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April 25, 2021

Scripture: Matthew 28: 16-20

Sermon Title: The Great Commission of God's Love

Prayer...

Introduction-

This morning we are exploring the story of Jesus commanding the 11 disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. It is known within church history as the Great Commission. Commission is another word for command or instruction.

I have always connected the story of the Great Commission to world missions. I grew up in churches that would remind us to spread the message of Jesus to the world. When I attended seminary, I chose Fuller Theological Seminary because it was known as a place devoted to world missions. I graduated with my Master of Divinity degree from Fuller in 2002 and included in my degree many world mission courses for my electives. I also was blessed at Fuller to meet missionaries and

ministers from many different nations, including countries like Korea, China, Philippines, Japan, Kenya, Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Liberia, Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Egypt, India, France, Germany, England, Spain, and I could keep going.

So when I think of the great commission I first think of spreading the message of Jesus to the world.

Let us take a look at the story from Matthew's Gospel and highlight a few key things.

1. Context- Jesus is meeting with the 11 disciples, since Judas is no longer with them, and it is after the resurrection and before his ascension into heaven. He meets with them on a mountain.

Reminiscent of Moses who received the ten commandments on Mt. Sinai.

2. The disciples see Jesus on the mountain and worship him. This shows that Jesus is viewed by the disciples as the Son of God.

3. Some doubt. Scholars debate what this means, but the idea that some of them experienced doubt might encourage those of us who struggle with doubt as part of our faith journey. It is okay to experience doubt even as we worship Jesus.
4. Jesus comes and says to them, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Jesus does not just tell his disciples only to share about him with others. Jesus wants them to make disciples. They are called to reproduce themselves. Disciples are students of a rabbi or teacher and the original disciples are called to go and help raise up other friends and followers of Jesus. As they make disciples, they are to teach people to obey Jesus’ commands. Jesus also makes it clear that the disciples are to continue the ministry of baptism that Jesus experienced from John the Baptist. And as the disciples baptize, they are to use

what we would call trinitarian language, Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. You may notice when I baptize people at our church, we also baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

5. The last message from Jesus according to Matthew's Gospel is one that brought great comfort to the original disciples and brings comfort to all of us. Jesus reminds his friends that he will be with them always, even to the end of the age. In other words, Jesus says, I will always be with you.

We can see how the story of the great commission inspires world mission today and reminds us of God's love for the world, but before I talk more about the beauty of this message from Jesus, I want to share that the Great Commission also was used by the church, especially during the period of colonization to cause great harm.

As a reminder colonization was the movement of largely European nations to expand their ownership of land throughout the world. As we

remember from our history classes, between the 1500's until the 1960's almost the entire world was colonized by European countries.

The United States of course also spread its own control over North America and its influence in other nations around the world, often displacing native people as it gathered up land.

The sad reality as Europe and the United States developed its land and influence, they often combined harmful colonizing actions like using military power to take over native people's land while forcing conversion to Christianity and requiring indigenous people groups to be baptized.

Unfortunately, for many nations in the Southern Hemisphere, the idea of the Great Commission brings up a painful history of colonization.

One of the problems with some approaches to the spread of

Christianity from the 1500's into today is that Christian missionaries have sometimes assumed that they are bringing Christ to another

nation instead of recognizing that God is already active everywhere in the world before a missionary arrives.

Consider the thoughts of African religious scholar John Mbiti... who writes...

“The God described in the Bible is none other than the God who is already known in the framework of our traditional African religiosity.

The missionaries who introduced the gospel to Africa in the past two hundred years did not bring God to our continent. Instead, God brought them.”

John Mbiti helps us understand that when Christians from Europe went to other countries to spread the message of the Gospel of Jesus, they often made the mistake of thinking that they were the only ones that had a relationship with God. Instead Mbiti reminds European missionaries that just as the Jewish people had a relationship with God before Jesus arrived and Christianity eventually developed into a new

religion, so did African indigenous religions have connections to God that then became shaped by the coming of the good news of Jesus.

What does this mean then for us Christians today who seek to spread the message of God's love to the world revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

As your pastor, I certainly support the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus to the world. I think it is a good idea to make disciples of Jesus in all nations of the world. However, I think making disciples needs to be done differently now than some models in the past.

- First, as Christians we need to share our faith with humility and with less judgement of other faiths. As an example, our mission partner Taliilee Fiqruu and her husband Urgessa do mission work in Ethiopia by helping start schools for mostly Muslim students. In these schools they choose to not teach the Christian faith in order to show respect to the wishes of Muslim families they serve.

Instead, they build relationships in the community and by building

trust they have opportunities to share about Jesus in other contexts. Sometimes this leads to people becoming disciples of Jesus, but they do not force anyone to leave their religion and they show respect to Muslims. I have shared before with you that when I was growing up in San Diego my family was close to a Muslim family and we respected and supported each other's faith traditions. Maybe it sounds surprising to some perspectives within Christianity, but we can show respect to people of other faiths while still sharing our faith. We do not need to force conversions. We just can be ourselves and trust God is active in our world.

- A second approach to the Great Commission today is to recognize that any actions of love in the world support the mission of Jesus Christ. Sharing our story of who Jesus is in our lives is one way we can live out the Great Commission, but any time we show love in this world, we are supporting the mission of Jesus Christ.

Christian Author and Minister Brian McLaren says this about the great commission.

“I believe in and am committed to the Great Commission...I would define it as making disciples of Jesus (or learners of the way of Jesus) by proclaiming his good news of the commonwealth of God.”

McLaren continues,

I believe the way of Jesus – the way of love, faith, hope, reconciliation, radical rethinking, service, self-giving, respect for creation, full surrender to the Spirit – truly is the way, the truth, and the life.

I like how McLaren highlights that respect for creation can be a way to live the Great Commission of God’s love. On April 22nd last week we celebrated Earth Day. Earth Day reminds us to care for all of God’s creation and to work for environmental justice efforts like reduction of greenhouse gases and tangible efforts to reduce the impact of climate change.

Last week, after the verdict in the death of George Floyd, we continued to hear members of the black community describe how racial justice and a willingness to address the problem of systemic racism in society is a strong witness to the mission of God in our world.

I think the work of social justice, environmental justice, and any actions of compassion are an expression of the mission of Christ in our world.

When our civil servants including nurses, doctors, police officers, firefighters, social workers, legislators, and educators serve the needs of our communities, they are also fulfilling the work of God in the world.

Friends, the good news is that we can all live out the Great Commission of Jesus in the world by doing the actions of Jesus.

Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, encourages Christians to let go of doing service out of a need for ego. In a recent podcast interview on rethinking the Great Commission, Richard Rohr shared that when he entered the priesthood,

he hoped to go out and in the name of Christ to save the world. What he and other priests learned as they ministered to people in other nations is that they met God in the people they served. They thought they were the givers but learned that God was already there and they became the receivers.

Like Rohr says, let us live our faith with a similar humility. Rather than acting like the superior ones seeking to save the world, let us humbly do actions of service and help make disciples of Jesus by honoring the work of God wherever love is being displayed. If we act with humility and compassion, the world might see Christians less as the colonizers and more as the humble friends of Jesus who are peacemakers and partners in God's work of reconciliation and justice. Christians need to be defined more by what we support than what we judge. We need to be known for our kindness and humility more than for our hatred and pride.

Some of you have read an article recently put out with a poll from Gallup about decline in attendance in houses of worship.

According to Gallup -- Americans' membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend. In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999.

I think this statistic calls us more than ever to live out our faith with humility and compassion and to show our faith by actions of love rather than judgement. The younger generation that is pulling back from attending houses of worship is still open to faith, but they are looking for spiritual communities that inspire them to know a God who is good and loving.

So, I hear you saying from home, yes I want to be a Christian that can embody the Great Commission in a new way of humility and compassion. How do I start?

Start small. Start by listening to the world around you with an ear to learn from others, especially to learn from cultures, faiths, and perspectives different from your own. Start by recognizing that God is active all around you and within you. Your mission field begins in your home. For some in your school. For some in your workplace. Simple actions of love are the first step in living out the Great Commission. Then as you show love, remember you are embodying the love of Jesus. When appropriate share with others how your faith in God inspires your kindness and compassion, your care for all of God's creation. As we do these things, we will fulfill the Great Commission of God's love.

Please pray with me...