

Chuck Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
June 1, 2014
© 2014

Eleven-ish....

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."

Today's scripture is short and simple, and it is full of short and simple words: go, make, teach, obey. But it's those **little** words that can sometimes be the most freighted..... Does anybody here remember that line from Jr. High School days, delivered by the person that you had so hoped might be a girlfriend or a boyfriend: "*You know I really like you, but I **just** want to be friends.*" Oh, that little word "just"! Or consider one of those arguments, whether trivial or terrible, in a relationship that begins "*Honey I love you, **but**.....*" Ooh, little word; dangerous ground! Or in the hospital waiting room, maybe you have heard that sad little word said by the doctor: "*I'm **sorry**....*" And as a child, I knew I was in trouble when I was summoned with a sentence that began, in that low and growly and tight tone of voice that I knew portended no good, "*Son.....*"

Little words, short and simple words, sometimes pack the most punch, don't they? Today's scripture is particularly punchy since, according to the four gospels, these would be Jesus' very last words delivered on earth before He is taken into heaven. As such, they are sort of Jesus' own epitaph, his own last will and testament, as it were. And such last words are always worth paying attention to. I remember seeing on an urn in a cemetery in Indianapolis the following words: "*I told you I was sick.*" Now there is someone by whose last words she wanted to remind us that amidst the trials and hurts of life, amidst mortality itself, it is a gift to have a sense of humor.

And here in these closing verses from Matthew, are **Jesus'** last earthly words to his disciples, his last words to the church that his disciples were to cherish, and safeguard and lead forward. And so both because of their punch and their placement, we ought to pay attention to these words. And in doing so, let us recall what we know about Matthew's gospel and the particular folks to whom Matthew was writing his gospel. In Matthew, more than any other gospel, Jesus' earthly ministry is portrayed in parallel terms to the life and work of Moses. For Matthew, just as Moses brought God's revelation for His people there on the mountaintop in Sinai so too does Jesus bring an authoritative word for the Gentiles – that is, for everyone who is not Jewish, for you and for me. Moses spoke on behalf of God from that Sinai mountaintop and brought forth the teachings, the law, the books that are traditionally ascribed to him – Leviticus, Exodus, Numbers with their long teachings about how the Jewish people are to live as God's people.

And Matthew's description of Jesus hearkens back to the role of Moses for the Jewish people. And Matthew is pretty pointed about it: for example, do you remember where Jesus begins his teaching as it is portrayed in the gospel of Matthew? On a **mountaintop**, with what we call the Sermon on the Mount. And did you notice where, in our scripture for this morning that Jesus ends his earthly ministry? On a mountaintop: *“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the **mountain** to which Jesus had directed them.”*

So, in other words, if we haven't yet figured it out, the gospel writer is trying to tell us something urgent, important, essential here: his use of little, pointed words; his recalling and placement of these words of Jesus at the very end of the gospel and their role as Jesus' very last earthly words, and the fact that they are delivered from a mountaintop, reminding the audience that Jesus is, for Matthew, a new Moses bringing good news to all those who do know it, and very obviously paralleling the way Jesus

began his ministry in Matthew – on a mountaintop. Even if you're running on cruise control you can hardly miss the point that something important is happening here!

So, ok: Matthew has our attention. What can we possibly learn that is new or fresh from this passage of scripture that is probably one of the most famous and remembered and quoted of all the sayings of Jesus?

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."¹ And so a much more cumbersome, but perhaps more accurate translation might be: ***"Disciples, it is your job to make disciples. And to do that you will have go out, you will have to baptize, you will have to teach people about me."*** In other words, the going, the baptizing, and the teaching are **always in the service of making disciples**. 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** – as the very root meaning of the word "disciple" suggests – make a decision, wittingly or unwittingly, to serve and learn from **something**.

What are ***you*** a "disciple" of – who do you, wittingly or unwittingly, serve and show in your life that this is what you are learning from? Too many in our society, it seems to me, have become disciples of an either/or, black/white way of thinking that inevitably leads to angry and oversimplified positions and tends to demonize those who

¹Dick Donovan, Sermonwriter for May 22, 2005. www.sermonwriter.com "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 '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.'"

seem to disagree with us. We don't have to look far to find examples, even in church life. There are too many churches who make it clear that anyone who doesn't subscribe to a very narrow set of views and interpretations of things is not "really" Christian. If you are not the "disciple" of such a view, if that's not what you serve, then out you go. But even at the other end of the religious spectrum, among what the media call religious liberals, there is always the temptation to be not the disciple of the gospel that reminds us that there is neither Jew nor Greek, male or female and that **all** are welcomed around God's table and in God's sanctuary, but to be the disciple of a certain "correct" or, as the term goes these days, "politically correct" view on certain things.

Or maybe your temptation – I know mine 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) but 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, as Jesus put in our scripture today, "all that I have commanded you." I read lately that the average price of a wedding in the United States has now gone over \$30,000! There's also some indication that there is developing a reverse correlation between the amount paid for a wedding and how long the marriage lasts! 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.

Now, of course, this sort of consumerism is an easy target, isn't it? And so many of you in this room are indeed so faithful, so very, very faithful to being **Jesus'** disciple

and are **not** the disciples of a consumer culture that says money and stuff are what makes us happy. But the temptation is, nonetheless, insidious isn't it? It's always there. And sometimes the temptation can come in the form of hoarding our money and our stuff. But that doesn't satisfy either. Because as so many Christians have noted over the years, you can never have enough to "finally" be happy, finally be secure – and it doesn't make disciples!

When all is said and done, what this passage of Jesus is 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? What possible effect can you or I have in a culture that turns a celebrity wedding into media feeding frenzy, spilling thousands of times more ink, bandwidth and attention than the dying children in the Sudan? How do you and I "make disciples" of the Prince of Peace in a society where a child under the age of 15 – a child! – is killed by a handgun every 100 minutes, and where there have been almost fifty more school shootings since the slaughter at Sandy Hook?² How do we "make disciples" in a society where there continues to be one out of five children who go to bed hungry every night? Or we don't even have to be so dramatic about it: How do you and I "go into all the world" when so often, it seems, that our work, our families, our jobs occupy all our attention and energy?

In the very way that Matthew tells the story of Jesus' last earthly words and his

²Physicians for Social Responsibility Los Angeles www.psrla.org/gunviolence.htm

Great Commission to you and me, he also tells us that Jesus understands the situation. Did you catch the reference in the scripture to how the disciples gathered there at the mountain? Let me read it again: *"Now the **eleven** disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them."* **Eleven**. The very word reminds us of the imperfection of even those who had been closest to Jesus. **Eleven**. The very word reminds us that the task is not easy because the pressures to misunderstand, to follow something other than Jesus, are very powerful – and they could even get to one of the original twelve, one who was as close to Jesus as anyone. **Eleven**. As one writer put it, *"The number eleven [just] **limps**.... 'Eleven' reminds us of Judas' treachery. The original number of apostles correlates with twelve sons of Judah and twelve tribes of Israel. [But w]here there [once] were twelve apostles, now there are eleven. [And so t]he church that Jesus sends into the world is [itself] fallible, 'elevenish,' imperfect. [It limps.] Yet Jesus uses exactly such a church to do his perfect work.... Jesus takes this imperfect number and gives it a perfect vocation"³*

Here is the good news, the very good news for us this day: First, even though you and I are indeed "elevenish," even though you and I are imperfect, even though you and I are less than we want to be, and more the disciples of something other than Jesus on occasion; even though we are "elevenish" in that we can feel so daunted, so incomplete, so unfit for what Jesus asks of us, the good news is that Jesus knows. Those first disciples to whom the awesome vocation of making disciples was given were also themselves "elevenish," imperfect, incomplete. The good news is that time and time again – and here yet one more time – God uses a motley, imperfect, incomplete, "elevenish," cast of characters to do things that that they never ever thought

³Bruner, Frederick Dale, *Matthew: Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28* (Dallas: Word, 1990), p. 1090. Quoted in Dick Donovan, Sermonwriter for May 22, 2005. www.sermonwriter.com Emphasis mine.

they could do.

Second, the Risen Christ goes with us: "*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" I can hardly think of better news than that. Because it means that you and I don't have to work alone. It means that everything doesn't rest on our shoulders. It means that we are in relationship always to one who both calls us to our best and yet understands our imperfections, our "elevenishness." This Great Commission that Jesus leaves us with is always about both assurance and challenge : we are **assured** that no matter our imperfection, no matter our various ways of being incomplete, we are nonetheless upheld by the living God. It is because of that good news that we can indeed accept the **challenge** of those words, those little but oh-so-important words, to go, make, teach and baptize.

Today I want to end a bit differently than usual. Today I want to close with a few moments of silence. And amidst the silence, as we end the Easter season and anticipate the coming of the Spirit to give birth to Church on Pentecost, I invite you during these moments to think about what **one** thing you can do in the coming week that will carry out this Great Commission of making disciples. Maybe it will mean that you get another "church business card" from me after service (because, I hope, you've given your previous one away) and will look for the opportunity to share it and the kind of community that this congregation wants to be and the kind of God it worships; maybe it will mean that you finally have that conversation about God with that friend or acquaintance or co-worker who seems so lost; maybe it will mean that you ask God to finally clear out that ten minutes a day in which you can really and truly pray; maybe it means that you will give yourself over to that Bible study you've been meaning to do so that you can be undergirded and inspired for the work and witness God calls you to. What one thing will you do this week? Let's be still and think on that.....

With gratitude indeed for the one who goes with us and whose little words challenge us and whose large and abiding love can transform us and the whole world. For this: thanks be to God!