

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### Matthew 28:16-20      *"Make Disciples"*

"What's next?" After any major event, it's a natural question, and for Jesus' disciples it was dominant after the Resurrection. Would they now "go back to normal" - return to itinerant preaching and healing in Galilee? Or was something else big on the horizon now that Jesus was again among them, but clearly changed? "Lord, will you now restore the kingdom to Israel," they asked. So Jesus spent 6 weeks teaching "the Eleven" and other disciples what was to happen next. It was clearly not what they expected.

#### 1) *The Great Commission*

For one thing, Jesus made it clear that he was going to return to "his Father and theirs" - but that he would nonetheless still "be with them" in the person of "another Comforter," the Holy Spirit whom he would send them at Pentecost. Secondly, he made it clear that now his disciples would have the task of carrying on what he had begun. That is summarized in what is often called "the Great Commission" at the close of Matthew's Gospel.

In a few words - tho' Jesus doubtless said much more - we learn much about Jesus himself and about the mission of his followers. First Jesus says that he has now been given by God "*all authority in heaven and on earth.*" What does that mean for his hearers? That he is the King, that he has authority to issue commands that his people

are obliged to obey. That what he now commands his people to do is not impossible, because he will ensure that all things work together to advance his plans. That there is no limit to his power and influence, no place or time where he is not in control.

Secondly Jesus links his authority to that of his Father and the Holy Spirit: that as new followers of his are brought into the company of the disciples, they will be baptized "in his name" as well as "in the name of the Father and the Holy Spirit." Already Jesus is teaching them what they had only glimpsed in the past; that he is "God in the flesh," on a par with his Father and the Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity has its roots in Jesus' self-awareness and in his teaching about himself. And so he can also promise that he will be with his disciples always, wherever they go; in other words, that he has the Godly attribute of omnipresence.

If this is what we learn about the risen Jesus, what do we learn about being his disciple? That all disciples have the mission of "making new disciples." This is the imperative at the heart of Jesus' words: "*make disciples of all nations.*" What until now has been restricted by design to "the house of Israel" is to go world-wide. Jesus is not only the Messiah of Israel, he is the Savior of the World, and that must be proclaimed to all

people in all places in all times. The command of King is "make disciples." Disciples are supposed to obey their Master: it makes no sense to claim to be his follower and then refuse his clear command. "Make disciples," he says to all disciples of all ages.

How is that done? Three verb participles are attached to the imperative to make disciples: "going, baptizing, teaching." If "all nations" are to be called to discipleship, some people will have to leave Jerusalem, leave Galilee, leave Israel, to bring the gospel to foreigners. The New Testament book of *Acts* shows how that began - from their home base Christian community in Jerusalem where love and power were found, through trial and persecution and flight to the rest of Judea and into Samaria, and then by conviction and obedience into Phoenicia and into the Mediterranean islands and into North Africa and into Asia and into Europe. Within 20 years there are Christian communities as far away as Rome.

## 2) *The Mission of the Church*

The rest, as they say, is history. Except that like all history - under God's Providence and Jesus' Presence - it required decisive actions by specific people to make it happen. James took the Gospel around the Black Sea into Asia proper; Thomas took it to India before the 1<sup>st</sup> century was over. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Christianity was in southern Gaul and Spain; by the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century St. Alban was recorded as the first Christian martyr in Britain. By the 5<sup>th</sup> century the Gospel was established in the Rhine valley and had reached Ireland.

Then, for almost a thousand years, Christianity rested on its laurels in Europe, until the 1600s when it crossed the Atlantic. But it was not until the late 1700s that the Church awoke again to the command to bring the Gospel to "all the nations" - nations

that were now their trading partners and colonies! People like William Carey realized that sloth was being disguised by assertions that God would call his elect in his own way and time, without anyone's help! In 1789 Carey published a ground-breaking missions manifesto on "*The Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*," and formed the Baptist Missionary Society, the first of dozens of mission organizations to emerge in the 1800s. He and his family went to India, where he translated the Bible into Bengali and Sanskrit. It was the beginning of the greatest missionary movement the Church had ever seen, as thousands of people went around the world with the Gospel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Carey went down in history as "the father of modern missions."

Now, of course, that has all changed again. Christianity in Europe and North America has become tired and stagnant, and few people go out now to bring the Gospel to the world. But the seeds sown by earlier generations have sprouted, and the Church is now growing fastest in sub-Saharan Africa and in southeast Asia. What we (in Cold War days) used to call "The Third World" has become "The Majority World," and they are sending us missionaries. The world center of Christianity has moved east and south in the past 50 years, while much of Europe and the "elite culture" of North America has moved into a "post-Christian" era.

## 3) *Mission Today*

What then is left of the Great Commission for you and me and the churches of today? Do we still accept that Jesus commands us to "make disciples"? Or have we given up on that? Do we think that reforming American culture would be an adequate substitute? Or are the "culture wars" already over, and the Christians lost?

If we want the Church in our culture to survive and flourish, what ought we to do? How would we “make disciples” of Jesus Christ in this culture? What does that mean, anyway? It’s introducing people to the still-living and present Jesus, proclaiming his gracious gospel of reconciliation to God and repentance and forgiveness of sins, calling people to a place where the Spirit can bring real life to the living dead, teaching the way and the truth that Jesus taught, training people to praise and glorify God the Father in all they do.

What is the mechanism of making disciples? It’s a bit like an *apprenticeship*. You become sufficiently close to someone to work with them; you show them how to do it by doing it well yourself; you give them the chance to work and practice themselves; you teach them the skills and the practices; you take an interest in their progress; you applaud their achievements. In the techie-world, it’s sometimes called “hand-holding.”

But Christian discipleship is more than apprenticeship, in very important ways. We are to make people *disciples of Jesus*, not of us. If that means they move beyond our help, so be it. It’s Jesus they are following, not us! Secondly, this apprenticeship is served *in community*. Jesus’ command to “baptize them” is a reminder that his followers are joined together in community, which is where they learn by example, but also where they are supported and loved. Discipleship is a *way of life*, and not a set of learned skills. Thirdly, all disciples in this community are *constantly learning*. There are no master-craftsmen, only a lot of beginners in the Christian faith and life. So teaching is ongoing and essential. Nobody ever knows enough about “all that Jesus commanded,” or is able to obey more than a little of it. All disciples need each other for example and encouragement and support and correction.

What would it mean for us to take seriously “making disciples”? I think we would have to start by asking what value we truly place on Christian faith and the Church. Is it more than lip-service? Or will it all increasingly take second or third place to our real priorities of family, education, career, money? When we are all “so busy,” will there be any time or talent or treasure left over for Christian faith and its expression in the communal life of the church? In other words, do we want this church, or any other church in our area, to be here in (say) 30 years’ time? If so, what will it take to make that happen?

Are we ready to invest ourselves in the future of the church of Jesus Christ? With our very truncated sense of history, made worse every year by our 24/7 “news” channels, we may prove to be the first generation that fails to learn that what we have today was created by people who came before us: that our parents’ generation gave time and talent and treasure to raise buildings and budgets, to teach classes and preach sermons, to supply the needy and visit the sick, to bless the community and spread the gospel. Other people brought us into the Christian community, they made sure we were taught the Bible and the Christian doctrines and a Christian way of life. How much are we ready to invest in the next generation or two? Do we hope they will learn it all by osmosis? What happens to a suburban church that has almost no members between the ages of 20 and 40? How long can it last?

The Church has a *purpose*, as Rick Warren and others have tried to spell out in recent years to a sleepy American Church. A church’s prime purpose is to train people to glorify and praise God in all they do, just as Jesus did. But at least four things a church must do to accomplish that include *evangelism, incorporation, instruction and*

*mission*. People have to be invited to hear the Gospel. They must be made part of the loving community. They must be taught to follow Jesus in loving and serving people inside and outside the community. And they must learn to themselves make new disciples. The process is *cyclic*, it must be repeated over and over by each generation; any church is always only one generation away from closing its doors!

Some disciples will have to obey the Great Commission by “going” to a particular place of call, outside their culture, to bring the gospel to people who have not heard it. (That might be a geographic “going” or a cultural “going” or a generational “going.”) Others will be making disciples “as they are going” – in the normal course of their lives. Every one of us has people in our “circle” with needs that we know can only be met in Jesus Christ: people in need in our families, people we work with, people we know through the schools or through sports, people who live on our street and in our neighborhood, people we often meet in town. As we are going, we are called to make disciples – to invite other people to follow Jesus, as we are trying to do.

We are not ourselves masters, we are disciples. Our Master tells us to make more disciples. Too often we don't. But all it takes sometimes is that simple little invitation – “come to church with us sometime, I know you'll enjoy it.” Someone in this congregation who was invited in recently said, after his first week in church, “This is what I have been looking for all my life...”

Let us pray...