

Text: Matthew 28: 16-20
Title: A Global Claim
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Roger Allen Nelson

From his perch at the end of the bar, he called me over. He was a captain of industry, a delightful raconteur, and a non-practicing Jew; he peered over the top of his reading glasses, stirred his gin and tonic, and said,

All this religious stuff is making a mess of the world. I mean, what is it with these Muslims? They believe that everybody should become Muslim. Do they really believe that the whole world will one day be Muslim? And death to those who don't...

I didn't have a quick easy answer. The intersection of universal claims and religious extremism is fraught with fear and uncertainty. And while I am not conflating the two, I was reminded that we confess with joy and confidence the day when,

*...every knee would bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

The global reach and global claims of different religious visions can be confusing and cause for conflict. This multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-faith world is difficult to navigate. The collision of competing faiths can be complicated, violent, and terrifying.

So, how then do we live in this global village?
How then can we be faithful to these last words of Jesus?

Well, let's begin with the great comfort I take in this text...

For when the resurrected Jesus stood before his disciples some worshipped and some doubted. It seems that the very sight of the risen Jesus doesn't rule out uncertainty. Dear friends, there is space for all of us at the feet of Jesus.

But, to this human mix of worship and wonder, to both believers and doubters, Jesus acknowledges not just a global claim, but one of ultimate universal authority. And, then he gives marching orders. He tells them to, "Go."

Well, not exactly.

This one little "go" has long primed the missional pump of the church. It has prompted missionaries to go to every corner of creation. And, translated into English, it seems simple and straightforward: Go!

But in Greek, grammatically speaking, it is not that simple. This "go" is not an imperative; it's not a command. It's a participle. Literally, the word is "going." It might better be rendered:

While you are going...

As you are going...

In your going...

While you are going to work...
While you are going to college...
While you are going on vacation...
While you are going to Ann Arbor and Antarctica and Israel and Iowa...
While you are going wherever it is that you are going....

...make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey everything I commanded you.

The dominate verb, of the last thing that Jesus said to believers and doubters, was not “go” but “make disciples.” Going is the condition that allows one to do what is essential. And, the essential thing seems to be the making of disciples.

Now, that’s not to diminish the missionary impulse that would send some to follow the call of God to go all over the globe. The Church of Christ is growing today in the southern and eastern hemispheres in part because of the faithful work of missionaries from the north and the west. But, that’s not the essential call of our text. Rather, without singling out the faithful or the floundering, Jesus says to all:

While you are going, make disciples...

Let me offer a couple observations, rooted in this text, that might help us live into that calling in our cosmopolitan-multi-cultural-big-city-context.

While in California this spring I ran on a path alongside the ocean. For mile after mile, with low humidity, a gentle breeze, the occasional dolphin sighting, and endless sunshine, it felt like I could run forever.

There were hundreds and hundreds of surfers along the coast. I ran, watched them surf, and noticed that some would paddle-paddle-scramble-hard-paddle-scramble to catch waves, while other seemed to be in sync with the motion of the ocean. They seemed to know how, with just a few powerful pulls, to catch a wave. While some struggled and waves kept moving past them, others surfed with a kind of efficient grace. They seemed to know how to let the wave do the work....

Since Easter we’ve been thinking about the power of the resurrection as a creation-changing-tsunami that rolls and reaches out to every corner of creation. Last week, Pentecost, we celebrated the gift of the Spirit as that which moves, empowers, and blows that wave outward.

Dear friends, we are not alone, paddling hard, in making disciples. The power of the resurrection and the desire of God’s heart wants the same. No one is a follower of Jesus without the movement of God’s Spirit. And to that end it is incumbent on us
to have some sense of the wave,
to know, or identify the movement of the Spirit,
to be able to catch the flow.

Maybe the wave of the Spirit is not always a bigger church, or a more fervent worship, or a more “successful” ministry. Rather, maybe the best measure of the Spirit’s flow is where there are expressions of mercy, forgiveness, love, and justice. Maybe the “fruit of the Spirit” is a better measure of what God is doing than power, size, prosperity, and political voice.

This call to making disciples comes at the end of the gospel of Matthew. The gospel that defines discipleship with teachings like:

Blessed are the poor in spirit...
Blessed are the merciful...
Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute...
Don't worry about what you will wear, but seek first the kingdom...
Don't judge...
Whoever takes a humble place – like a child – is the greatest...
Forgive not seven times, but seventy-seven times...
Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me...
Don't be afraid...

You get the idea. Could it be that the “great commission” is the instruction or invitation to embody the way of Jesus? To continue – *as you are going* – obeying what Jesus taught? And, in that we are riding the resurrection wave; in that we are catching the wind of the Spirit.

That’s not to relegate Jesus to little more than teacher or example, but it is to think about mission or disciple-making differently. Stanley Hauerwas puts it this way:

The work of Jesus was not a set of ideals or principals for reforming or even revolutionizing society, but the establishment of a new community, a people that embodied forgiveness, sharing and self-sacrificing love in its rituals and discipline. In that sense, the visible church is not to be the bearer of Christ’s message, but to be the message.

In classroom, construction site, and courthouse, in pub, public-square, and pre-school, wherever it is that we are “going” may we embody the way of Jesus.

These are real people in my life...

A gentle-hearted retired Hindu doctor.

A single mom with four kids who reads sermons on-line and wants a foundation for her kids but hasn’t been to church in more than ten years and can’t quite find the courage to go again.

A hipster who’s pretty sure he’s smarter and more sensitive to universal spiritual matters than those who restrict their sense of the truth to Jesus.

A Catholic couple who only go to church on Christmas (maybe Easter).

An affable Muslim shop owner.

An alcoholic who’s saved and sober through Alcoholics Anonymous, but who’s not about to give a name to an anonymous higher power.

An Ivy League scientist who sees no reason or warrant to suspend what he knows to be true for the sake of gooey feelings and good endings.

I could go on. You get the idea. You could draw up a similar list. We live in a quirky-colorful-wonderfully-robust-human-mosaic. So, in going about my life, how would I faithfully make disciples of these people?

None of them want to be the object of mission.

None of them want a relationship whose goal is their conversion.

All of them are friends.

All of them need to be loved and forgiven and encouraged.

All of them could use friends who follow Jesus.

Maybe my calling is to be rooted in the faith that has sustained my life, bear living witness to that reality, and listen to and love my friends and neighbors. Who knows how far the wave reaches?

There is a great story about David Livingston ~ the missionary, explorer, physician, and fighter to end the slave trade in Africa....

When his wife died in Africa, he helped prepare her body for burial, helped make the coffin, helped lower it into the grave, and helped cover it with earth. Then he opened his Bible, and read the text of great commission, including the promise:

Surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

That said, Livingston turned to his African associates and continued,

Jesus Christ is too much of a gentleman not to keep his word; let us get on with the task...

In the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew Jesus is named "Immanuel," God with us. In the last chapter Jesus promises to be with us to the very last day So, while I don't fully know how God will sort out the eternal and global implications of different religious visions. (I am content to let that be God's business....) I do know that God calls the floundering and the faithful to the making of disciples, to following of the way of Jesus. And he promises to go with us.

Therefore, don't be afraid.

You are not alone.

Wherever it is that you are going, God goes with you.

Thanks be God.

Amen.