

Dancing Together

FPCS, June 19, 2011

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore 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 behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

I don't know if you all know this, but today is another a big day in the liturgical life of the church. Wait, but last week was Pentecost, right? It's not time yet for World Communion Sunday or All Saints... That's right friends, hold on to your hats, it's Trinity Sunday. Set smack dab in the midst of the summer lull, maybe the lectionary committee knew that only those hard-core elements that stick around in the summer were prepared for the spectacle that is Trinity Sunday.

And what better text for a day when pastors near and far grapple with some, not-too-confusing but theologically accurate way to fit into twenty minutes a witty and engaging explanation of one of the most baffling and mysterious statements of our faith. All while walking a very fine line to keep the unity and the tri-unity of our God in tact. God who is of one essence and three persons, a doctrine it took the church years to iron out and only minutes for us to scratch our heads and say, huh? I have sympathy for those tasked with putting together our Revised Common Lectionary, for there are only a few places in the Bible where we can turn to get even a glimpse of our triune God- Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost mentioned all together as one. And this familiar story of Jesus and his disciples, the one we know as the Great Commissioning, this is one of those.

Amidst all of the drama and heart-ache of crucifixion, while the guards and chief priests plot to cover up the mysterious disappearance from the tomb, our story begins as the disciples follow the instructions of the women who first saw Jesus and head to Galilee.

Matthew's account keeps these post-resurrection sightings brief. There is no chance to meet Jesus along the roadside and to break bread with him as in Luke. There are no sightings of Jesus on the riverbank, nor breakfast awaiting

them as they row to shore as in John. Here, Jesus meets the disciples where he told them to go and keeps his instructions brief. Brief, but significant.

In my former life of hosting high school and middle school youth to participate in urban mission opportunities, I spent some of our time together each day, trying to put their activities into context: What are we doing when we sort clothes for a clothing closet? Why do we take time after preparing the meal to share in eating it alongside the residents at a homeless shelter? Why does the church spend the energy to run a summer reading camp for low-income kids?

One of the things I did was to gather a small cadre of Scripture texts that would help me point towards mission as a calling, a responsibility of those of us who follow Jesus. When gathering those texts I purposefully steered clear of this particular commissioning story in Matthew; preferring instead the neighborly actions of mercy by a Samaritan in Luke, and the vision for fasting from the prophet Isaiah that includes breaking the bonds of oppression and bringing the poor into your house.

I steered clear of this Great Commissioning because I read it as the very instruction to take on the mindset that I was hoping to educate away from. One that still trips me up at times when I want to know what we will do in service for others. What we will build, or teach, or plant. *Us* going to *them*. "Go and make disciples of *them*", "baptize *them*", "teach *them*". *We* bring Jesus to *them*. This understanding of mission as conversion was not the mission that I felt the church being called to then, and it is still not the mission I feel the church being called to engage now. In fact, this understanding of mission has weighed upon the church for far too many years.

I've been thinking about this all again recently because two Sundays ago our Bangladesh travelers met with Les and Cindy Morgan to go over some final details and plans for their pilgrimage that will begin at the end of this month. A more developed and faithful practice of mission than that of the Morgan's is, I am sure, hard to find. After twenty-three years serving in rural and now in urban Bangladesh, these two formed without hesitation the simple but difficult equation of the church in mission. Three words: Mission equals relationship. This is where we began our conversation as a group. Mission equals relationship- in this particular context relationship with God, with one another, with the beggars on the street, with the bishops of the Church of Bangladesh, with the Muslim families who will welcome our travelers into their homes for a meal and conversation.

With this equation in my head, with the trappings of Trinity Sunday rolling around, I returned this week to Jesus and his disciples on that mountain in Galilee—that text I had spent so much time feeling just a little uncomfortable about—and something was different this time through.

Jesus is already there. The disciples go where Jesus is already. They follow his instruction and he meets them there.

Being sent out, mission whether it's in our backyard or in Bangladesh, is about meeting Christ where he already is (where he already has been); the disciples are not bringing him to a place where he is not already. The psalmist stands in awe of this, reminds us that there is no place where God has not already been.

*“How majestic is your name in all the earth. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, **who are we that you are mindful of us?**”*

One of the other readings for this morning is the initial creation story in Genesis; where God creates, and it is good. God is before *all* things. God is at the beginning of *all* things. This same God stands here before the disciples, those who worship and those who doubt, and makes a bold promise; *“Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”*.

Not only has God *been* before, God *is now*, and God *will be*. We heard this with the rushing of the wind into that upper room at Pentecost. God does not desert the disciples upon commissioning, but stays with them. Behold, the trinity. And on Trinity Sunday to boot. Oftentimes we turn to this passage on Trinity Sunday for the reason I gave early on- it's one of the few places we hear the Trinitarian formula: that one so familiar to us as we gather around that font, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Yet, there's more here than just merely the formula.

It's important for us to remember that for the gospel writer, concern about teaching proper trinitarian theology wasn't at the top of the list, because the presiding issue for the small and struggling group of believers at the time was making sure the word spread of the resurrected Lord. And shockingly, they're gathered in Galilee, which means that it's not only Jews who are invited to hear this message, but Gentiles as well. *All the nations*. So, the final words of Jesus are a commissioning to those very believers. All of whom worshiped, but some of whom doubted, and *still* Jesus sends them out. He doesn't first recommend they get their stories straight *and then* go out. He sends them

from there, doubts and all. Instead of being sent out with a firm understanding of Trinitarian theology, they are sent to act as Jesus has embodied for them: with the reassurances of the psalmist ringing in their ears of God before, with the reassurances of the one who stands among them with authority here and now, and with the reassurances of the resurrected Lord who promises to be with them to the end of the age.

One of the prevailing images of the trinity in the Eastern Orthodox tradition is of a dance- between God- Father, Son and Holy God: God our Creator, God our Redeemer, and God our Sustainer. This is a dance of relationship, with not one indivisible from the other, but in mutuality. Dancing together.

Two years ago a group from our church traveled to Malawi to build relationships and work with Joy to the World Ministries in the remote Dzuwa Village. Many of you remember, this was a group of parents and teenagers, older and younger, all traveling and not knowing what to expect once we arrived. What are we *to do?*: A question I know many of us asked at one point or another. In fact we learned quickly, it was hard to know what to expect even for the next day. This is what makes mission as relationship different, more difficult in some ways, because relationships are hard to plan for and impossible to schedule.

Pen has preached before about the day we had listed on the itinerary given to us as “Door-to-Door Evangelism”, and then “Outdoor Evangelism”. For those of us, myself included, who get a little twitchy at the notion of evangelism (we’re back to that *us* bringing to *them* thing I mentioned earlier), there was quite some anxiety going in. Much of that was relieved when we realized that this, too, was about creating relationship; when we saw the various ones among us pull up their favorite Scriptures and talk about what they meant to them. All of this culminated in an outdoor gathering with music and introductions, proclamation and dancing.

I have a video of several in our group- Lauren Rogers, Anne and Emily Booker, Kaitlyn Stevens, Molly Hiers, and Edward Stroud among others, all clustered together in the midst of Malawians of all ages- laughing and dancing their hearts out to one song after another. That is one of the joy-filled images that sticks with me even two years later, and one I expect I’ll have for a long time. This is the kind of dancing I imagine God to be involved in and calling us to.

Dancing together, in mutuality, without divisiveness- letting go of *us* and *them*. This is no middle school dance where some are in and some are out, where it

feels safer to stick to the side of the wall than to venture out. To be made in the image of God is to be in relationship, participating in this dance together- no matter how silly our moves are, over our protestations about not being able to dance, even letting our stiff Presbyterian joints loose to the music, inviting and despite of our doubts.

Jesus commissions his disciples from that mountain in Galilee- those who worshipped *and* those who doubted- to continue to live in this image that he has embodied for them. Yes, they are sent to teach. Yes they are sent to baptize. Yes, they are sent to make disciples. We also share in this commission. But the difference that occurred to me approaching this text this time, is that all of these things are done in relationship with others. In teaching others, we are drawn into relationship where we also can learn. In baptizing, we initiate relationship by making promises to the new believer as a community of faith and enfolding them into the triune life of God. In making disciples we recognize the relationship and presence of God already at work- inviting all to join the dance.

What Jesus is asking of his disciples- those who worship and those who doubt- is outrageous— go to the ends of the earth to teach, to baptize, to make disciples of all nations. They can't do this on their own without relying on the authority Jesus mentions here, the mercy and the strength of God who endures. Meaning that the work of salvation is not our own to complete. Thanks be to God. We can't do it by ourselves, plain and simple. We are not expected to, nor are we called to this solitary act. Instead, we're put in relationship with the one, true God, who does have this power, and we're sent out together.

Yes indeed, today is another big day in the life of the church. Trinity Sunday. Today is when we affirm our faith in God who was, who is, and who will be- and we recognize that our ability to fully understand this is limited. Today we are humbled to know that it is not all up to us- that we are not the saviors of the world, but that Christ is. Instead we rely on the mercy and strength of God to go out and make relationship our priority, because Christ is awaiting us wherever we go. And behold, Jesus reminds us, I am with you always to the end of the age. Thanks be to God for that- now let's strap on our dancing shoes.