

COMMISSIONED

A SERMON FOR TRINITY SUNDAY

JUNE 15, 2014

First Presbyterian Church

Marianna, Florida

MATTHEW 28:16-20

Ted W. Land, Interim Pastor

We're going backwards this morning. We've already celebrated Pentecost, which was last Sunday, but our story from Scripture this week is from the close of Matthew's gospel, and tells the story of the Ascension of Jesus, and of what we know as the Great Commission, His instructions to His disciples, and indeed to the church, as He left this world.

I suppose going backwards shouldn't be too much of a challenge for the church today. If we look at the influence of the church on society, we are going backwards. The morals and standards of society, the number of people in prisons, the number of people on drugs, and the number of registered sex offenders tell us that Christian behavior is not a standard of our society.

If we look at church attendance, both percentage of the population and raw numbers, we are going backwards. We used to point at Europe, where church attendance was two and three per cent and see that as a sign of dying churches. And today, there are cities, states, in America where church attendance plunges to those depths.

If we look at church membership statistics, we are going backwards. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Southern Baptist Convention both on the average have lost about 40 thousand members a year for the last few years. They don't miss them as much because there are more Southern Baptists than there are Presbyterians but that is still going backwards.

Pentecost was really the day that the apostles and disciples gathered in the Upper Room were empowered to carry out the Great Commission that Jesus gave them on the day of His Ascension.

So, on the Sunday after Pentecost, let's go backwards, and look at what Jesus had to say.

First of all, He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Do you know how much authority there is in heaven and on earth? I don't. But I know a lot of people who think they have authority over parts of this earth. And I know a lot of people who think they are authorities over a particular topic or subject on this earth. And what Jesus says is essentially that there is no higher authority than Himself. Jesus is the ultimate authority, in heaven and on earth.

I do not find that troubling. I find it comforting. Jesus is making it clear that He is indeed as we have known all along God in human flesh. He is the Supreme Being. He is The Higher Power. There is no other authority over Him. And yet at the same time Jesus is stating that He is the Son of God, to whom that authority has been given. Now don't ask me to explain it. The doctrine of the Trinity is so complex, and yet so simple. There is one God, revealed as Three Persons, Father (or Creator), Son (or Christ) and Holy Spirit (or Comforter).

But let's don't get tied up in a doctrinal discussion this morning.

Let's get on to the Great Commission, to what Jesus told us to do.

He begins by saying, "Go..."

In the first chapter of Acts, when Luke re-tells the story of the Ascension, when Jesus is being lifted up into heaven, He disappears into a cloud. And two angels, two men dressed in white, appear, and ask the disciples "Why do you stand gazing up into heaven?"

We are not supposed to stand around gazing into heaven. We are supposed to go out into the world.

And what are we supposed to do when we get there?

Jesus tells us that we are to make disciples of all nations. We are supposed to convert all people to Christ's cause. We are supposed to set such an example before the world that those who encounter us will want to be like us.

Now there are some places in the world today where churches are going forward, increasing in numbers (both attendance and membership), gaining in influence.

In Nepal, once considered a place where there were no Christians, the Christian church is growing. One of the desperate needs there is for seminary professors to teach those who want to go out into the world and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

In Kenya, despite famine, and disease, and war, the Christian church is growing. Indeed, there are more members of the Presbyterian Church in East Africa than there are in the United States of America.

They are making disciples. They are baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Now we have baptisms in this church. But most of those baptisms are babies, infants. We birthed them and we will raise them. And that is as it should be.

But adult baptisms, baptizing those who are joining the church, who are coming to Jesus from the world and not the womb, that is where the challenge is.

So many times “church growth” is a numbers game. We move members around from one church, one geographic region, one denomination, to another. It is those who have never been to church, who are not now in the church, who need not just the church, but the saving grace of Jesus Christ, who are the target group at which we should be aiming. And I’ve got some good news for you! There are more of them now than there have ever been before! There are more of them now than there are of us!

Some folks refer to America as a Christian Nation. It never was. It never has been. It never will be. I suppose that if every person in the United States of American converted to Christianity, then we would be a nation of Christians, but it has never been that way, and it certainly isn’t now. But there was a time when churches were respected, when ministers were trusted, when churches had influence and status and that time has passed.

Leonard Sweet, theologian, seminary professor, and futurist, lives a bi-coastal life. He spends part of the year teaching at a Drew Seminary in New Jersey and the rest of the year teaching at a university in Portland, Oregon.

As he flies back and forth, he sometimes is listed as “the Reverend Sweet” and other times as “Dr. Sweet”, “Professor Sweet”, or even “Dean Sweet”, depending upon who made the reservations. He says the treatment he receives, the attitudes towards him, vary with the title. And the conversations with his seatmates tell him that a professor or dean is much more respected and valued than a clergyman.

I think what this means is the day when we can expect clergymen to go out and knock on doors and bring people in to the church is past. To begin with, there are too many gated communities that wouldn’t allow it. But studies show that the people who join churches are people who are invited to church and indeed brought to church by their friends and their neighbors.

We Presbyterians do a good job of baptizing them once we get them in, but we do a lousy job of getting them in the door. And we don’t always do that great a job discipling them, teaching them. Other denominations, other churches, don’t do a whole lot better. But the Great Commission doesn’t end with baptism. It says that we are to teach them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded us.

The Great Commission essentially tells us to go and do. It doesn’t tell us to sit and wait. It doesn’t tell us to bow and pray. It doesn’t tell us to weep and mourn. It tells us to go and do.

In 1924, a great preacher named G. Campbell Morgan wrote:

“It has become very difficult for Christian people to talk of the things of Christ to each other. They meet together in ordinary life, and they talk of everything except the deepest things of their spiritual life; and that not because they have not deep experience, but because they are unfamiliar with the things of God and his kingdom, but because they have never learned how to help each other in mutual converse concerning them.” (THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, p. 92)

OK, so we can't tell them. We couldn't in 1924, and we can't in 2014. We say that our faith is “private.” Well how does that faith affect the way we live our private lives? We must show our faith in Jesus Christ not in private but in public.

We are told in the Great Commission to Go and do, not go and talk.

Dick Halverson, the late former Chaplain of the United States Senate, has said, “The maximum impact of the church of Jesus Christ in history in the world is not the impact of great and eloquent preachers or denominations, or church hierarchies, or even popes, or priests, or cardinals, or all of the programs that the church has invented. The maximum impact of the church of Jesus Christ is the influence of the aggregate of believers where they are between Sundays.

The measure of effectiveness of the local church is not when the sanctuary is full on Sunday morning, and the programs are in operation. The measure of effectiveness is when the sanctuary is empty, the parking lot is empty, and the programs are not in operation, and people are scattered all over a(n)...area, because where they are Christ is—in them. You are the church.”

You are commissioned; go, and do.

Let us pray.

O Lord we pray that we can indeed go into all the world, and make disciples, and teach them your ways. Help us to go and to do. Amen.

THE HALVERSON BENEDICTION

You go nowhere by accident. Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God has put you there. He has a purpose for your being there. Christ who indwells you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in His grace and love and power. Amen.