

Great Expectations
A Sermon on Matthew 28:16-20
Trinity Sunday
June 11, 2017

Introduction

Today is Trinity Sunday. The lectionary selected today's text as the Gospel reading because it has a reference to the Trinity: baptize all the nations in the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit. If you had asked Matthew about the doctrine of the Trinity, he wouldn't have known what you were talking about. The word Trinity does not appear in the Bible. It may have been used first by Tertullian, one of the fathers of the church, in the early third century. The Trinity is a church doctrine that evolved from the gospels and was first articulated as a doctrine in the late fourth century.

I will talk about the doctrine of the Trinity at the Table, but for now I want to focus on what this text means for Matthew and, even more important, what it means for the church.

First Move: Disciple All the Nations

Today's text consists of the last five verses in the Gospel of Matthew. It takes place in Matthew's story right after the Resurrection of Jesus. This is a post-Resurrection appearance. It is the first and only time that Jesus appears to the disciples after the Resurrection in Matthew. The lectionary could just as easily have placed this text on the first Sunday after Easter.

Let me refresh your recollection of Matthew's Easter story. Mary preached it two months ago on Easter Sunday. Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, go to the tomb on Easter morning. We don't know who James and Joseph are; they are not the brothers of Jesus. Their mother is later called the other Mary. There is a great earthquake and the angel of the Lord descends from heaven and rolls away the stone. The angel says, "Fear not. I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised." The angel tells the women, "Go quickly and tell the disciples. He is going ahead to Galilee; there you will see him."

The women run from the tomb with fear and great joy. Jesus suddenly appears to them and says, "Greetings." The women fall to their knees and take hold of his feet.

Jesus tells them, "Fear not. Go and tell my brothers to meet me in Galilee; there they will see me."

Matthew does not narrate what happens next, but we assume that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the disciples. The disciples believe the women. The women are the first to proclaim the gospel that Jesus is risen. The disciples believe that Christ is risen without having seen him for themselves. They go to the mountain in Galilee where the women told them to meet Jesus.

That brings us to today's text. Matthew's story is a model of reserve and understatement. He is talking about the risen Christ, but he says nothing about what Jesus looks like. In the other gospels, Jesus shows the disciples the wounds on his hand and on his side. He passes through a wall. The disciples touch him to prove to themselves that Jesus is physically present. Jesus eats with them. We don't have any of that here. Matthew says that the disciples fell on their knees when they saw Jesus, but they hesitated. The Greek word for hesitate could also be translated as wavered or doubted. They believed, but they were not sure what they believed. This could be a similar reaction to doubting Thomas. The rest of Matthew's story focuses totally on what Jesus teaches.

Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Jesus probably refers to himself here as the Son of Man. The Son of Man is described in Chapter 7 of the Book of Daniel. It is Daniel's vision of how God will bring justice to the world. Daniel has a dream about four great beasts that rise up out of the sea. The beasts represent four great empires that conquered Israel: the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians and the Greeks. The most fearsome beast represents Greece under Alexander the Great. The sea represents chaos. The four great beasts have been ruling the world. God is seen as the Ancient One, an old man with a white beard, who sits on a throne, dressed all in white. He opens his judgment book.

Then one like a Son of Man comes in with the clouds and appears before the Ancient One. God gives the Son of Man rule over all the peoples of the earth. Daniel says, "To him was given dominion and glory and kingship that all peoples and nations might serve him. His dominion is an everlasting that shall never pass away." The Son of Man represents humanity. A New World Order replaces the Old World Order. The beasts are replaced by a ruler who is fully human.

Jesus tells the disciples to do three things: First, go and disciple all the nations. The Greek word makes disciple a verb; it could be translated either as disciple all the nations or make disciples of all the nations. Disciple in Greek means a student, a learner, a pupil of a teacher. Plato and Aristotle had disciples. They taught their students how to do philosophy. For a Jewish person, to be a student means to be a

student of a rabbi and study the Bible. It is the story of the mighty acts of God in history. It tells how God expects holy people to live.

The second thing that Jesus tells the disciples to do is, “baptize all the nations in the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit.”

Third, Jesus says, “teach them to guard all that I have commanded you.”

Second Move: An Impossible Commission

Jesus has given the disciples the Great Commission. A commission is a delegation of authority from a leader to a subordinate.

Tom Long, one of the leading preaching professors in America in the last generation, brilliantly captures the gist of the Great Commission. He says that Matthew’s concern is getting the timid followers of Jesus of Nazareth to venture out into a frightening world with a bold gospel.

Long encourages us to look at the scene as comedy and irony. Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Nothing in the surroundings seems to support such a claim. Jesus is speaking on an unnamed mountain somewhere in the backwaters of Galilee. He has a congregation of 11, down one from the week before. And some of them are doubting and not sure what to believe.

Then Jesus gives them three incredible commands: “Go and disciple all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit, teaching them to guard all that I have commanded you.” Jesus and his disciples were all Jewish. The nations can also be translated as Gentiles. In today’s political environment, it could be translated as foreigners. Go to foreigners, people who are different from you, and disciple them. Go to people who speak a different language from you and somehow convince them that the gospel comes from God. Go to rich people and preach about the poor. Go to conservatives and preach the gospel of diversity and non-violence. Go to progressives and preach about obedience and authority. Go to women and pray in the name of the Father. Go to African-Americans and preach about being slaves to Christ.

Jesus has great expectations for the disciples. It seems impossible. It is such an overwhelming commission that the disciples have no choice but to rely on the mercy and strength of God. They know that they cannot do it alone. It is possible only if it is true that Jesus will be with them always until the end of the age. Then Jesus will be acting through them.

We can argue about what really happened in the tomb on Easter Sunday. What would you have seen if you were there and videotaping it? Was there a bodily resurrection or was there what progressives call an Easter event in the consciousness

of the disciples? One thing you cannot question is that the disciples were wildly successful in discipling all the nations. That congregation of 11, not counting the pastor, grew into three billion people today who call themselves Christians. That is an undeniable miracle, a mighty act of God.

How did they do it? First, they asked people for a radical commitment. They baptized all the nations in the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit. The word baptize has lost some its force today. People have come to think of baptism as being initiated into Christianity. Some denominations sprinkle babies with a few drops of water. Disciples, Church of Christ, Baptists and Mennonites dip a child or an adult into the water in a baptistry for a couple of seconds. The Greek verb, βαπτίζω, means to dip or immerse in water. Baptisms in the first century were performed in rivers. Swimming was not popular until the last 300 years. Most people didn't know how to swim before that. They were scared to wade into a river and be dipped under water. Baptism literally symbolized death for them. Paul says it best: baptism is dying to our old way of life and rising to new life in Christ. People don't get the same sense of gravity today; baptism too often has been reduced to something you do to join a church.

The second thing that the disciples did in discipling all nations was to teach them to guard all that Jesus commanded them. When you hear the gospel, it changes you. Not the watered-down stuff that passes for the gospel today. The message in evangelical churches is too often, Be good, believe in Jesus and you will go to heaven. Liberal churches leave out the heaven part and just say, be a nice person. God is love, so you should love your neighbor. People choose churches based on the quality of their children's program and their praise band. Church has become a consumer choice. It is all about me and meeting the needs of my family.

The gospel doesn't work like that. The gospel has rough edges. It doesn't try to accommodate to us. It makes demands on us. It asks for nothing less than our lives.

John Dear preached the gospel when he was here in May. He spoke at the annual dinner for the Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty and at a talk at Edmond Trinity the next morning. He blew people away just by speaking on the Sermon on the Mount, which many believe is the core of the gospel. He didn't have to add anything to it. The Sermon on the Mount is radical stuff. Melissa Rose, a teacher in our Mother's Day Out, said that she needed to go back and read it, that she didn't realize all that was in there. I asked Phyllis Shinn, a visitor, what she thought, and she simply said, "Wonderful." Joel Blomgren said it was like listening to Jesus himself preach.

There are three billion Christians in the world today, but how many disciples? How many of them have actually heard the radical gospel proclaimed? How many Christians take the Sermon on the Mount seriously? Does the gospel change your life? Are you different from before?

That is our challenge as a church. We don't need more Christians. We don't need more members. We need more disciples.

We have been waiting for the kingdom for 2,000 years. God may be waiting for us. The kingdom of God is about transformed hearts and minds. In the kingdom of God, everyone is a disciple.

Third Move: Building Our Own Discipleship

We can begin with ourselves. That is our mission statement as a congregation: Building Disciples and Reaching Out.

I don't think it is credible for us to preach the gospel until we live the gospel. That is why the gospel is so powerful when it is preached by someone like John Dear. We know he has lived it.

Today's text tells us what we need to do. First, we have to die to our old way of living. That is easier for a monk or a nun than for the rest of us. We like our day jobs. We like owning a few nice things.

The image of the body of Christ helps us here. Mary preached on it last week. God has given each of us different gifts. Not all of us are called to be monks and nuns. You could say that monastics are the soul of Christ. They are farther along on the spiritual journey than we are. They can clear their minds of all their own thoughts and desires and open their hearts to God. They pray much of the day.

Some of us are ears. We listen to others as a pastor. Simply listen to people and let them know that they have been heard. Don't be too quick to identify with them and tell them your own experiences. Just listen and sit with them. Then you are bringing the presence of Christ to them.

Some of us are eyes. We see what is going on in the culture and we tell the truth about it. We try to read every book in the library and learn about what is hidden from most people.

Some of us are hearts. We are naturally compassionate. We enjoy being around people, especially children, and caring for them.

Whatever your gifts are, use them. Think of yourself as an athlete for Christ, building up your gifts. When a congregation is full of athletes for Christ, the body of Christ is built up. People can see the kingdom breaking in all around them. That is when the church will grow.

We die to our old ways by living out our baptisms. We rise to new life in Christ by guarding “all that I have commanded you.”

We cannot guard all that Jesus commanded unless we know what Jesus commanded. We have to read the Bible. The New Testament tells us what Jesus said and what the earliest followers of Jesus thought about Jesus. The Old Testament was scripture for Jesus. Luke tells us that Jesus went to the synagogue every Sabbath and heard Scripture. Much of what Jesus said was to fulfill what was written in the Old Testament. We cannot understand Jesus unless we recognize that he was Jewish and unless we familiarize ourselves with the scriptures that he heard in the synagogue.

We have to read the Scripture and live the Scripture. Gandhi read the Sermon on the Mount every day. It had a profound influence on his spirituality. It is one thing to read the Beatitudes and hear the gospel of non violence. It is another thing to live the gospel of non violence.

I think some of you are starting to get that. We have been studying non violence and spirituality on Wednesday nights for several years. John Dear helped us put it all together.

Jesus was serious about this stuff. We should not only read the Beatitudes, we should live the Beatitudes. We should live the Antitheses. We should live the parables. If we open ourselves up to what Jesus taught, it will transform us.

If you want to die to your old way of living, start by turning off the TV. TV is full of sugar and fat; it doesn't feed your soul. Find time each day to read the Bible. Read the Gospel of Mark. That was the first gospel that was written. It takes less than two hours. Read Romans. Mary and I will be preaching on Romans for six weeks this summer. Go back and read 1 Peter. We just finished preaching on that for six weeks. Read Genesis and Exodus. Mary and I will be preaching on the last half of Genesis and all of Exodus for three months beginning in August. Read the Sermon on the Mount, at least once a week.

The more you read the Bible, the more it builds on what you have read before. You see something new every time you read it. You see more connections. It starts to shape the way you live.

Conclusion

The culture said No to Jesus' life and ministry by putting him on a cross. God said Yes to Jesus through the Resurrection and No to the powers that killed him.

Matthew closes his gospel by asking us how we will respond to the Resurrection. Discipleship is at the heart of the Great Commission. It is not focused

on evangelism or mission. It is focused on building disciples. Discipleship is our way of saying Yes. It is our way of participating in the Resurrection.

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