

## Matthew 28:11-20, The Commissioning of the Disciples

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

### John 3:11-17

<sup>11</sup>"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you<sup>[a]</sup> do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.<sup>[c]</sup>

<sup>16</sup>"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

<sup>17</sup>"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

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**Baptizing into the Mystery**

**John 3:11-17; Matthew 28:11-20**

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I learn new words sometimes from amazing friends, friends like Sandi Goering. As a gifted church historian, she teaches her classes about how the accounts of history get written, especially with what gets put in and what may be left out. Given her interest in the saints and martyrs of the church, particularly women, the word I learned from Sandi has to do with how their histories get written. A history of a saint, particularly THE history of a saint that recounts his or her sainthood or particularly exemplary spiritual life is called a “hagiography.” In a hagiography, the author lifts up only the parts of the person’s life that shape her story toward a spiritually motivated outcome. This type of history asks: What is the spiritual “good news” people learn from hearing about this particular saint? And, what is it about his or her life that we want to emulate and express in some way in our own?

Now because hagiographies were originally these highly edited stories of saints and venerated persons, the word has also taken on a secondary meaning in today’s language, as the history of any person that intentionally leaves out the negative and tries to make the character appear saint-like. So is it a true story if some parts have been intentionally left out? Perhaps it depends on the circumstance. What kind of biographies do you like to read? I’m reading one now written by the late night *Daily Show* host Trevor Noah about his growing up through the ending of apartheid in South Africa. It’s called Born a Crime because he was born to a black mother and white father in a time when his birth alone rendered him illegal. We know it’s not a hagiography already because he begins his tale with something that might appear far from the “make it look good” kind of history.

And as he talks about his childhood – he doesn't leave out the parts about getting into trouble, a lot, and how his mother chose to discipline him with physical punishments, and his step father was an abusive alcoholic. But though he would not consider himself a saint, I'm sure, he also talks at length about his church life, his prayer life, and his gratitude for how his family and culture influenced his life. Since I'm only part-way through it, I'm not sure exactly where reading the story will take me, but it's a fascinating read about a life far different from my own with spiritual insight that I find incredibly relatable nonetheless.

Back to our familiar stories, it's important to note that the Bible itself is not a hagiography though it does have plenty of biographical notes in it about people we assume were dedicated to their spiritual lives. The Bible, however, doesn't leave the complicated details out, the ones that show people in both positive and negative circumstances. Though we pick up the Bible to learn more about God, what we get when we start reading it are stories about people, about who they were, and even to some degree about how they thought and felt. Today's two texts are about Jesus talking to those who would eventually be sent to carry his story forward. In Matthew he's making a specific charge to the disciples about what they should do after he's gone, and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of John, he is carrying on a conversation with Nicodemus, a conversation that has been overheard by many, many Christians who want to live into a life of faith. One of the most often quoted verses of scripture can be found there, "For God so loved the world, that [he gave his only Son]... so that [anyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.]" We know that verse pretty well though we tend to stop at the end of verse 16 as if it were finished rather than continuing on through verse 17, the one that reminds us that Jesus was not here to condemn the world but to offer salvation to all those who dwell in it. If we stop too soon, we may get the impression that our eternal life is highly conditional, dependent solely on our belief in Christ, but if we go on, we find

out that God is not as interested in condemning us as we might have heard either growing up or from other Christians who build their theology around that one verse, and leave the next one out.

One of the points I think Sandi hopes to make in her classes at Randolph Macon and that I'm hoping to make now is that it matters how we tell the story, where we stop, what we put in, what we leave out, and how we describe what people are thinking and feeling as they become our spiritual guides in interpreting this ongoing spiritual legacy. We want to understand the saints, or even some very good ordinary people, so that we as human beings can strive toward the greater good we find by shaping our lives like theirs. That's a good thing.

Today, we will welcome Morgan Raymond as a full-fledged participant in the story of the saints, or at least the story of some rather good people here at Ashland Presbyterian Church. Our church history, or if you bear with me, our church hagiography, in and of itself is an important story, and if we do our job well, the stories we tell about who we are will reach back into the whole of the Christian narrative, repeating themes, honoring memories, and discovering how the life and way of Jesus Christ has impacted our little church family throughout the years.

It is into this mystery that we baptize our children, or occasionally our adults as well. We baptize into the Triune God, the holy mystery of the one true God, discoverable in three distinct persons. But we do so because after his resurrection, just before his ascent back into heaven, Jesus taught the eleven remaining disciples that this was their mission – to go into all the world making disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to follow the commandments he put before us. That's the life of the church, isn't it? We are introduced to the story, brought into the tradition through the sacrament of baptism, and then sent out to go and do what Jesus was doing – and to do so in God's name. It is our story. But in this rendition of the story from Matthew's telling of it, we get an amazing glimpse into the

thoughts of those very same disciples. We are told that they worshipped, and they doubted. The English word “some” isn’t there in the Greek, and it is our attempt at scrubbing the version to make it sound more holy than maybe it was. I think it’s good to know this, even about the disciples who knew Jesus best. They were saintly, and they were human. They were the ones on whom the telling of this story depended, and they were the ones who questioned what to do and say about their own narrative. They were the doubting disciples, but their willingness to be sent into God’s world with Jesus’ message is why we have the gospel to read today.

So, to tell the hagiography of Ashland Presbyterian Church, I would recount the baptisms, and the teaching, and the sending that we do almost as naturally as our breathing. I’ve said, often enough to hear it repeated back to me, that at its very heart, this is a teaching church. We enact the sacramental ways of bringing folks into this fold, and then we lovingly, joyfully teach – because we love the learning so much ourselves. When we love something or someone, our curiosity about that thing, or that way, or that person increases dramatically. We want to know all there is to know, and we want to share our discoveries with others. That love of both God and neighbor are cultivated here in very rich soil. But what I haven’t talked about as much because it has taken me longer to see it that this is a sending church as well. We don’t cloister our folks like precious saints within the walls of the church. No, we are constantly sending our folks back out into the world. Perhaps we don’t want to admit that quite so much because it means that we have to love them like we do, AND THEN let them go. But I dare to say that our most famous hagiography, the saintly tale that continues to be one of the anchoring stories here at this church is the story of Flo Sthreshley. Flo felt the call of God as a young person, a call that would take her around the world from this church she called home. For decades she shared her love of God with the people of the Congo – and yet, her church was here. Her home congregation remained Ashland Presbyterian Church, the church that sent her. But the stories of our sending only multiply from there. We hire, and teach, and send

interns with regularity. If they were to decide to stay too long, we wouldn't have done our job with them very well, would we? Our job is to take them in as students and release them as those ready to become pastors. It's a characteristic of this church I'm glad to have noticed in a blazing "aha" moment because I'm going to start incorporating that story more into our internship process as I see it grow and develop, so keep your ears open for that. But today we add to our hagiography by starting young. We welcome an infant, an impressionable child into this community of faith. Jesus told us to baptize her, to teach her, to give her the absolute knowledge that the love of Jesus will remain with her always, to the end of her life, to the end of every single age in history. That's being church. That's being who we were called to be, and who we are today. Truth be told though, Morgan will not stay with us forever. The days of spending a lifetime in one particular church are fading fast – though that's still within our walls as well, right Kathleen? But even Kathleen, who has been here since she was Morgan's age, has been sent by this church, sent to teach young people in Ashland as her calling. See, it is who we are.

But in the meantime, while we have Morgan learning and growing with us, I hope you will tell her your stories not only of being drawn to this place, I hope you will tell her your stories of how you have been sent from this place. I hope you'll tell me too. I know they are out there. Perhaps you were sent by a meaningful prayer to show the unconditional love of dropping off a homecooked meal to your neighbor with young kids and a busy life. Perhaps you were sent by the choir's song to bring music into the lives of your grandchildren. Perhaps your love of learning here flows out into your teaching kids or mentoring business associates elsewhere. Now I know. Now I know why we don't have a particular mission that we've identified as our brand. Our mission is simply to be sent – whenever and wherever God is sending us.

Perhaps this is a lot to put on Morgan's shoulders. She has a great deal of growing up and learning yet to do. But maybe it's good to start now, to say that God is calling her in love, already, because God has put her here, right here, to learn and to grow with those who will prepare her to live Jesus' way in the world. That's what we do. And someday, like many of our now adult children, she will go elsewhere and make her own way with this story of a few saints, or at least some rather good people, who entered into her life and became an everlasting part of her journey. Amen.