

The Great Co-Mission
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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Psalm 8

1

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.

2

Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

3

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;

4

what are humans that you are mindful of them,
mortals^[a] that you care for them?

5

Yet you have made them a little lower than God^[b]
and crowned them with glory and honor.

6

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,

7

all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,

8

the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

9

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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."^[d]

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O God, in whom we live and move and have our being, bring life to these words; move our hearts; and be with us always, to the end of the age.
Amen.

Let's start here. The risen Christ's last words in Matthew's Gospel, the Great Commission as it is known, are uncomfortable for some Pilgrims. We are Progressive Christians. Central to our identity is that we are not exclusivist. We respect our neighbors of all faith traditions and no faith tradition and don't put religious pressure on our friends. We are not here to condemn or judge. Our New England sensibilities also make us reluctant to get in people's faces about religion.

And yet, I think Jesus' mandate, Commission, in this text can apply to us.

It's worth spending some time with the text. Let's start at the beginning. Those 11 who had followed Jesus heard one more call: they showed up on a mountainside and listened to him one more time.

"When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted."

Other translations add, some doubted. Whether it's all of the 11 or only some, what I want you to hear in this is that doubt was part of their faith journey even after Easter. And that Jesus asked them to keep sharing his way, even in the midst of their doubt.

Do you have doubts? I have doubt. I have doubt all the time. I hold big questions about Jesus, about Easter, about the church, about my life as a Christian. A colleague of mine says that faith is not the opposite of doubt, faith is the opposite of certainty. In other words, you can have faith and doubt at the same time. Certainty without room for doubt is brittle and fragile. It's like a dry twig. Faith with doubt is resilient. It's a green branch that can bend a little and keep growing.

There are churches, I'm not going to name names, that proclaim Doctrine and Creed with absolute conviction and no room for doubt. Pilgrim, and the United Church of Christ, follow Jesus's way but we don't ask people to ascribe to a Creed. We honor that everyone has the capacity to state their own beliefs and even for those beliefs to change many times.

So if you're in the number that worships and has doubts that's okay. And in fact, according to a book our council has been reading about younger generations and church - a lot of younger adults, whom we'd like to bless and welcome and serve, don't want to be locked in to dogma that seems hard to believe. In other words, a lot of young adults have doubts. That's one of the ways we are a safe space for them.

On the other hand it can be really hard to invite our neighbors to church when we don't have a specific, cookie cutter set of ideas to share. An easy elevator pitch, something well defined that you can say in three minutes. I think we are certain about one thing: our glorious, gorgeous, enthusiastic, radical welcome of people, as they are, as the beloved and beautiful children of God they are. We are certain Jesus taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

“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.”

Again, translation gets interesting here. One of the translations we looked at in Bible study reads go therefore and *teach* all nations... And we loved this translation because Jesus is our teacher and we have so much to learn from Jesus and it is much easier to think about offering the wisdom of a great teacher than it is to try to convert people.

The crucial thing about this part of the text is that Christ's followers are asked to go out into the world. To engage with the world, to meet our neighbors, to serve our neighbors, to share good news. To be in relationship with the world, not to be solely introspective and internally focused. To be generous and outgoing and seek the good of our neighbors and our neighborhood.

“Full humanity, we might say, is never in the singular, never merely “I” or “me”; it's always in the plural, always “us” and “we.””¹

And that relationality is crucial to who we are. I am not me independent of you, we are dependent upon each other, that is to say interdependent, and we are in what Dr. King called the inescapable network of mutuality. ²

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/6/1/relationships-are-who-we-are-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-trinity-sunday>

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1117490-we-are-caught-in-an-inescapable-network-of-mutuality-tied>

Archbishop Desmond Tutu draws upon the concept of Ubuntu to name this mutuality: *'My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.'*³

If not certainty in dogma, then certainty in love.

If not *make disciples of*, then *share the teaching of Jesus*.

And if not evangelism, then personal invitation.

Why share about this community, this church?

Now, I'm quoting myself here - a handout I put together three years ago called 5 Whys and 6 Ways of Personal invitation. Why invite folks to Pilgrim?

Because you care about the person and genuinely believe they'd be blessed by experiencing our community.

Because there's great stuff going on and you're excited about it.

Because Jesus shared the good news of God's love and invited his followers to do so, too.

Because there are a lot, I mean a lot of very loud voices of condemnation and exclusion right now. Some of our neighbors, family and friends are targets of that condemnation and exclusion. They deserve to hear that they are loved, beautiful and welcome here.

And, hey, if you love this community and it's truly live giving for you, why wouldn't you share it with people you care about?

(5 whys and 6 ways of personal invitation doc)

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

³ <http://www.tutufoundationusa.org/2015/10/06/striving-for-ubuntu/>

Every place in the gospels where the risen Christ speaks, they offer some form of reassurance and blessing for the time they will not be with the disciples, with their community. In John, Christ offers peace and the Holy Spirit. In Luke, Christ shares a meal that we model our Christian meals upon, and just before ascending Christ offers a blessing. Here in Matthew, he says: I am with you always.

This work Christ's disciples are sent out to do, this work we are sent out to do, we are not sent alone. We have a co-mission. Christ is with us, every day, through the end of the age.

We can be with Jesus, to the end of the world, if we are with Jesus's siblings, our siblings, hearing their cry. Today, we only operate in the world in the name of Jesus, making the love and justice of Jesus real, standing with our sibling Jesus, if we go out into the world to bless and serve.

But, says womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher,⁴ it is our inherently relational, Trinitarian God who draws us back again and again into relationship with our neighbors. "God's courageous, generous, relational, Trinity" makes possible our response to the violence that affects the whole earth. God is "in creation's struggle for life abundance, and for the full realization of freedom, justice, love and wholeness on earth as in heaven."⁵ God is in the struggle, and we who are in relationship with God are called in to relationship with every one of our siblings, to act for justice and liberation.

Go.

Teach.

Bless.

And remember, Christ is with us always, to the end of the age. Amen.

⁴ Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective*, Kindle Edition.

⁵ *ibid.*

