

The Great Commission

Go...make disciples...baptize...teach. Those four verbs constitute what is often called the Great Commission. It's also probably one of the more guilt inducing passages in the gospels. Many of us sort of break out in a sweat when we think about sharing our faith with other people, at least in words. We do better sharing faith in actions, but an actual conversation about God with someone who's a non-church person?

Kinda scary...

At least I always thought it seemed so.

Then I left medicine to become a pastor. When you do that everyone wants to know what happened, whether they are people of faith or not. It's not a story I can tell without telling what I believe God did for me. So I've gotten much better about sharing my own experience of God with people outside the church.

Even so, the first time I did my Facebook live Wednesday evening thing, I thought I was just doing it on the church Facebook page. Soon I was rather startled to see all these other names floating across the screen and I realized I was on my personal page – and that it was set to public. Now I've gotten sort of used to that, too. Practice seems to be the key to talking about faith with people.

Now, my purpose here isn't to harangue people to witness and evangelize. You have enough to deal with right now.

The heart of our faith story is how we've experienced God working in our lives. Mostly this morning I want to talk about what God might be up to in the midst of all we're dealing with now, and how it relates to the Great Commission and to our own baptism.

The story of our life with God of course begins before baptism. God created us and loves us from the moment we come into being. Baptism is not a requirement to get God to love us or claim us. God loves us all, period.

But baptism does do something very important. Baptism is how we are "born again" into life as a disciple of Jesus. We believe that baptism is death and resurrection...it truly changes us.

Baptism begins the process of making us disciples. That process is continued by the presence of the Holy Spirit throughout our lives.

In many churches today, the scripture being read is from John's gospel. It's the passage where Jesus promises the Paraclete, or Advocate, aka the Holy Spirit. Jesus promises that the spirit will come to walk alongside the disciples...to be their comforter and teacher.

From our baptism on, we are being shaped by the spirit. We are shaped by the Spirit who receives the gospel words of new life in Christ and helps them become a part of us.

Through the Holy Spirit, we are shaped by the bread and wine of communion. We are shaped by the beloved saints in the body of Christ in our faith communities.

All of those are the ways Jesus fulfills his promise to be with us to the end of the age.

That spirit regularly greets our doubts with love and assurance. That spirit connects us on the deepest level with other people and with all of creation. That spirit regularly reminds us that being a disciple means loving our neighbor...and even loving our enemy. That spirit draws us to see what loving our neighbor might look like in a given situation.

And that spirit helps us use our gifts and abilities for the sake of the world. The spirit makes us able to see how God is at work through the church...through the people around us...through the gifts given to each of us.

Sometimes I think the hardest thing is to trust that baptism...to trust that it did anything for you...to trust that the Spirit truly is working in you. Trusting our baptism means that we too are empowered by the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit to go, make disciples, baptize and teach.

Well, eventually we can go...right now it's still best to not go any more than necessary. But you get the idea.

That doesn't mean standing on a street corner preaching, or necessarily going door to door. Street corner evangelism may have its place – although I don't believe preaching about condemnation and the fires of hell ever does. But it's not mostly very effective, and it's really not who most mainline Christians are. Our gift is to simply be aware of God's work in our lives and in the world around us, and then be able to talk about it.

I think as we've gone along during this time of limiting activities outside of home and some workplaces, God has been working to help us find new ways to be community...new ways to worship.

But I think what I've been noticing is that now, like during any time of crisis, at least some people are being drawn to God...to a community of faith. I don't know what long term changes God is leading the church to but I'm very curious.

Mostly I'm wondering what your experience has been this past couple of months as far as faith is concerned. What has been your sense of community through the assorted ways of connection available? What has God done for you during all this? What has God drawn you to do for others?

What has strengthened your faith? How has your faith changed? Has your understanding of what it means to be a baptized disciple of Jesus changed?

As you think about God's work in you, remember it doesn't always make us feel all warm and fuzzy. Sometimes God's work makes us uncomfortable. Have you had that experience?

Pentecost is in two weeks. I don't anticipate gathering in person yet – I'm hopeful for June. Pentecost is our celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit and her presence in and amidst us.

I'm hoping some of you would be willing to share a little of your faith experience during the pandemic. Zoom participants can share online, or write something for me to read, anonymously or not. Those not on Zoom can write something and give it to me also. How we've experienced God in the last two months is a story we have to tell. It's in many ways a very different story than past stories, but in one important way it's the same.

The age old story is that we are joined to Christ's death in baptism...the old passes away...and we are joined to Christ in his resurrection. We are continually reborn into new life.

Before and after pandemic may be one of the most striking death and resurrection experiences we'll have had in our lives. And because the whole process is still ongoing, I'm intensely curious what resurrection will look like.

But because of Jesus' promise, I know that through the next transition, we will not be alone. Jesus is with us always.

The Holy Spirit has guided us through this. I would never have expected Zoom to be where I saw the work of the Spirit, but here we are. The Spirit is working through people of all sorts, ordained and not ordained, who have shared devotions, reflections, music, art, photos of nature, all to bring a sense of the spirit to others.

The Holy Spirit has worked through scientists and doctors as they have worked tirelessly to learn more about this virus, even while the pandemic is still unfolding.

The Holy Spirit has worked through people who have tried mightily to follow protective measures to keep people safe, while at the same time trying to find ways to help people with the economic fallout. The Holy Spirit has worked to calm anxieties and lift despair. And in the less comfortable category, the Holy Spirit has shone a light on the weak spots and cracks in ourselves and in our culture.

Part of my devotional reading this past week has been based on Julian of Norwich, a mystic from the 14th Century who wrote on a series of visions she had of the crucified Christ. In that image, what she saw was not the medieval obsession with God's wrath, but instead an unfathomable love.

Perhaps her most famous quote is this "all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well."

I've often struggled with that quote. It doesn't always seem to me like all will be well. Like the disciples on the mountain, I can sometimes be counted in the "some doubted" group.

But really what it means is essentially death and resurrection. If all could be made well from Christ's death, then truly all manner of thing shall be well.

The details of what that "well" will look like are generally not known in advance. But it's the Spirit within us, the same spirit that comes to us in baptism...the spirit that comes to us through the gospel word and through the bread and wine, that same spirit gives us the power to trust that God is working and that all manner of thing will be well.