

## Is the Great Commission Still our Mission?

Matthew 28:16-20

Do you know what the Great Commission is? The last three verses in the Gospel according to Matthew – chapter twenty-eight, verses eighteen through twenty – are called *The Great Commission*. Matthew's Gospel was designed to be a kind of new Torah, the Christian version of the five books of Moses from the Hebrew Bible. In Matthew, the story of Jesus is told around five major sermons or sections of teaching material. They are followed by a telling of the passion story including Jesus' death and resurrection.

The gospel story culminates with Jesus coming back to meet his disciples on a mountain in Jesus' home territory of Galilee. This is Matthew's version of the second coming of Jesus (need background on this). He told them two important truths and gave them a mission – *The Great Commission*.

The first truth was a word of clarification and, in some sense, of reassurance to the disciples. He said, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." This statement about authority and power means that this is no longer the man Jesus with whom the disciples walked and from whom they learned. Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God. He is living in the heart of God. Such images convey that this is no longer the Jesus of history, but the Jesus of eschatology. The glorified Christ gives to the church, represented by these disciples, its *Great Commission*, its mission to the world.

"Go and make disciples of all nations!" Don't sit and wait for them to come to you. Be proactive. Invite others to follow Jesus. In the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, "tell others about (tell others and use words if necessary.)"

"Baptize those disciples in the name of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!" Yes, these are instructions about continuing to practice the physical, symbolic act of baptism. At the same time, Jesus directed the church to the much deeper truth that what baptism represents – a new life perspective identifying with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. To baptize disciples is to let people experience the presence of the living Christ in you. It is to enable other people to experience the community of God, the Trinity, in our community.

The final command of Jesus' mission is to "teach [the new disciples] to obey everything I have commanded you." So the question is, "what did Jesus command the disciples to do in Matthew's gospel?" What commandments do we hear from Christ in those five sermons? The most powerful sermon in Matthew is what we call *The Sermon on the Mount*. It includes the beatitudes, the statements of blessedness including: blessed are the poor in spirit, are those who mourn, are the meek, are those who hunger and thirst for justice, are the merciful.

*The Sermon on the Mount*, filled with so many memorable and powerful teachings for living, ends with a story. Those who hear the words of this sermon and do them are like a wise man who built his house on a rock. It stood up to the storms of life. But those

who don't hear these words, and especially those who don't do them, are foolish. The house they build won't stand up to the storms of life.

*The Great Commission* is still the mission of the Christian Church today. It still reflects the marching orders of the followers of Jesus. We need to teach those we reach. We need to respond to those who come with the hope of hearing about our faith. We need to share with them the wisdom present in our community, in the Spirit, and on the journey.

Our mission is remembering what Jesus taught, living it ourselves, and teaching it to others. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" was a message to the affluent and powerful of Jesus' culture. It is directed to us in our affluence as well as a command to clarify and simplify our needs – to choose to do with less ourselves. Jesus directs all who follow him, all who live in the Spirit, to choose God's life as our treasure, to identify with God's new creation, and to embrace the spiritual transformation taking place in us.

"Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." The meek of Jesus' day would inherit the land conveyed images of the Jubilee year when all debts were to be canceled and all people restored to freedom and fellowship. Jesus' teaches us to be *meek* by pointing with our lives and words to God rather than to ourselves. In this way, we make God's presence through the Spirit visible to others.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Those who desire justice hold a dream of life in which no one lives in need. This was Jesus' dream. This is the dream the Spirit evokes in each of us who follow Jesus. This dream develops in us a deep hunger that all people will be free and the whole creation will experience healing.

"Blessed are the pure in heart." This is not so much a command as Jesus' way of teaching a very fundamental truth about life. Purity of heart means purity of thought -- how we look at anything and everything within us and around us. When fear controls us, it leads to prejudice and a judgmental attitude. Holding a grudge against anyone or any groups blocks our ability to see God in them. With a pure mindset, we are able to embrace the full value of all creation in each person. We are able to see God in others.

"Blessed are the peacemakers." Jesus' teaching to be a peacemaker challenges us with the need to be reconciled within ourselves as well as with those around us. Beware of being angry because it quickly turns to judgment and condemnation. Nurtured anger is the enemy of peace.

"Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake." It is an interesting aspect of Jesus' commandments that they are designed to fill us with joy and make us deeply happy. He knew that the secret of finding deep meaning and experiencing abundance in life was to live the values he taught. He also knew that, in each generation and culture, to be committed to bringing justice and peace would inevitably challenge those who maintain the status quo to their advantage. Blessedness and joy do not result from suffering, but the faithful belong to God's new creation without a doubt. Being awake to that knowledge is our source of joy.

The congregation of Crossroads Church has set as one of its principal goals for the coming year to reach out to people who are looking for a community of faith in which to experience the presence and freedom of the Spirit, to invite those who are interested to experience this community, and to welcome those who want to move into discipleship. We are learning to trust that our community has something deeply worthwhile to offer Those who are seeking to know the Spirit and who are open to the inner transformation the Spirit brings. This is more than a congregational goal. It is obedience to a command of Jesus. It is the mission of the church.

Our mission as followers of Jesus is part of that mission Jesus gave to those first disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel. Faithfulness to this mission requires simply that we are disciples -- not that we are fully mature in our faith (by no means!), but that we are on the journey. The mission requires that we come to understand it in terms of this time and place. It requires that we interpret and apply Jesus' teachings to the 21<sup>st</sup> century world and in the context of the culture in which we live. Finally, faithfulness to our mission requires a commitment no less than those first disciples. When we determine *first things first* for our lives, Jesus' mission must be first.

The mission, in the language of our time and culture, is to share our journey with others and to introduce them to the Spirit who lives in us. It is to teach those who want to know how we have learned to grow and live as Jesus did. It is to share the life of the Spirit by how we live and how we treat others. We will share Jesus with them using words when absolutely necessary. This is still our Great Commission.

After giving the disciples their mission, the risen Christ shared one last truth. Remember, "I am with you always to the end of the age." So, Matthew's Gospel teaches that Jesus is not out of the world somewhere waiting to return with a cosmic army. Jesus is present within us -- present as the Holy Spirit guiding, teaching, and encouraging us. So much of what Jesus taught and lived directed his followers, including us today, to be invested in the well-being of those around us.

The mission of the Church today is to work, in partnership with the Spirit of God in us and around us, for the transformation of the world into the *Shalom* of God. The mission of Crossroads Church is to be a community that encourages transformation of people in partnership with the Holy Spirit. This is a Spirit community that takes seriously what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians church, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

The journey of discipleship begins in scarcity and moves toward abundance. It begins in the wilderness and moves toward the Promised Land. This journey moves through the land of loneliness and despair transforming that land into a kingdom of joy and the blessedness of the poor in spirit, the peacemakers, and the pure in heart. As a congregation, that means our mission is to invite, encourage, challenge, and support people on that journey.

Our mission is to share the vision of a world that free to realize its potential and of a people who can fulfill theirs as well. Our mission is to see Jesus in the face of a sister, a brother, a friend – an enemy – and let them see Jesus in each of us. It is to let anyone who touches this community have at least the chance to feel the Spirit here and to excite the Spirit in them,. Our invitation is for you join us on the journey in Jesus' name.

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Give me a candle of the Spirit, O God,  
As I go down into the deeps of my being.  
Show me the hidden things, the creatures of my dreams,  
The storehouse of forgotten memories and hurts.  
Take me down to the spring of my life,  
And tell me my nature and my name.  
Give me freedom to grow, so that I may become that self  
The seed of which you planted in me at my making.  
Out of the deeps we cry to you, O God.  
(--George Appleton, *One Man's Prayer*, adapted by Jim Cotter)