

## **Matthew 28:16-20**

Holy Trinity + June 11, 2017

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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The Great Blessing

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 28:18-20: "Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

For our Gospel lesson on this Sunday of the Holy Trinity, we have before us one of the most famous texts of the New Testament, often called the "Great Commission." In fact, for many churches, consultants and experts who write about church life, this is *the* foundational text for the Church today – far more important to know than, say, the Creed. It is what we Christians ought to be doing: namely, you ought to be going and making disciples of all nations. If you're not doing that, you're not obeying Jesus, they say. So go. Go now. I don't know why you're still sitting here listening to me when there are disciples to go and make.

If that's the right interpretation, then it's an especially odd choice for the Sunday of the Holy Trinity. Of the festivals of the church year, this one is a bit different because the emphasis is on who God is, not what He does. Consider: on Christmas, we celebrate that Christ is born; on Easter, that He is risen from the dead; on Pentecost, that the Holy Spirit has come. On the Festival of the Holy Trinity, you get the doctrinal statement that the one true God is one God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

You also get the Athanasian Creed in a few minutes' time, which does the same thing. In the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, we spend most of our time talking about divine action: how the Father creates, how the Son redeems, and how the Holy Spirit sanctifies us. In the Athanasian Creed, you get a lot of talk about who the one true God – Father, Son and Spirit – is, as in "uncreated," "infinite," "eternal" and the like.

This is a bit of a challenge to sinners like you and me. See, in the western world we tend to be a bunch of pragmatic puzzle-solvers. Because we are pragmatic, we tend to see the Christian faith along the lines of asking God, "What are You doing," or "What have You done for me lately?" We tend to treat people this way too, by the way: be it employees or students or fellow parishioners, we're more concerned with what they're doing than who they are because we can measure such things. In reality, it's a shabby way to treat people, and it's certainly a shabby way to treat God.

Because we are puzzle-solvers, we gravitate towards what we can understand – we're not so excited about spending time on what we can't. So, for instance, it can be a gratifying thing to work on a difficult calculus equation until you finally figure out what X equals, because you've solved the problem. It's less of a satisfying thrill to meditate upon the eternal omniscience of God; because even if you give it your all, at the end of the day you're going to say, "I still can't wrap my mind around it."

As pragmatic puzzle-solvers then, we naturally focus on what God is doing, and not who God is. If this doesn't sound like a problem, then turn to your spouse or a good friend and say, "I really don't care who you are, because I only care about what you do for me." Afterwards, spend

the long awkward silence wondering why you chose to let those words come out of your mouth. With regard to God, this is a problem that actually endangers your faith in at least a couple of ways.

On the one hand, you'll be tempted to whittle God down into something that you can understand, to make the Almighty no bigger than your little – and sinful – imagination. As this takes place and you reduce God down into someone no bigger than you, then you'll just start to assume that you can explain more about God than He actually says about Himself: after all, if He isn't any bigger than you are, He probably acts and thinks like you, just in a more sanctified way, yes? This by itself is responsible for all sorts of spiritual harm in the world today: in reality, isn't every false religion an attempt to find God by constructing Him out of one's own imagination?

Remember: God is not a puzzle to be solved. His nature is a mystery to be believed. Isn't it a comfort that God, who is gracious toward you, is also far greater than you can comprehend?

Here's another danger: if you don't spend time meditating upon who God is, then you're going to get wrong what He does. His actions toward you spring from His nature: the One who names Himself "I AM who I AM" does what He does because He is who He is. If you fail to study who God is, your chances of getting the Bible wrong will skyrocket.

My first plea to you today is this: as you study God's Word daily (as I pray that you do), slow down. Even if you only cover a verse or two, make it a point to look at what God reveals about His nature, and give that time for meditation and prayer. Like the Creed we spoke today, your catechism will have a fine list of attributes of God: get to know that list, and then look for them as you read through the Scriptures.

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On to our Gospel lesson for today. As I said before, many regard this text as *the* foundational text for the life of the Church. It's no secret that Christianity is losing ground in the world today, and I can find you a bucket of experts who will say it's because so few Christians actually take the Great Commission – our Gospel lesson – seriously. If everybody was going and making disciples, the Church would be growing like gangbusters, they maintain. Mind you, this emphasis on Matthew 28 has only been a thing of the past two hundred year or so, so somehow the Church has managed to survive throughout the centuries without following the advice of our current-day experts. Go figure.

If you've been beaten up with this text as if it's a rolled-up newspaper and you're a disobedient puppy, set aside everything you've heard about this text and try to hear it as if you never have before. In fact, let's translate the text so that it's closer to what the Greek says. It's quite accurate that Jesus said to His disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me." That right there is great news: Jesus has all authority. This is what makes the absolution so comforting and sure: a pastor will never say, "You're forgiven for all of your sins, unless someone who ranks higher than Jesus says otherwise." Jesus has all authority, because His Father has given Him all authority: if He's died for your sins, then your sins are died for.

Moving on, here's the part that translations struggle with, because it's tough to put the Greek into English. Our reading has Jesus saying, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." Go and make, they say, as if these are things that you are commanded to do. However, a more literal translation would be this: "As you are going, 'disciple-ize' all peoples." "As you are going," says Jesus: it's not a hard command to "Go down the street from door to door, or else you're a horrible Christian;" rather, what He says is more along the lines of, "Wherever you are, this is what My people do because this is what faith does." What does faith do? *You* can't *make*

disciples: if that was your work, then the Holy Spirit would be out of a job. But Jesus doesn't actually say, "Make disciples." Quite literally, He says, "Go and disciple-ize." I understand that disciple-ize is not an actual word in English; however, you know what I mean when I say it, don't you? It means, "As you are going, do what you're given to do so that other people might become My disciples too." And how do people become disciples or followers of Jesus? By getting their sins forgiven – by being justified. How do they become justified? By hearing the Word of God. By being baptized. That's how the Lord makes people into His people. That's how He disciple-izes them.

So when the Lord speaks these words to His disciples, He's not saying, "I'm giving you a blueprint for how to make the Church grow, as long as you've got the guts and the willpower to go and make disciples." Instead, just before His ascension, the crucified and risen Lord describes to them the life of the Church and the ministry. It's as if He saying, "I'm about to ascend into heaven to prepare a place for you, but you know that I've died and I am risen. As you go here and there, do what My witnesses do: talk about Me. Where people hear and repent, baptize them. Where they want their babies baptized, baptize their babies too – I said, 'all nations,' not 'all nations over the age of 8.' It's by these means of Word and Baptism that I add people to My family: it's how I make them My children, My followers. And as you go, remember: I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Think of it this way. Way back when God created Adam and Eve, He told them to "be fruitful and multiply." Some have taken this as a command of strict law, along the lines of, "If you're going to be My people, you'd better have a bunch of kids, and then a bunch more." It is, however, a blessing. When the Lord said, "Be fruitful and multiply," He blessed them with fertility, with the ability to have children. God could have created more human beings by growing them in the ground like rows of turnips; but instead, He elected to involve husband and wife as His means and say, "I'll bring about life through you: be fruitful and multiply." Please note: He places this inside an office of marriage: He doesn't say this to all men and women, but to husbands and wives. Make no mistake, though: every new baby is a miracle worked by God through the man and woman.

Now, the Church is the family of God. God could add to His family by striking people with lightning bolts of faith from the sky or growing them in the ground like so many rows of turnips, I suppose. Instead, He has elected to involve His people as instruments for new life once again. That's what's going on in Matthew 28. Jesus says, "You will be My instruments for adding children to My family. Speak My Word. Baptize. That's how My people are born." Thus the so-called "Great Commission" is not a strict demand of law by which you measure how good of a Christian you are. It's a blessing so that God might use us to add to His people. Once again, He places this inside of offices: pastors are normally the ones who publicly preach and baptize, while parishioners normally share the Word within their vocations as opportunities arise. Make no mistake, though: every new Christian is a miracle worked by God, not us.

Don't get the wrong idea. Your sinful nature wants you to say, "If this is a blessing, I'm off the hook! I don't have to tell others about Jesus." When you think that way, repent: your faith wants to talk about Jesus, wants to tell others about Him. If you're holding that inside, you're silencing your faith and rewarding your old Adam. It's why 1 Peter 3:15 says, to always be "prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you." It doesn't mean you must go down the block, knocking on strangers' doors. It means conversations with family and friends. It means reading Bible stories to your kids and blessing them at bedtime. When opportunities arise, you share the faith – you tell other people the hope that you have. Because you do have hope, and you can tell.

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So why this Gospel lesson for the Festival of the Holy Trinity? Jesus mentions the Trinity in it, of course. He tells His apostles to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Now, here's a funny thing about the New Testament and the Holy Trinity: when the Trinity is mentioned, it's usually in connection with your salvation. When Gabriel appears to the virgin Mary to say that she will give birth to the Savior, he explains that the *Father* will overshadow her and the *Son* will be conceived by the *Holy Spirit*. When the *Son* is baptized in the Jordan, the *Father* speaks and the *Holy Spirit* descends. When the *Son* first preaches salvation in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16ff), He begins with Isaiah 61:1 and says, "The *Spirit* of the *Lord* is upon *Me*." When the 72 return from proclaiming the Gospel, *Jesus* rejoices in the *Spirit* and gives thanks to the *Father* (Luke 10:21). In Galatians 4:6, "God has sent the *Spirit* of His *Son* into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! *Father!*'" In Ephesians 1:17, Paul prays that God the *Father* of *Jesus* the *Son* would give you the *Spirit* of wisdom. One more: in Titus 3:5-6, we're back to baptism where God "saved us ... by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the *Holy Spirit*, whom He (the *Father*) poured out on us richly through *Jesus* Christ (the *Son*) our Savior."

Soften your hearts, repent and marvel. As the one true God reveals Himself to you as *Father*, *Son* and *Holy Spirit*, He makes known that all three persons are at work for your salvation. To fall into the trap of saying, "I don't really care who God is" is to say, "I really don't care to know about the One who saves me by great sacrifice for eternity." Behold! The omniscient, all-knowing *Father*, *Son* and *Spirit* all know your sin better than you do ... and yet they all will and work for your salvation. The omnipotent, all-powerful triune God wills that the *Son* redeem you by suffering and death. The one, true, righteous and holy God wills that the *Son* bear all of your sin and unrighteousness to the cross for your salvation.

As God reveals who He is, He doesn't leave you to anguish at the incomprehensibility of His being. He doesn't remain a far-off deity who leaves you to puzzle things out. Instead, He reveals Himself at work to save you. He makes Himself known most of all to you in *Jesus*, but He makes clear that *Father*, *Son* and *Spirit* all desire your redemption His power, His eternal nature, and all His authority are behind your salvation. While you cannot comprehend Him, He gives you the faith to believe this marvelous news: you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the *Father* and of the *Son* and of the *Holy Spirit*. Amen