

Kerra Becker English – June 7, 2020

God's Word in Scripture

Matthew 28: 19-20

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.”

God's Word Proclaimed: Go, Make, Baptize, Teach, and Remember

The charge at the end of Matthew's gospel is a fairly familiar text. We remember these words of Jesus but may not remember exactly the context of how Jesus delivers them. This message will be delivered after the resurrection on a mountain where the disciples were designated to meet. It is the two Mary's – Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” in Matthew's gospel that come to check on the tomb. There they meet an angel who tells them that he has risen and that the message is to bring the others and meet him in Galilee, Jesus also appears to the Marys, offers greetings, and tells them to not be afraid, and to go tell his brothers, his disciples, that he will meet them at the appointed place.

Meanwhile – the nervous guards go and tell the chief priests what they've seen of these conversations, and then the chief priests and elders concoct a lie to suppress the story. They pay these guards a large sum of money to tell anyone they came in contact with that his disciples came at night and stole the body while they were asleep. Even then – corrupt leaders used lies and deceit to further their own power and purposes.

The eleven go to Galilee to the mountain Jesus had told them about. And Jesus shows up. There, they worshiped. There, they doubted. Matthew doesn't hesitate to let us know that this is an awe-inspiring story that at times will seem like the most true story you've ever heard, and at other times might seem like absolute fantasy, a children's tale that you should grow out of. But the gospel writer makes one thing absolutely clear – those in power would rather this little detail about Jesus' resurrection and return not come to light.

Those who seek to amass worldly power today also want this story tidy and left in a closed book, a mere symbol of religion and power, rather than an open book where the seeker might encounter real people who worship and doubt and are called by Jesus to action in their own times and places.

The eye-witnesses to the resurrection at the tomb were women. Who was going to believe them? Especially when the guards of the state were told to spread false information.

Those who repeated this story were students of a failed Messiah. Who was going to believe them? Their leader who was supposed to save the world died - a criminal's public execution.

Those who saw Jesus after his resurrection always seemed a bit clueless as to who that man was until he breaks bread or calls them by name. Does that make the story seem more or less credible to you? Three years traveling and doing everything with a person, and you don't even know him when you see him?

It's amazing this story is still being told.

Let me pause for a moment in this biblical story and talk to you about some Jesus followers who took to the streets Friday in Ashland...

Friday in Ashland – white clergy stood together and confessed their sin of racism and confronted some long-standing doubts about what they had been taught to be “true” about power in the church. For religious and racial unity to be possible, we let go of our positions of power as the chief priests and elders, so we could truly listen for the authority that comes from only Jesus.

Friday in Ashland – Randell Williams, senior pastor at Shiloh Baptist, asked us if we would care at all about him and those who look like him if we found them robbed and beaten on the Jericho road. He called us NOT to be like the priest and Levite who step around or step over half-dead black bodies in America.

Friday in Ashland – a young woman in full hijab, a handful of Randolph Macon college students, elderly black church statesmen, a lot of middle-aged and older white women, a few families with children, a whole bunch of clergy, and Randell’s absolutely adorable 4-year-old daughter worshiped - together. We worshiped Jesus – because Jesus freed us all when he taught us in his body and through his spirit that even death, not even empire dealing death, can stamp out love.

Friday in Ashland – promises were made for this to be much more than a one-time event. We didn’t want to wave our togetherness “Kum ba Yah” moment, and forget about it. We are praying hard that this is a new beginning, the gathering point for a new future, knowing that the work to create that future will be difficult – but not impossible.

Was Friday foolish -given that we are confronting at least 400 years of racial injustice? Maybe. But I do hope we have just enough foolishness in us to believe that we can make a difference in this old world and do those things others say cannot be done.

Those who have been hearing me lead worship these past 8 years have heard that line a few times before I suspect. You know that I pray for us to have just enough foolishness all the time.

So then, the question then comes in as to how. HOW do we, how will we make a difference?

Randell's message on Friday called us to truly see him and see other hurting people in the black community and care enough to honor their humanity – to BE the Samaritan who uses his own resources of time, and compassion, and money to bring that man on the side of the Jericho road, or any road, from death to life. It was an awe-inspiring message.

And today, I also want us to consider this charge that Jesus leaves us with at the end of Matthew's gospel. It is also a "to-do" list when it comes to making a difference in this old world.

These two verses often get used in very pro-evangelism kind of ways. Go, make disciples, and baptize becomes the formula for coercing conversions to Christianity. I'm not sure that's exactly what Jesus had in mind, though I think we would do well to reclaim the word "evangelist" as someone who actually has good news to proclaim. I want to know if is this charge is good news, not just for those who become Christian, but for the whole world.

One method for understanding scripture is to focus on the verbs in a passage which is what I'm going to do briefly, and I hope you will consider thinking about further at home. What does it mean, to go, make, baptize, teach, and remember?

The first verb is a stand-alone – Go. GO implies movement, change of direction, something with a new beginning. It may be odd in this time where we are being told that it's safer to "stay" to hear the command "Go" – but I do think it's where God is calling us. Now I don't mean that everyone has to go be in a crowd somewhere. That would be unwise. But I do think we are being led to "GO." Go – spend time with your doubts. Go – into those spaces where worship happens spontaneously and gives us a sense of wonder. Go – and make sure your eyes are open for those

you can offer a hand on the journey. Go – you would be correct in thinking that it’s a word that doesn’t imply safety. To go – is almost always to take a risk.

The second verb is make. Make disciples of all nations. I’ve always thought this was a weird saying. I was taught that disciples were individuals. How can a nation be a disciple? Does it mean make disciples who are of all different nationalities? That makes sense. It gives us an understanding that Jesus wouldn’t exclude someone because of their skin tone, their language, or their cultural understanding. I certainly don’t think that Jesus meant to make Christian nations in the sense that we are seeing now of Christian nationalism where it’s clear that the nation and the power of the nation is far more important than the part about being Christian. But to make disciples of nations would be that the nations would be students. Disciples are always learning from their teacher. It would also mean that nations have a moral compass to follow. The teacher sets the tone. So in that way, I don’t necessarily need the nation to be Christian – but I would surely love it if as a whole we could move toward being more like Christ in love and concern for our neighbors.

The third verb is baptize. I talked briefly about the Spirit’s role in baptism last Sunday. To baptize is to initiate someone into a tradition, to allow the person to grow into a particular understanding, and as Jesus says it, we are to baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I’m not going to get into Trinitarian theology here – but just a reminder that these names represent the mystery of God, the divine within humanity, and the nature of God in the present moment to lead and to guide. This isn’t just about a formal ritual when it comes from Jesus. This is about taking this particular understanding of the fullness of God into our everyday lives.

The fourth verb is teach. Ashland Presbyterians are so, so good at this one. Teach the tradition. Be students, be initiates, be LEARNERS. To study the commandments in scripture is important because it helps us to internalize their meaning. I was reminded by a friend in ministry this week that Dr. Katie Cannon used to tell her students when it comes to scripture and our story, “Learn to think with your heart and feel with your mind.”

The fifth and final verb is remember. Remembering is what we do at the table, right? We eat and drink and remember. Jesus charges us here to remember that he is with us ALWAYS, to the end of the age. This week has felt to me like the end of an age more than any other week in my life. We are living through a pandemic in a time when the call to justice is pervasive on a number of counts – for blacks, for women, for the LGBTQ community, for immigrants, for the poor. It feels like we are on the precipice of apocalyptic destruction and at the same time yearning and contracting, waiting for something new to be born in us. It’s probably the best last verb Jesus could give us. Remember. Remember that Jesus is with us – always. Yes, even in our current situation. Maybe especially in our current situation. Remember. Amen.