

May 12, 2024

Lesson 11: Our Mission

Scripture: Matthew 28: 16-20

Context:

Today we continue our spring curriculum, “Encounters in Prayer and Love,” where we look at how the spiritual discipline of prayer illuminates God’s presence in our lives. Today we continue our unit titled “Empowering Spirit,” as we examine how Jesus and the Holy Spirit led people to focus on spreading the gospel to languages where others could understand the gift of faith and grace. Today’s lesson will be to accept how the Great Commission Jesus gave to the eleven disciples is our work as well.

Today’s scripture lesson comes from the gospel of Matthew. This climatic story of Jesus’ ascension to the heavens comes as part of the resurrection narratives. Although Luke limits Jesus’ resurrection appearances to the Jerusalem area, Matthew follows Mark in locating the commissioning encounter in Galilee.¹ Mountains play a significant role in Jesus’ ministry and thus it fits for his final instruction to come on a mountain.

When the disciples arrive there, they worship him. Yet as with most of the resurrection narratives, there is doubt as to what is happening. Thus, Jesus takes the moment to assail their doubts and give them instruction. While the words are few, the statements Jesus makes are bold and reveal much about his identity. Jesus begins with naming his authority as the Christ, the one by whom “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”² Jesus is Lord when he had them follow him and Jesus will be Lord forevermore.

Jesus follows this strong Christological assertion with a commission. He instructs them to go and make disciples of all nations. The term “all nations,” is tied to the word *ethne*, which means non-Jewish individuals, spreading the focus of the gospel.³ This also helps to negate other claims in Jesus’ ministry where the focus would have been on the Jewish mission. The Great Commission is meant to draw the circle wider for those who want to follow Jesus and feel God at work in their lives.

The final part of the Great Commission is a command for the disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. What is interesting is the absence of faith as a precondition for baptism. The tense of the participles (“baptizing,” “teaching”), does not indicate the Gentiles must be discipled before they are baptized, or baptized before they are taught.⁴ Baptism is part of the journey and Jesus’ words indicate this will be part of a lifelong journey. Jesus closes this very short commissioning with the reminder of how Jesus will always be with them, both now and to the end of the present age. Jesus will not leave them as they figure out the journey together to be his disciples.

¹ Hare, Douglas R.A. “Matthew.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 332.

² Matthew 28:18, NRSV.

³ Hare, “Matthew,” 333.

⁴ Ibid. 334.

Application

For those who grew up in the church, there are certain days and services which stand out. You remember perhaps special liturgical celebrations like Advent, Christmas, Holy Week, and Pentecost. You might also remember special annual traditions like Vacation Bible School where your church became a luau party or a rocket ship depending on the curriculum of the year. Every now and then, you might remember a special baptism or confirmation service, for those close to you and perhaps your own.

The one to come to my mind when I read this passage were the times when people were “commissioned.” These commissioning moments would usually come at the end of the service as a Response to the Word. They ranged from the Lay Leadership starting a new year of leadership or of a mission team getting ready to repair homes in rural poor areas near us or somewhere more exotic like a Latin American or South American country. I remember watching as everyday people stood or made their way to the altar. There was always an initial hush as the people were lifted before the congregation. Sometimes, there were hands laid upon them and you could see people perhaps crying especially if the commissioning involved some traveling. And the liturgy always included some focus on being a disciple in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

For my young mind and heart, I was seeing a glimpse into commissioning, of disciples hearing the word “go” and stepping up to use gifts and graces in various places. As a recipient of commissioning services, I am always struck by the power of people praying for you and then your own self recognizing you are promising to do something for the honor and glory of God. There is joy and yet there is always a healthy trepidation as being commissioned by God is an honor and a privilege.

What stands out to me in these occasions is how some of these moments of commissioning are not just for those who are in ordained ministry. Commissioning is meant for all the people of God to hear God’s call to serve the Lord. Nowhere in this text does Jesus tell the eleven how some of them get off the hook. The Lord tells all of them they are to go forth and to join in the kingdom work where God is already moving. The same goes for us today as those commissioned by Jesus to go forth and seek the ways we are to labor in God’s kingdom.

One of the greatest opportunities we have in ministry is to know as commissioned disciples of Jesus is how we may not always get everything right and we may even fail in some of the things we try. Yet the greater gift we have as we live into our commissioning from God is we learn. We learn how discipleship and ministry is always evolving and how we are called to both adapt and to also be challenged. It is through those experiences God does some of God’s best work. Yet we will never learn those things unless we try.

I was recently reflecting on a project I engaged in where not everything went as I planned. The experience was not fun and yet I learned more about myself as well as gifts God had given me. And in this experience, I learned how God can work through all sorts of situations to help us grow and bloom. You cannot get better if you do not have mistaken or hiccups along the way. We become sharper, more attentive, and we see how God helps us to try new things and even more so, to ask more questions about how we can be better disciples of Jesus Christ.

If there is anything I am coming to appreciate more, it is people who try to do something with good intentions. People may not always get things right, yet God can work through all of us to do things for the kingdom. In the Great Commission, Jesus doesn’t give a formula for perfection. Instead, Jesus gives a commission focused on discipleship, of learning and growing

with the grace of God covering us each step of the way. Today we hear the good news of how Jesus invites us to go forth and be with him as he makes disciples out of others and out of us.

Why do you think the Great Commission is so important to the church? When was a time you were commissioned to do something? Can you think of a time you learned from something which “failed?” How could God be at work in you to do something for the Lord? Who are people you see as strong and devoted disciples; what makes them stand out to you?

Rev. Dr. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009