

Church on the Mall  
June 7, 2015  
Rev. Sarah A. Colwill  
Genesis 1:1-2:3  
Matthew 28:16-20

“...therefore...”

The Holy Spirit, part 3: Church as Witness

This morning we read from Matthew’s Gospel what has infamously become known as, “The Great Commission”. The four Gospel writers have had to deal with the dilemma of just how to end a Gospel, and Matthew has chosen a bold decree, with Jesus telling the disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. While there is no breathing of the Holy Spirit per se, the sentiment is there: Jesus announces his authority in heaven and on earth which allows him to “therefore” do something so bold as to open the mission field to the entire world and then he tells his disciples to go. Their marching orders are both simple and expansive, both short yet exhaustive. It tires me out just thinking about it. They are to go into the whole world and make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them and teaching them to follow Jesus’ commands.

The church has been living into this charge for its entire existence. And as the church today, the responsibility is now ours to heed this Great Commission. Today this is our commission: to go and make disciples, to baptize, to teach. This is our third week talking about the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity that comes to the gathered group of disciples on the day of Pentecost in the Luke-Acts storyline, the Paraclete, or Comforter, Advocate, or Helper in John’s Gospel that Jesus breathes upon

the disciples on the day of his resurrection. We reflected first upon the church as prophet and how the Holy Spirit comes to the community of believers in order that they may proclaim God's love and mercy to the world. We reflected last week upon the church as pastor and how the Holy Spirit sends us into the world to show God's compassion, care, and healing to all those who are suffering and living desperate lives. Today we reflect upon church as witness and how the Holy Spirit empowers us to share our faith with the world for the purpose of welcoming others into the community of believers.

When I first hear the word "witness" in the context of my faith, my memory goes back to my freshman year of college at Penn State Main Campus and the man known as the "Willard Preacher". While students were headed to and from class, a street preacher would stand on the steps of the Willard building, a popular classroom building centrally located on campus. With a Bible in one hand he would shout words of doom and gloom, quoting scripture passages about hell, condemnation, and judgment. Every once in a while a smart-aleck student would engage him, but for the most part, he preached his words of death and fear into the wind. Or maybe my mind goes to the conversation I had with the Jehovah's Witnesses who knocked on my door in Louisville while I was in seminary. I proudly announced to the kind folks my call to ministry and my commitment to the church which much to my dismay did not seem to impress them one bit. A brief and frustrating conversation ensued, where I was hoping we would see our Christian commonalities, but instead it seemed I was still in need of conversion.

My guess is that I am not alone in these sentiments. The word witness, well, it can make us itch a bit, squirm even. And not all for bad reasons. We Christians have come across as pushy, self-righteous, intolerant, and arrogant in our evangelism or witness techniques. Rather than welcoming people into Christian discipleship, the conversation was more likely to focus on how you will spend your death instead of how you will live your life. So even when our intentions are to witness to the Good News and talk about God's love for us, our words may fall on defensive ears because of the reputation that precedes Christian evangelism. And much different than those first century disciples – most of the people we encounter on an everyday basis have at least a cursory knowledge of Christianity. If we walk up to a stranger and mention the name Jesus, most people will know who we are talking about. We are not sharing new information.

So, what does it mean for the church to be a witness in this day and age? When most people already know who Jesus is and our reputation for attracting new converts is not the best? We seem to have to choose between risking coming across as self-righteous and pushy or just saying nothing at all. These aren't good options. And there aren't easy answers. But, but – I do believe we are absolutely asking the right question. How do we live into the Great Commission? This is the right question for us to be asking; it's the right question for us as a church to be trying to answer.

First of all, let's look a little bit at what Jesus is commissioning us to do. Our goal is discipleship, which is spelled out a bit further to include baptism and teaching.

Jesus opens up this invitation to all nations and all peoples: this isn't just for the Jewish community, or those living in Jerusalem; this invitation is not limited. This invitation is not just for people who look like we do and talk like we do. This invitation is not just for the "right" people who we want in our church on a Sunday morning. This invitation is not just for the saints, the well-to-do, the do-gooders, or the previously churched who have moved into the area. This invitation is for the people too poor to make a pledge, the people too old to get the Sunday school program back up and running, the people who may have somewhat different beliefs than we do. This invitation is for the people who come to worship in a suit and tie or a class dress, those who come wearing ripped jeans that cost \$200 and those who come wearing ripped jeans that are too big and came from a thrift store. There is no target audience here. Everyone. All nations. All peoples. All races. All ages. All ethnicities. All walks of life. We are to make disciples of all people.

Our commission to new believers is to baptize them and teach them the ways of Jesus Christ. I suppose I could walk through the mall with a bowl of water baptizing shoppers and store owners in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit – but that misses the intent of baptism. This was the sign of welcome and participation in the faith community. Baptism is the mark that you are in – regardless of how new you are to the church or how different you are than the rest of us or how "unchurched", that baptism means you are an equal brother or sister in Christ. And now that you're "in", the teaching begins and the community of believers follows Jesus' commands.

When we act as a witness to Jesus Christ, we accept new believers into our fold in a way that welcomes them as if this was always their home. They are welcomed home, in the same way that we were welcomed home. And we welcome knowing that they have just as much ownership of the church as we do; which is – not much. It's Jesus Christ who calls the church into being, and we all just get to participate, no one any more or less than another.

When we witness to Jesus Christ, sometimes that takes place right here in this sanctuary, when new believer can see how we treat one another and how we treat them. New believers can see how we follow Jesus' commands to love God and love one another, to care for the poor and sick, to bind up the broken hearted, to go into the world and reveal God's mercy and forgiveness to all those who have sinned, to promote the welfare of other human beings. And sometimes, even for "old" believers – sometimes we need to be witnessed to, too; as a reminder, a reinforcement, as encouragement that God's power and presence is still at work in the world and right here among us.

When we witness to Jesus Christ, sometimes that means sharing our faith with others, outside these doors, in our families, at work, or with our friends. A powerful witness can be the way we live our lives. People see our priorities, they catch glimpses of our prayer life, they know we go to church, they see us donating our time, talent, and treasure to the church. Even if our evangelism has mixed reviews, the church has a solid reputation in responding to emergencies and helping those in need. From Catholic

charities to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Christian denominations witness to the healing and presence of God in the midst of trouble through our charitable efforts.

But to try to figure out what it looks like to share our personal faith with another, let's look deeper into this morning's scripture. Matthew 28 is the discovery of the empty tomb. It begins with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary coming to the tomb. We have an earthquake, an angel rolls back the stone and proclaims Jesus' resurrection, they run to tell the disciples and on their way Jesus himself comes to them. He tells them to go and tell his brothers to go to Galilee where they will see them. Here, in verse 16, we have the disciples in Galilee, where Jesus appears to them.

The two Marys are the first witnesses to the Risen Jesus. What's implied in this retelling is that they, indeed, told the disciples, they shared their Christian witness – because the disciples are in Galilee just like Jesus instructed. We don't know what they said, but the disciples must have believed them, because they were there on that mountain. So Mary and Mary were our first successful Christian witnesses. They shared their experience of the Risen Jesus and the disciples believed them.

Why did the disciples believe them? I'll point out two reasons. One, they were credible and two, they were talking about their own personal experience. The women were friends of the disciples. They knew one another. Their story made sense and they had each other to verify it. Their motivation was pure. Mary and Mary were credible witnesses. When we share our faith with others, having credibility is important. If we

are speaking with someone who trusts us, who knows our motivations are sincere, they are much more likely to believe what we are saying.

Secondly, they are sharing their experience. I wonder what that Willard preacher would've been like if he could have shared something from his heart, instead of only quoting certain lines of scripture. What if he would've told a story of how he was lost, but God found him. Or a story of how his life had fallen into the Pit and the love and grace of Jesus Christ saved him. Or a story of a time when he felt that deep peace of God even in the midst of life's hardships and heartaches. Mary and Mary share their experience of the Risen Jesus, they don't just talk about him. They don't just quote prophets. They speak from the heart and they share a real way that the presence of God was in their midst.

So I'm not sure that walking up to a stranger in the mall and telling him or her about John 3:16 is the best way to go about this witnessing. But what about someone you know, someone who trusts you? Could you share a personal story of a way that God's presence was powerful in your life? What about even one another? Can we open ourselves even to other Christians and share how the Good News has affected us in a way that was life-changing? This may not be attracting new converts, the power of our personal testimony can help strengthen one another's faith.

I want to invite you to turn to a neighbor and just take 20 seconds and share one way that you experienced God's presence this week. You don't have to go into detail – just mention one time when you experienced God's presence this week.

The Great Commission is upon us as the church of Jesus Christ. Because of his power and authority, “therefore” we have been blessed and consecrated and sent out to be a witness to his saving love. And let us not forget that final line to close out the Gospel. Jesus says, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” I think he tells us to remember because he knows we may be likely to forget. This is a task and a mission and a ministry that he authors and that he sustains through his presence. One of the ways he nourishes and feeds us for this assignment is by inviting us to the table and meeting us here in the bread and the cup. We are not alone in this journey, but Christ is with us always, to the end of the age. Thanks be to God. Amen.