, to go and say every Sunday we come around a Table where a love of Christ unifies in ways that are stronger than all those insidious and evil forces in the world that seek to categorize and divide us. And here is the thing: **He goes with us.** He goes with us. Unlike in Luke's Gospel, where Jesus' last act is the ascension, leaving the disciples standing there looking at his leaving, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' last act are indeed those last words: *"I am with you. Always. Til the end."* *"I won't tell you exactly how to decide this or that. I am not some sort of cosmic 8-ball which you can shake and get the answer to come up in a little window. But I'm going with you. As you work and struggle and have joys and sorrows, as you seek to share the good news and offer hope to the hopeless, as you seek to take joy and delight not in an angry God who is looking for people to punish, but in a God who is love unconditional and unending – I am going with you."*

Jesus is going with us. Isn't that very, very good news? Shall we go with him?