

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 22, 2014
The Rev. Robert H. Malm

Making Disciples

Exactly 40 years ago during the summer of 1974, I was preparing to enter seminary at the Yale Divinity School (and Kyle, as you prepare this summer to leave Grace as our Music director and enter General Theological Seminary to begin your studies for the Priesthood, I hope 40 years from now, you'll look back and give thanks for your call and your years of service to the Church, as I do today.)

I had just graduated from North Carolina and for June, July and August I was working for my uncle on the cranberry bogs my great-grandfather had carved out of the coastal, sandy forests of southeastern Massachusetts. I wasn't really sure of what I would encounter in seminary and I had no idea if I would or could be ordained, nor did I know what kind of a job, what kind of ministry I would pursue.

I was going to Yale because I wanted to learn more about Jesus; I wanted to learn more about theology, spirituality and the history of Christianity. I wanted to learn about the Church, and specifically the Episcopal Church and what we were doing in a world torn apart by war, drugs, and political scandal.

For 40 years I have asked myself and others:

"What is Jesus trying to teach us?"

and

"What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?"

These are the very concerns Matthew shares with us in his Gospel. Today we hear Jesus teaching his disciples, giving them missionary instructions. Matthew introduces us to Jesus the teacher, the rabbi, the one who has important lessons for us to learn.

Near the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, we read Jesus' most famous teaching, the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew organizes Jesus' teaching into five discourses. Today's Gospel lesson is from the second discourse – "instructions for disciples." Matthew ends his Gospel with the Great Commission, telling his disciples in every age and in every place to "*go and make disciples...baptizing them...and teaching them...*" (28:19, 20) The work of the Church is making disciples, helping people to know and to follow the teaching and the life of Christ.

The most basic truth Jesus teaches is "*God is love...*" How do we share this truth? Hopefully we witness to God's love in every celebration of Holy Communion here at Grace. Our worship proclaims God's love for us. We also proclaim God's love in our outreach, the many ways we try to support others locally and around the world. I would hope all of our programs, all of our ministries witness to this most basic truth, "*God is love...*"

In today's Gospel, we hear Jesus tell the disciples, "*Have no fear...*" and "*do not be afraid.*" Later we read, "*Perfect love casts out fear...*" (1 John 4:18) How do we help others to overcome

fears? How do we deal with our own fears, our anxieties? The teaching in today's Gospel gives us some guidance.

First, we are to "acknowledge" Jesus. Some would say, "confess" or "proclaim" Jesus. This really means to tell the story of Jesus, to tell others how God's love and God's power is present in the story of Jesus. Share how the story of Jesus has become a part of your own story.

Last week at the 10:00 AM service, we celebrated Youth Sunday. Two of our high school students preached and they both did an excellent job. Colby reflected upon his own conversation with Eugene Alford whose 9 year old son, Andrew, died very suddenly in April. How, why does God allow such tragedy? Colby first told Eugene that this must have been part of God's plan. But then Colby realized that wasn't much of an answer. The sudden tragic death of a 9 year old is not God's plan. Breaking my neck is not God's plan. So, then, Colby simply said, "I don't know." It's alright to not know, to live with mystery and doubt. Colby knows the story of Jesus and he shared how this story has become a part of his own story.

And we are to love Jesus; loving Jesus will help us overcome our fears. We are called to love what Jesus loves; people, God's justice, community, peace. Yes, peace; even though in today's Gospel Jesus says, "*I have not come to bring peace, but a sword...*" Telling the story of Jesus, loving Jesus, following Jesus can bring us into conflict with others. Christians are still being persecuted today in parts of our world. Choices we make when we try to follow Christ's call can bring us into conflict. This is the sword Jesus talks about.

Kyle, I'm not sure how your parents reacted to you telling them you were going to Seminary, but I remember how my parents reacted 40 years ago, "You're doing what?" "Why?" "What will you do?" "We're not paying for you to go to Yale..." This was hardly a "sword"; more like a "butter knife." My father wanted me to go to law school. My Mom wanted me to get a real job. Jesus values our family loyalties and responsibilities, but he asks for more. One commentator writes, "Kingdom work...is more controversial and subversive than conventional kindness. If the teacher gives offense, how much more the student?"¹

Following Jesus leads to the cross, to suffering, even to death. Matthew arranged his material to emphasize Jesus' teachings because he wrote to a community undergoing persecution. They needed strength and encouragement. They felt the sharp wounds of the Roman Empire's swords literally slaughtering them. When do we need strength and encouragement? Whenever the pain, the crisis is overwhelming. Whenever we know illness, suffering, and death.

I hope the weeks of summer give us many opportunities to reflect upon what Jesus has already taught us. I hope we might consider what new lessons we might learn. And I hope we will all be committed to making new disciples.

Genesis 21:8-21
Psalm 86:1-9
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

¹ Feasting on the Word; Year A, Volume 3; Westminster Press; 2011; p. 167.