

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
June 4, 2023  
Matthew 28:16-20  
Trinity Sunday

*God of action, you sent your disciples into the world to preach, teach, and make disciples of all nations. Make us instruments of proclamation, so that all might know of the love you have for humanity. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*

### **“Commissioned”**

The Easter Season, which began two months ago, culminates today. Next week, we go back to Ordinary time for the first time since February. Today is an odd Sunday on the liturgical calendar, because it's the only Sunday of the church year that is devoted to a teaching of a church doctrine. It's Trinity Sunday, a day when many well-meaning, articulate preachers try to explain a concept that is, in so many ways unexplainable.

You'll be glad to know the Trinity is not what I want to talk about today.

Instead, I want to talk about the church. I've been doing some thinking about the church; I'm celebrating my 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary here and my 27<sup>th</sup> as a minister and that has gotten me to reflecting on the church – both this one and the church in general. And our story from Matthew, “The Great Commission” as it's known, seems tailor-made for this. I mean here we have Jesus in his final act sending the disciples out into the world with pretty specific instructions about how to build what we will come to know as the Church universal.

“Go,” Jesus says. “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” It may be the end of Jesus' story, but it's just the beginning for the disciples. Will they go, and if they do what will happen next?

We tend to forget when we hear this passage that it's still Easter or soon thereafter. The disciples are just a few hours or days removed from the crucifixion. Joseph of Arimathea has given Jesus a proper burial; the tomb

has been secured by Pilate and those old men; the women have visited the tomb and discovered it's empty; the angel has told them to go to Galilee and report all of this to the disciples, and the authorities have plotted a scheme to try to convince the people that Jesus' resurrection is a hoax. All of this is in the disciples' review mirror and those objects really are larger than they appear.

Because of all this, they're also a fragile group. Matthew subtly points this out to us when he notes that only 11 disciples greeted Jesus in Galilee . . . a reminder that not all will make it. Added to this is that while some worshipped, others doubted. Perhaps the ones who doubted had heard the ruse the old men had cooked up, the story about the resurrection being a hoax, and they had started to believe that was true.

The word used here for doubting means to waver, to be unsure which way to go. It's a waffling, uncertain kind of word that's best translated "to hesitate" or "to sit on the fence." Matthew's doubt is not intellectual questioning as much as it is waffling behavior, standing in two spaces, being unsure which direction to go. The disciples are unsure which direction to go. Do they go back home to their families and declare this chapter of their lives closed, or do they go forward to where Jesus points even though the future is unclear? Interestingly, Matthew only uses this word one other time in his gospel, when Jesus says to Peter after Peter tries to walk on water: "Oh Peter, why did you doubt?" Which means that some of the 11 are hesitant to step out on the water with no proof the surface will hold. Yet they worship anyway, accepting the risk of going out even though they waffle.

Five years ago in my first sermon as your pastor – a sermon titled "The Safe Zone", I asked:

". . . as we move forward in ministry together, what are the walls God calls us to knock down – either literally or figuratively? Who are the people on the other side of those walls we're supposed to be calling brother or sister? How are we called to move beyond these walls and reach out to those outside of them?"

I have no idea if those questions made you hesitant or not. Now that you've known me for 5 years, maybe they do now!

I went on to say that while I didn't have the answers to those questions, I was certain of one thing – and that is that as followers of Jesus, we're called to do more than just do ministry in the safe zone. And we've done many things in 5 years that have taken us out of the safe zone . . . and probably outside our comfort zone, too. Tomorrow we'll welcome almost 100 campers to the church in our 3<sup>rd</sup> annual MAD2 Camp. Who could have foreseen that? But who knew that a worldwide pandemic and racial reckoning were around the corner? None of us could have predicted that.

But instead of allowing our waffling to get the best of us, we moved forward. At a time when the surface looked like it would do anything but hold, we dove in *in spite of our doubts*. At a time when other churches did nothing, we went, just like Jesus tells us to do . . . despite our doubts. "Go," he says. And you did. I know it wasn't always easy; I know the conversations weren't always comfortable and that some of you didn't always particularly like what I had to say or perhaps what I did. But to be the church today – at least a successful one – means moving out of the safe zone and our comfort zone. I can tell you that after 27 years in the ministry, churches that live in the safe zone and comfort zone don't survive. I really believe that leaving those zones are key to survival and being willing to do that – even with our doubts -- makes all the difference.

Twenty-seven years ago upon graduating from seminary, I was perfectly trained to serve a stable church with a stable income in a stable community and a stable flow of people into it, And yet I have never served that church because that church didn't exist then and it doesn't exist now. It's a cliché to say that we live in a time of rapid change but it's true. And the churches that ignore the change will not survive. The churches that ignore what's happening around them, that ignore the great cultural shifts, will die. They will go the same way businesses like Border Books, Blockbuster Video, and Kodak Camera went. Good while it lasted, but failed to keep up. They will be left wondering where all the people went and why they aren't coming to church anymore.

Friends, you have to go even when you have doubts, and even when it makes you uncomfortable.

In addition to reconnecting with our community and putting ourselves out there, we have spent the past six months cleaning up our operations. None of us could have foreseen what happened in January with the misappropriation of funds. But instead of pointing fingers of blame, which would not have served us well, the Session commissioned a Task Force to get the house in order so there are clear lines of accountability for who is responsible for what. And the Session has spent a great deal of time learning what its responsible for and what our Church polity requires. They did not let the crisis go to waste, so while law enforcement continues to investigate, the Session approved a new Manual of Operations to prevent this from happening again. It was difficult work, but I'm grateful to the Task Force for agreeing to undertake it, and to the Session for having the courage to adopt the necessary changes.

Friends, I said a couple weeks ago but it bears repeating: Faith always looks forward; it rarely looks back, because faith means setting out in a new direction. Time and time again in the Bible we're shown that faith means saying good-bye to the familiar and embarking on a new beginning. The 11 disciples probably would have been happy to just stay on the mountain worshipping Jesus, but Jesus told them to get up and get moving. And they went without having the faintest idea of what was in store. The only thing they knew was that Jesus promised to be with them; which apparently was all they needed to know to summon the courage to go.

By faith coupled with their doubts, they went so they could discover the new beginning God had in store for them.

They went up the mountain and worshipped, even though doubted. It would have been easier to return to fishing. It would have been easier to stay on the mountain rather than venture into the world. But despite the doubts and the odds, they journeyed into new territories. You have

journeyed into new territories despite the doubts and odds, and for that you are to be commended, because most churches don't. It's just too scary.

As I reflect on 27 years in the ministry, I pray our churches have lots of space for those who doubt and question because that's how we grow and mature in our faith, and the world needs more mature Christians. With the depiction of Christians on the news, I often doubt that we serve the same God. A cartoon in the New Yorker once showed a man sitting alone on a bench seat, wearing a T-shirt that says, "Ask me about my religion." The caption under it read, "Another way to keep an empty seat beside you on the train." It's possible that nothing has cost Jesus more new disciples than the tactics of those most intent on recruiting them. So let us not be like that.

But at the same time I pray our churches have less space for *waffling*, as Matthew describes it. I hope we don't hear the Great Commission and worry it's too much, or it's more than our budget will support, or it's too challenging. *I hope the Great Commission doesn't make us waffle.* Because all authority on heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, and he sends us out to teach, to baptize, to proclaim Good News, and he promises never to leave us to the task alone. "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age".

So go. In the words of John Shelby Spong:

"Go to all the world, go beyond the boundaries of your fears. Go to those you have defined as unclean, unworthy, unsaved, uncircumcised and unbaptized. Go to those you have reduced to being the object of your prejudices. Go to those who are different. Go to the rejected of the world and teach them what Jesus taught, namely that God is love and that love embraces all that God has made; that love has no boundaries, that love rejects no one and that love is the essence of the gospel. The Great Commission was never meant to be a charge to us to convert the heathen,

as it has so often been interpreted to be. It was and is a call to see everyone as living inside the love of God.”

And so today, Matthew brings his gospel to an end and our work begins. This gospel is to be lived, not just repeated, because God is not a noun, that demands to be defined, God is a verb that invites us to live, to love and to be.”

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

*Ever present God, In the midst of our journey, we have trusted in you. We ask that you continue to work through us. In the ministry of this congregation we pray for strength and courage, for creativity and joy. May we see each other-young and old, differently abled and gifted, with a variety of talents, as people who are signs of faith-filled living. By faith, Let us grow and minister, as did our ancestors, summoning the courage to say, “God be with you,” while looking forward to the future you have in store for us. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.*

Sources:

[www.revgalblogpals.org](http://www.revgalblogpals.org) Commentary for Matthew 28:16-20

Feasting on the Gospels and Feasting on the Word, commentaries for Matthew 28:16-20