

Our Marching Orders

Matthew 28:16-20

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 14, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20, NRSV)



It's critical that we remember the context here at the end of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus has been resurrected. He was dead for three days. Now he is no longer dead. And he didn't just cheat death; he conquered death. He has not only been resuscitated to his former state for a time until he dies again, but resurrected to his glorified state for eternity. And *his* resurrection was just the beginning. Easter lit the fuse on God's restoration plan for all of creation. God's Kingdom had come, was coming, and would in time come in all its fullness. Sin forgiven. Relationships healed. People made whole. Nature restored. Death vanquished. All this and more was set in motion when Jesus rose from the dead.

So imagine the anticipation! When Jesus' disciples, following his instructions, go to the mountain in Galilee to wait for him, we can only imagine the emotions which must have been swirling inside of them. How hard it must have been to wait. And yet they must wait. You see, when it comes to carrying out the mission of God's Kingdom, it is never wise to charge out ahead of Jesus. Remember when you were a kid and you'd build a sandcastle at the beach, maybe even an impressive sandcastle. You work for hours on your creation. But then the tide rises. The waves creep closer and closer. In no time at all the ocean will completely erase all your work, every last grain of sand back to where it was before. Similar results will occur whenever we set out, even with the best of intentions, to do the work of Christ ahead of Christ, or when we set out to do work in the name of Christ that is not work he intends for us to do. Wise disciples always wait.

Well, when Jesus arrives Matthew tells us that “[**the disciples**] **worshipped him; but some doubted.**” Again, these men had just witnessed the resurrection.

Now the resurrected Christ is standing there right in front of them. And some are still doubting?! Doesn't that make you feel better? I'm so glad Matthew didn't leave that part out. Christians are, at the very same time, believers *and* doubters, adoring *and* wondering, trusting *and* questioning.¹ If you find that mixture in yourself, be encouraged. It does not disqualify you from following Christ.

In fact, as Jesus sees them in their doubt he does not step away but comes near to them. He is about to ascend to heaven, to the right hand of his Father. They are about to be sent out to meet the Holy Spirit who will empower them and guide them to join in the establishment of God's Kingdom in this world, heaven coming to earth! The next words out of Jesus' mouth are no doubt going to be worth capturing. This is the moment for marching orders, for clarity of vision, for a great commission, and not only for them but for all followers of Christ, even doubt-filled followers, from that moment forward.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” That's how Jesus begins. Just think about what he is saying. I don't have complete authority over even one little area of my life. I don't even have authority over my own body. I get sick when I don't want to get sick, hurt when I don't want to get hurt, ache in places now I never used to ache. In contrast, Jesus declares here that he has all-encompassing authority over everything in creation. He is the Chief Executive Officer of the universe. As one commentator puts it, all spiritual, metaphysical, philosophical, and religious power – everything in heaven – *and* all social, physical, political, and economic power – everything on earth – belongs to Christ.² He's got the whole world in his hands!³

This is Jesus' way of saying to his disciples, then and now, “Whatever it is that I'm about to ask you to do is something that you, with my help, are going to be able

¹ I'm borrowing words here from Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 2 (Eerdmans, 1990), 810.

² Bruner, 810.

³ Ephesians 1:22-23 declares, **“And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”**

to do. If I ask you to make everything in world purple and orange, you will be able to do that because I am in complete authority over color, and light, and molecular structure – all of it!” If even death is now subject to Christ, everything is subject to Christ. So if we have faith, we can do whatever it is Jesus asks us to do. Knowing this inspired Paul to write in Philippians 4:13, **“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”**⁴ Disciples of Jesus should be filled with boundless confidence as they follow him out into the world to do what he asks and empowers them to do.

“Therefore...” Jesus says. Pay attention to that word. It’s not a throwaway word. It’s pivotal.⁵ Everything in creation is under the authority of Jesus, *therefore* **“go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”** And there it is. The marching orders for the church, God’s vision simplified and clarified, our great commission. It’s enormous, but it’s given by one who has death on a leash.

Quick grammar lesson here as we look at these loaded verses. There are four verbs here in Jesus’ command: go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. But you need to see that the main verb in the marching orders is ‘make disciples’. The ‘go’ tells us where, out in the world. The ‘baptize’ and ‘teach’ tell us how. The ‘make disciples’ tells us what.⁶ Jesus’ marching orders here have to do with disciple-making, and it’s very important that you understand this. *Discipleship is the main work of the church, the most important thing that we are to be doing.* That means that if the church is expending it’s time and energy and resources on activities that do not involve making disciples in the way Jesus says here we are to make disciples, we are simply building sandcastles on a beach at low tide and even religious sandcastles will be washed away in short order. Jesus’ mission in this world is to build disciples and the church, if it wants to share in Jesus’ mission, must make disciple-making its central focus.

Along these lines, two questions arise right away.

First, what is a disciple? That’s not a word we use much outside the church these days. Even within the church lots of us aren’t sure what it means to be a disciple.

⁴ NRSV

⁵ Our seminary professor always encouraged us to notice the word “therefore” in scripture and to ask what it is there for.

⁶ You could translate the verse this way: “As you go, be about making disciples, and you do that by baptizing and teaching.”

My brother-in-law trained to be a woodworker. His training, essentially, was to apprentice a master woodworker. That meant that for years he literally stood by this other man’s side, watching, listening, helping, practicing, and receiving correction when he needed it along the way. Basically, he tried to learn what the master woodworker would do with his piece of wood if the master woodworker were in his shoes.

That’s basically what a disciple is, an apprentice. So a disciple of Jesus is somebody who follows Jesus wherever Jesus goes to learn from Jesus how to live this life. What’s unique about an apprenticeship with Jesus, of course, is how comprehensive it is. My brother-in-law’s apprenticeship started and ended at the woodshop. His woodworking mentor didn’t also train him in how to be a good husband, how to manage his finances, how to deal with his enemies, or how to practice compassion with the poor. That would have been outside his area of expertise. But with Jesus, there is *nothing* outside his area of expertise! Therefore, a disciple of Jesus is somebody who is asking, “What would Jesus do if he were in my shoes?” and is asking that question in every moment and in every circumstance. All authority in heaven and earth belongs to the one we follow if we are following Jesus!

So, if a disciple is a man or woman who seeks to follow after Jesus in all things, how do we make disciples? That’s the second question, and Jesus is surprisingly clear here with his answer. According to Jesus, there are two components to making disciples. First, we baptize. Second, we teach. Let’s take these one at a time.

“Baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” That’s the first component of disciple-making. Baptism, remember, is the sacrament of initiation. It’s a beginning. When a person comes to place their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, comes to recognize and trust that Christ is the answer to every ultimate question and the ultimate satisfaction to every longing of the soul, then he or she is to be baptized. The water of baptism points us to cleansing, that an old life has been washed away and a new life restored in its place. Baptism marks us as God’s people, forgiven, beloved and favored.

Furthermore, Jesus is teaching us something very important here when he specifies that we are to be baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When we become Christians we come to share in the very life of God. Not in the sense that we become divine, as some would teach, but in the sense that the self-giving, loving, shared community of our one God who is mysteriously revealed to us in three persons, is a life we get to share, with all its benefits.

We are children of a new Father. We are siblings of our brother, Christ. We are constant companions of God through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. In baptism we are welcomed in as eternal members of God's family. It's remarkable!

Now, the fact that making disciples involves baptizing people makes clear why Jesus begins his marching orders with the word "Go!" I mean, who can we baptize if we just stay to ourselves in the church? Babies. That's about it. The call for disciples to make others disciples, therefore, begins with the call for the church *to go beyond itself* out into the world to share the gospel with people who do not yet believe and who, therefore, are not yet saved. Certainly that means loving and serving people with our actions because people won't care what we know until they know that we care. But at some point we have to actually tell people the message. Paul writes in Romans 10:13-15, **"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?"**⁷

When was the last time you shared the gospel with somebody who was not a Christian and then watched Christ open their heart to receive him so that they believed and were ready to be baptized? As I'm going to try to make clear in a minute, there is no reason why God should not be using every last one of us in this way because, as Jesus is making clear here, this is the main work of the church.

Let me make something else clear. Baptism is no causal activity. I had somebody call me recently who had not been in the church for years but had since had a couple children and wanted those children to be baptized. In talking to her it became clear, however, that she herself hadn't been following Christ in her life for years, if ever. Still, she felt like baptism was something which would be a good thing for her children. It can't hurt, right? Well, I had to lovingly and gently explain to her what baptism meant. When a person is baptized that person is committing to submit to Christ's lordship in every aspect of his or her life. It's a radical commitment, the most radical commitment of all. Similarly, when parents baptize their children they are solemnly promising to make the nurturing of their children in the Christian faith their *all-consuming priority* as parents.

You see, baptism is not just insurance we get to guarantee we go to heaven when we die. It's got

nothing to do with that actually. So I respected this woman for realizing that this was not what she was ready to do, that baptism of her children at this point made absolutely no sense because that wasn't a commitment she was ready to make. Baptism never makes sense unless the person being baptized, or the parent bringing the child for baptism, is ready to claim complete allegiance to Christ. Do you realize we have no authority to baptize people in the church who have not come to this place of surrender? When we do, we do great damage and shouldn't be surprised when later on baptized people in the church who have never really given themselves to Christ begin to bristle constantly at the teachings of Christ which radically aim to transform their lives. This was not something they ever signed up for!

This is why making disciples is not just about baptism. That's only the first step. Jesus is clear, disciple-making also involves the lifelong journey of helping baptized men and women learn to obey everything he commanded us. I mean, if you're willing to trust Christ at the outset, you should be willing to trust him along the way? You would never claim to trust a doctor, teacher or auto mechanic whose directions you are not willing to follow. No different with Jesus!

Notice, by the way, Jesus didn't say that we are to teach people everything he commanded, but that we are to teach people to *obey* everything he commanded! That's a big difference! It's been said that sometimes we want an 'information booth' version of discipleship. Show up on Sundays, receive a download of information, and spend the rest of the week better informed but, otherwise, largely unchanged.⁸ That's not discipleship. Christian discipleship is never simply about information but always ultimately about transformation! It's actually not that impressive to memorize the 10 Commandments. It's not a bad idea to do so, but nearly anybody can do that in an afternoon. But try living by the 10 Commandments! More than that, try living out all the things Jesus taught his disciples – confessing your sin, forgiving those who hurt you, loving your enemies, blessing those who curse you, walking the second mile with your oppressors, refusing to lust, speaking the truth always, giving away what you don't need, loving all your neighbors as much as you love yourself, loving God above all else. Nobody learns to live like this in an afternoon.

As you have probably heard, it's estimated that it takes about 10,000 hours to master one skill in life. Assuming you have the raw talent to begin with, it takes that long to become a concert pianist, a

⁷ NRSV

⁸ Mark Dever, *Understanding the Great Commission* (B&H Publishing, 2016), 23.

professional athlete, a master woodworker. How long then do you think it takes to become a master of every aspect of life, somebody who is living like God intended you to live in every moment and every circumstance? A lifetime is not nearly long enough. But that is the road of discipleship baptized men and women are called to set out on. The idea that in baptism we simply enjoy Jesus' love and forgiveness but then go on living our lives in ways that demonstrate that we don't really want much to do with him, is an idea that is never once found in scripture.

So let me make sure this is clear. As we go out into the world, making disciples who are baptized into the life and community of God, and then set on a journey of complete conformity to Christ's teachings, is the central and most important work of the church. Disciples of Jesus are men and women who are giving their lives to making other disciples of Jesus. The word 'Christian' is found 3 times in the New Testament. The word 'disciple' is found 269 times! The New Testament is a book about disciples, by disciples, for disciples!⁹ Therefore, if we are not seeking to make disciples as Jesus models and empowers us to do so, then by definition we are not living as disciples.

Now, I know that some of us, maybe most of us, are sitting here thinking, "I can't do this. I can't share the gospel with others in ways that lead them to be baptized as Christians and then spend my life teaching them to obey everything that Jesus commanded us. I'm just an ordinary member of the church!" But that's the thing! Jesus' marching orders here are given to ordinary members of the church. The call is to go into all nations and make disciples. These eleven men couldn't possibly have done that by themselves, nor could all the pastors and missionaries in history. Only the church as a whole can do this. Jesus is giving these marching orders to you and to me just as much as he gave them to Peter, John, James and the rest of them on that mountaintop that day.

But here's good news. We don't go alone. Don't forget how the text ends. **"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."** The Chief Executive Officer of the Universe is with us in all of it! Jesus' marching orders to us are framed by his omnipotence (he's all powerful!) and his omnipresence (he's everywhere at all times!). We can build sandcastles on our own. We cannot build the Kingdom of God on our own. But we don't have to! Christ goes before us and

behind us, with us and in us, above us and beneath us. And the promise is that it is just a matter of time until all things will be set right. The end of all wars and division. No more poverty and injustice. Not only souls, but bodies redeemed as well. A new heaven and a new earth with all things in all places healed for all time.

Don't you want to give your life to this mission, as daunting as it sounds? What are you giving your life to today which is better than this? I pray you will find yourself inspired today, that you will reexamine Jesus' marching orders here and say, "Yes! That's right! This is what I was called to give my life to!"

Here's the hard part. Is this happening in the church right now? How many of us are actively sharing the gospel with people we know who are not Christians and seeing God use us to lead them to a profession of faith in Christ that results in baptism? How many of us are actively and intentionally teaching other disciples coming up behind us in the faith how to obey everything that Jesus commanded us? Who specifically are you sharing your faith with and discipling right now?

Here's the reality. The contemporary western church, some time ago, made discipleship in the church optional, extra credit, an advanced track for those especially eager Christians among us. In other words, it is absolutely commonplace these days to be a member of a congregation without finding yourself a part of a comprehensive apprenticeship where you are learning to obey everything Jesus commanded and helping others to do the same. In his book, *The Great Omission*, Dallas Willard bluntly puts it this way: "Churches are filled with undisciplined disciples...and most problems in the contemporary church can be explained by the fact that the members have never decided to follow Christ"¹⁰, when following Christ means systematically and progressively rearranging all the affairs of your life around Christ's teaching and leading.

If the church were filled with actual disciples, it would become a very uncomfortable place for such undisciplined disciples. If you show up in worship on Sunday morning as your casual religious duty in a congregation full of people who are, unlike you, committed to these marching orders of Jesus, you will be welcome there but you may not like it very much because your life will stand out in sharp contrast to the lives of those around you who are truly living as disciples. It's not that they are perfect people, or even better or more moral people than you are. They may not be. But they are sold out

⁹ Dallas Willard, "Discipleship: For Super-Christians Only?", *Christianity Today*, October 10, 1980. Read this excellent article in full at https://rcwollan.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/dwillard_discipleship_article.pdf

¹⁰ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*, (Harper Publishers, 2006), 5.

to a mission in life that is vastly different to whatever other mission you have sold out to.

This is a hard word. It's a hard word for me to hear. But I believe we have to hear it. And if we're willing to hear it, we will know it's true. The lack of discipleship in the contemporary church is an epidemic problem that has infected our congregation as it has most every other congregation around us. This is the temperature in the room and I'm afraid that to some degree we have acclimated to it. And for those of you who may want to challenge me here, let me simply ask again. How many of us are actively sharing the gospel with people we know who are not Christians and seeing God use us to lead them to a profession of faith in Christ that results in baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? How many of us are actively and intentionally teaching other disciples coming up behind us in the faith how to obey everything that Jesus commanded us? Some of us are. But if this is *the main work of the church* (i.e. our marching orders!), it has to be more than just some of us or we are running the risk of spending our time and energy building sandcastles on a beach at low tide.

Today, however, I am hopeful. I really am. Along with many others in many corners of the church these days, there are a number of us here in this congregation, including many of us in leadership, who are waking up to this crisis. There is a move of the Spirit drawing the contemporary church back to its original marching orders. As you may know, many of us here have already committed a great deal of time, energy, study, reflection, training, and even resources, to learning how we can become a church that lives up that middle part of our own mission statement which says we are "a community loving Christ, *building disciples*, serving all." This is where God is leading us. It's partly why I share this message with you today, on Stewardship Commitment Sunday, in hopes that you might be encouraged to know how the financial resources we pledge today will be used in the months to come. I pray you are inspired, as I am inspired, by where the Spirit seems to be leading us.

I'll be honest, this effort is by far the hardest thing I've ever been a part of in all my years in ministry in the church. Nothing even comes close. Part of that, I think, has to do with the spiritual resistance we are bound to face when we seek to live out Jesus' most pressing marching orders. Part of it is also that following Jesus is just plain hard. There is a heavy cost to discipleship, to committing in this life to follow Jesus above all and to help others to the same. But the cost of non-discipleship is even greater. To quote Dallas Willard again, "Non-discipleship costs abiding in peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees

everything in the light of God's overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly the abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring."¹¹

Here's my prayer. I pray this nearly every morning. I pray that God would show us in this congregation how to join him in the most important work he has ever given us to do and that we – not just a few of us but many of us! – would joyfully pour everything we have into this work because we know that there is literally nothing to which we could ever give our lives that would be better than allowing Christ to free us and transform us so that our lives could in turn be used to set free and transform others as well. This is my prayer, and these days it's mostly what I pray about when I pray for the church.

Amen.

✱ ✱ ✱ ✱ ✱ ✱ ✱

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 28:18-20 again. Remember the context, that this happens right after Jesus' resurrection and just before his ascension. What stands out to you from this passage?
2. What do you make of the fact that these disciples had the resurrected Jesus right in front of them (in the flesh!) yet still doubted? Can you relate?
3. When Jesus commands his disciples to go and make more disciples. What does it mean to you to make disciples? What does that look like in day to day life?
4. Do you agree with the assessment that churches these days are filled with "undisciplined disciples"?
5. What about you? Are you personally and actively sharing the gospel with people you know who are not Christians and seeing God use you to lead them to a profession of faith in Christ that results in baptism? Are you actively and intentionally teaching other disciples coming up behind you in the faith how to obey everything that Jesus commanded us?

¹¹ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 9.

6. Do you believe that these are, in fact, your marching orders? Do you believe you are somebody who, with God's help, can carry out these marching orders?
7. Do you live day to day with the boundless confidence that should come with knowing that all authority is in Christ's hands and he is always with us? Why or why not?
8. What is one specific way you have heard Christ calling you to live differently as a result of this message? What are you going to do in response?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What do you think is the most important thing that God wants us to do on this earth?