



LAKEWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Brian Mitchell

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ON A MISSION FROM GOD

Matthew 28:16-10

I love to drop in the odd pop culture reference in my messages and sermon titles. You may have noticed. So, a number of weeks ago when I looked at the lectionary scripture for today in preparation for the sermon, and I saw that it was Jesus' final words to his disciples in Matthew's Gospel, or as we call it, the Great Commission, I had to go with a Blues Brothers sermon title. If you are not familiar with it, The Blues Brothers is one of the funniest, and perhaps irreverent, movies ever made. In the movie, we find Jake and Elwood Blues flying through the streets of Chicago in a beat-up old police car, trying to put their old rhythm and blues band back together to raise enough money to save the orphanage that they grew up in. While that is going on, they constantly get in trouble and are on the run from numerous police departments, the Illinois Nazis, a country and western band and a mysterious woman who is intent on blowing them up. In fact, it seems all of Chicago is after them. At one point, while being chased by the cops, riding in the Bluesmobile listening to his brother Jake complain about their predicament, Elwood delivers one of the most memorable lines from the movie, "They're not going to catch us. We're on a mission from God." Okay, so that was maybe the Scottish Blues Brother. It becomes his catch phrase throughout the movie whenever one of the old band members does not want to join, or they seem to have a problem, "We're on a mission from God." Despite being a pair of crooks, they believe it and are faithful to the mission even in the face of many obstacles.

The Great Commission, in Matthew chapter 28, leaves the disciples and those who follow Jesus in much the same boat after Jesus tells his disciples to, "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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." After reading that, we should get the shades and hat on and have confidence because we too, are on a mission from God.

I am sure the moviemakers' satirical use of the phrase is perhaps mocking history a little. There has been much damage done in the name of people saying they are on a mission from God, much of it very recent as we are unfortunately all too aware.

However, that does not let us be excused from this mission, from this commission. In fact, the thought of donning the hat and shades makes it a little more exciting for me. Ours is a mission of sharing a message of grace and forgiveness. I am sure this passage is one you have read and heard about many times. It can become one of those passages

that flies by us as we hear it. We think, “Oh yeah, the Great Commission, I know that, go make disciples, got it.”

This morning we’ll try to come at it as if we have never heard it before and see what Matthew actually says. We’ll see what Jesus actually says.

The first two verses focus not on Jesus, but on the disciples. I’ll read it again. “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” Wait, what was that? They worshiped him, but some doubted? Did we catch that? Here are the folks who have been in Jesus’ presence, who have seen him resurrected, but some doubted.

First of all, before we look at that, we read that as soon as they saw him, they worshiped him. We understand the implication of that, right? These well-versed in the scriptures, orthodox Jews know above all else this one principle of religion: You don’t worship anything that’s not God. You worship only the one true God. You worship nothing else. It’s the first commandment. They never would have forgotten that. And Matthew uses the phrase a few times in his gospel. He is making it clear these orthodox Jewish men believe, when faced with Jesus, they are worshiping God. Today is Trinity Sunday. The concept of the Trinity is sometimes questioned as it is never mentioned in scripture. Well, the doctrine of the Trinity was not just made up by some scholars in a room. It is from texts such as these, when the deity of Jesus is implicit in the reading of the text, which has helped us form the doctrine. The disciples did not doubt this man before they were God. Otherwise, He would not be worthy of their worship.

Now, back to that doubt thing: Why would Matthew write that if it were not true? This is not how you write fiction. It is quite an astonishing comment by Matthew, but I would suggest it supports the historical accuracy of the Gospel and this event in particular. It is not exactly helping Jesus’ case for his Gospel writer to mention that along with the worship, some doubted. My guess would be that the Gospel writer wants us to know that the disciples still did not have it all together. There is no apology in this apparent weakness, and there is no need to hide it. As someone who has had his fair share of doubt over the years, I find some comfort here. For a long time, I have thought doubt and faith are partners, in a way you cannot have one without the other. What is faith without doubt? It is certainty. I see no shame in doubt, and, as I said, I find comfort in the doubt within some of those who followed Jesus closely and would go on to do great things for him.

Doubt is not something we often chat about too openly, especially in church, but most of us have been there, when we have wondered or questioned. If that is you today, please know you are not alone. Just do not let your doubt close the door to your faith. Know that they are strange and weird partners. Notice also that it does not seem to be a huge deal here in the scripture.

After Matthew tells us that some doubted, you may expect him to justify the comment, but it seems to make no difference to Jesus. He must have known some doubted. He had already spoken to Thomas, but he does not try to ease their doubts or try to convince anyone. He motors on with His commission. So not only can you worship and at the same time have doubt, but this Great Commission is still for you. You who worship, you who doubt, here is what you have to do. It does not matter because He is going to tell them where the strength for this Great Commission will come from. So what that some may doubt. He begins with the words, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” And ends with, “And, remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” This work is not going to be done on the strength and talents of the disciples. This is the work of Jesus, and Jesus will be with them.

Back to the movie: Jake and Elwood Blues are criminals. Jake is leaving jail at the start of the movie; their language is awful; and their morals are awful. Initially they promise the money in the morning, no doubt acquiring it by some illegal means. I would not suggest this is their redemption story; the movie does not go there. It does show the moment they see the light. It does show these less-than-perfect musicians receiving a calling they interpret as a God moment (James Brown is their preacher by the way.), and it shows them respond. Yeah, it’s comedy. It’s entertaining. But what are we if we are not less-than-perfect people, who would often prefer not to hear this call, let alone respond to it. Think again on this Great Commission of Jesus. It is given to the disciples. Scripture is open in its telling of the weaknesses of these folks. It does not matter to Jesus. This is their call. Just as it is your call. Don’t wait until your faith is strong enough for the task. Don’t leave it to the elders or the preacher or those folks who seem like they have it all together. Because, here is the truth; none of us really have it all together.

So, the Great Commission itself, “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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” What did that mean to them? First of all, it meant this message which, so far, Jesus has been pretty clear was for God’s people, the Jews, is now going worldwide to all nations. This would have been pretty groundbreaking in its time. The people Jesus wants discipled are the Gentiles. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and The Holy Spirit. It’s that Trinity thing again.

But it doesn’t stop there with telling and baptizing. Jesus continues, “Teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” This may be a long-term commitment. This is making disciples, not converts, not church members, but disciples.

What does it mean for us today? We are, for the most part, the Gentiles. We are the ones who were reached. But it has been passed on to us. Are we to travel to the ends of the earth to share the gospel? Maybe. Perhaps the ends of the earth for you today is the end of your street, your neighbors, your friends, your enemies. Perhaps the ends of the earth

for you today is that pew you sit in, where you share a kindness and the love of Jesus, with one who may be in desperate need.

Perhaps the ends of the earth for you today is to reconcile with that one person. Perhaps the end of the earth for you today is to show love to the one you think is unlovable, perhaps to provide a meal, to teach a child at Vacation Bible School. Perhaps you can't get around like you were once able and the ends of the earth for you today is the couch in your living room, where you can write a note of encouragement or peace. Perhaps the prayers you say for others are helping to form disciples. How do we live this commission? We live our lives sharing, in all we do, this good news that we, as doubting imperfect people are accepted and used and LOVED by the creator God. We live that daily so that those around us cannot help but see the one we follow.

None of us are excused. We are all on a mission from God. Know that as we all work toward being more Jesus like, the person you are now, right now, is the person Jesus has commissioned and the person Jesus can and will use, because He is with you always, to the end of the age.

Amen.