

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury  
Sermon – May, 22, 2005  
“Into the World”

Trinity Sunday, May 22, 2005  
2 Corinthians 13: 5-14, Matthew 28: 16-20  
Rev. Lynne Dolan

The Lectionary offers a particular challenge this morning. Today is Trinity Sunday; the only Sunday in the church year designated to honor a doctrine of the church. Although there are places in the Bible where Trinitarian language is used, there is no clearly defined doctrine of the Trinity found in the biblical text. Theologians developed the doctrine of the Trinity much later. However, one of the first clues to the trinity's importance is found in the language Jesus uses to instruct his disciples. In today's gospel lesson in what is known as “the great commission” Jesus says, “go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything I have commanded you.” The great commission is at the very heart of discipleship.

You have to wonder what Jesus was thinking when we witness the disciple's reactions. Admittedly, what Jesus asks his disciples to do seems rather impossible. We who are many centuries removed from the great commission may not even take it seriously, however, as you consider it more closely you begin to wonder what is so great about the “great commission?” In fact, it seems rather like a recipe for disaster. The gospel lesson reports that “the 11 disciples journeyed into Galilee onto the mountain which Jesus had directed them. And upon seeing Jesus they worshipped and some doubted.” First, Jesus entrusts his ministry to only 11 disciples. As one preacher notes, Jesus has already lost 8.3% of his personnel. This can't bode well for his mission. Secondly, we hear that as they gather on the mountain, some worship Jesus and some of them doubt. How can his mission hope to succeed if some of the disciples experience doubt from the get go? Here they have the risen Christ right before them, giving them explicit instructions and promising to be with them always, and they still doubt.

Any coach would tell you that when you send a team onto the field you expect them to believe, in themselves at the very least if not in the ability of the team as a whole to get the job done, despite what reality or statistics say. I imagine those doubting disciples could have taken a page from the game plan of the down three games to none approaching elimination now World Champion Boston Red Sox. Although most of the players likely believed they could win, there had to have been at least one or two of

them who harbored a few doubts. We are human, we are likely to have doubts from time to time, especially when something is particularly important to us. However, this makes no difference to Jesus. To this group of worshipping doubters, Jesus entrusts his newly inaugurated mission. Despite their limited success thus far, these disciples are not exactly our first choice to carry on Jesus' ministry.

For better or worse, the ministry is now in their hands. They will have to figure out what to do next. I find this rather heartening. Instead of being critical of their inability to fulfill Jesus' mission, I am encouraged that Jesus trusted them, failures and all, to be his disciples. He does this because he has already told us that the authority does not rest with the disciples, it rests with Jesus. Jesus tells them "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He sends them into the world to make disciples by baptizing people in the name of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but the authority remains with Jesus.

What exactly does that mean? If we live as faithful disciples, if our witnessing is compelling enough then we would hope that others would want to join us in this work. However, we can not force people to follow Jesus, just as Jesus could not keep his disciples, faithful though they were, from having doubts. Nor should we condemn anyone that follows another path or for that matter, no path at all. The power to make disciples rests with the Triune God whom we worship and adore. Sometimes, we expect something mystical to happen in our baptism. Jesus tells his disciples that the first step on the discipleship journey is baptism. However this is only the beginning, the stepping off point. Baptism is a beginning, an initiation, it is not a completion. There is a life's worth of work to do once the sacrament of baptism has been received.

Our commissioning into discipleship begins with our baptism. Sometimes, what we know to be the Great Commission becomes what Sarah Dylan calls "the great Omission." We think that baptizing folks is enough. She reminds us that Jesus does not instruct us to make churchgoers, people who include religion as one among many respectable civic activities. He calls us to make disciples, people who really follow Jesus as Lord. Now I understand this Lordship language has fallen out of favor in recent years. It can be the source of much heated discussion in theological circles. I understand for example, that the Lord language was hotly debated when hymns were considered for the New Century Hymnal. We use this language cautiously and advisedly because as Sara Dylan reminds us, "too many people have used this language for too long to support their own agendas, ones that undermine the radical freedom which is Christ's gift to us." We hear this dangerous rhetoric creeping into our political debates. Insisting that God is on one side or the other, blessing one person's point of view and not another. I appreciate Jim Wallis insisting during the recent presidential elections that God is neither Democrat nor Republican.

It is not our job to be Lord, that job is already taken. Our job is to do whatever we can to help one another become faithful disciples. That is why we recently changed the name of the Board of Christian Education to the Board of Discipleship Education. We are in the business of doing more than informing or sharing education, we are in the business of forming and molding people of all ages into faithful disciples. Being a disciple means more than coming to church faithfully every Sunday. Jesus did not say “come to church to make disciples” even though this is where most of us are formed and informed as disciples. Jesus sends us out into the world, to meet people where they live, in their own communities. In order to be effective disciples, we must take the time to learn new languages, to humble ourselves, to build lasting relationships based on mutuality and compassion.

I believe we have become complacent in our discipleship. We have accepted an “if we build it they will come” mentality. For many years, we took a passive approach to discipleship and church membership. If you were Christian you were likely invited to join a church in your community by a friendly neighbor or perhaps a helpful coworker. Those times have changed. In that old way of doing things, the mission field was some place far, far away, somewhere exotic where people had never heard of Jesus. We no longer have to travel to far away places to engage in mission work. Our mission field, the place to encounter potential new disciples is now no further than our front door. However, in order for people to encounter this saving God and loving liberator, we need to invite them in. Better yet, we need to cross those imaginary boundaries that have kept us isolated or separated from each other and dare to witness to this Jesus whom we love and serve.

Jesus does not give us a marketing plan with this great commission. He didn't identify a target audience or demographic. He does not assume we should start with any particular group because they will be more receptive to our message. He simply says go, to the ends of the earth, go wherever the Spirit leads you. Share the message with whomever you meet as thoughtfully, lovingly and authentically as you can. The rest is up to the Holy Spirit. Gender doesn't matter, ethnicity isn't a factor, nobody worries about age, economic status is superfluous, religious background isn't a concern, race and sexual orientation aren't issues either. Go to whoever is interested and share the Good News in whatever way is comfortable.

Perhaps you don't understand every theological nuance. Perhaps you wonder whether you can handle this mission or do the right thing. Even in the midst of your doubts or fears, the Spirit will work in your life and people will respond. Jesus actually commissions us to “discipline.” That sounds strange, but the original word in Greek is not a noun, but a verb. Listen again to Jesus' commission. “All authority in heaven and

upon earth has been given to me. Hence, disciplize all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; teaching them to keep all as much as I commanded you. And look! I am with you all the days onto the culmination of the age.”

Making disciples is much easier than “disciplizing” because there is a realistic end-product in mind. You get a new person, you baptize them, you teach them, and then you are done. Mission accomplished. Jesus understands disciplizing as a lifelong process. It doesn’t end with confirmation. It is about growing in our understanding of what being in a relationship with Christ involves. The church’s mission is not about making members of an institution, but of equipping people for discipleship as participants in the living organism that is the body of Christ. Much easier to make members, because once they are in and supporting the mission of the church your work is done. But disciplizing? We have a hard time even saying the word. I suspect the notion of disciplizing makes more than a few of us a bit nervous with its 24-7 call to obedient and faithful discipleship. Disciplizing calls for commitment, for lifelong learning, that’s a lot more than most of us bargained for.

I know that we struggle with this language of discipleship. I know we don’t always understand what Jesus expects of us as the living, breathing body of Christ here in this place, in South Glastonbury in the year 2005. I believe what Jesus hopes of his disciples is that we will continue to doubt, to struggle, to ask questions, to challenge assumptions, and through it all, find ways to spread the Good News. I believe Jesus still hopes his disciples will wrestle with this notion of disciplizing, and embody this hope and grace he entrusted to us. The comfort and the challenge comes with the promise that Jesus is always with us, that he sends the Spirit as our guardian and support.

If Jesus is always with us, then he might expect us to be faithful to his commandments. He may expect us to actually love our neighbor, love and pray for our enemies, forgive not 7 but 70x7 times, be the light of the world, not be anxious about tomorrow, and serve others rather than be served. To take on this vision of disciplizing is a lifelong encounter with the living Christ who is always drawing us out of ourselves and into the world. Richead Carlson comments that

\*To take on this vision means having a pastor who is not an employee that you have hired to do work for the congregation but to have a missional leader who through Word and Sacrament participates in the equipping the discipleship of all.

\*To take on this vision means moving away from an ‘if we build it they will come,’ mindset for mission and embracing the reality that we are the light of the world that is sent into a very dark and hurting world.

\*To take on this mission is to assume the position of follower who not only brings Jesus beyond the walls of the congregation but also obediently goes where Jesus says go and lives where Jesus says live.

Are we ready for this? I wonder if the original 11 disciples were ready for Jesus' mission when they trudged up to that mountain in Galilee. Their doubt is probably an indication of their alarm, even in the midst of their worshipping. We too might doubt the success of the mission Jesus continues to place before us. However, Jesus never let a few doubts stop him from establishing his mission or including even the most blatant doubters among his most trusted disciples. This disciplizing work is tough. May we therefore graciously and thankfully, receive the blessing that Paul bestowed upon those difficult and wrangling disciples in Corinth: "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." What more do we need? May it be so! Amen

Source:

Dylan's blog for Trinity Sunday, Year A

Richard Carlson, "What was Jesus Thinking?" (a sermon on the great commission.), Trinity Sunday/Year A, May 22, 2005.