

Walking In The Light

One of my favorite places is a deep canyon creek in the Mogollon Mountains. The creek really is sublime, lined with ghostly white Sycamore trees, multiple waterfalls, and cold pools. The fishing isn't bad either. I love that little creek, but it's not real fun getting there. The trail starts innocently enough at a lower elevation. You look around and see Piñon and Juniper, PJ country, but you're just as likely to see Mesquite and Yucca. For the first couple of miles, it's a gradual climb. Then the terrain starts to change. While still climbing in general, you're going up, down, up, down, rinse and repeat, as you cross numerous small canyons. The trail really messes with your head with all that up and down business. Eventually you top out in country with Manzanita bushes, Mountain Mahogany, and Ponderosa Pine. About this time, you're beat, both physically and emotionally. So you take off your backpack and sit down on a nice inviting rock in the shade. You don't want to sit too long, or you feel like you'll never get back up. About this time, my friend announces, "Well, that trail ain't gonna walk itself". That is just about the dumbest thing I've ever heard, yet it means a lot to me. Crazy as it seems, it relates well to today's scripture.

Today's lectionary suggests the passage at the end of Matthew, known as "The Great Commission". It flows well with the Pentecost story, which we learned about last week with Pastor Paul. Both stories are about Holy Spirit, and both are concerned with the pivotal question: "What do we do now?"

The words "The Great Commission" are not in scripture, but were added as a heading to this passage in Matthew around the 17th century. According to the Oxford dictionary, "commission is an instruction, command, or duty given to a person or a group of people". Jesus is clearly giving a command to the eleven disciples, when he says: "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

The word "THE" in the "The great commission" leads you to believe that it's only seen here in the bible. Actually, Jesus gives this command throughout the gospels and in the book of Acts.

My first reaction when I read this passage was "Why would Jesus entrust such an important duty to us?" I'm like, "Really? You want *me* to do this? You **do** know what I'm like, right?" The dilemma is resolved by thinking of the word

“commission” a little bit differently. If you divide it into two words, “co” and “mission”, you come away with a different perspective. The prefix “co”, as in “co-operate” means two parties doing something together. The word “mission” suggests a very important duty that has been meticulously planned out. So think about co-mission as a mission planned by God, given by Jesus, and acted on by us together with Holy Spirit. It makes even more sense when you consider Jesus’ words from Acts chapter 1, where he tells us: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The problem remains though: This pesky business about me being involved in the process. I am going to mess this up big-time.

The good news is that God has already planned and chosen. It’s really not up to us to decide who *receives and believes* the Gospel message. Further, in the doing, Holy Spirit does the heavy lifting, as much as we want to convince ourselves otherwise. Holy Spirit provides the time, the place, the courage, and the energy, not to mention the openness in the recipient. Yet our role in this mission is crucial and important. My job, as I see it, is to walk that trail – it ain’t gonna walk itself.

What is the point of inviting **us** into this mission? It’s nothing new, really. God involves lazy, ignorant, unskilled, weak, cowardly, dense, and sinful people into his purposes throughout salvation history. Maybe I’m being harsh – what I mean is God uses imperfect people like us. Could it be that this commission to witness the Gospel is sort of like a wink and a nod? Kinda like when you’re cooking brownies with a toddler and you do 95% of the work, and then you tell the toddler that she cooked the brownies all by herself. It’s nothing like that. Jesus means it when he commands us: “Go and make disciples”. He truly entrusts us with responsibility to carry it out, even though Holy Spirit does the heavy lifting. Is this confusing? Let me tell you another story.

Before I start this story, you should know that I was a typical 12-year-old. The word “work” was a four-letter word, especially when it did not involve pay. About that age, my dad “commissioned” me to help him build a wood fence in our back yard. Now you might think that at that age, I would get the grunt work, like maybe hauling lumber, or digging postholes. But you would be wrong. Although my dad planned how to build the fence and bought all the materials, he gave me

important jobs. I cut the wood with a power saw. I measured the cuts. I hammered. I dug. I did everything alongside him. I loved that job and I felt great about it because I knew I was truly a partner in the whole operation, not to mention the joy of working alongside my dad. I wasn't a trivial partner but was completely involved.

Our father in heaven wants us involved. He doesn't want observers. He wants us to walk that trail. He wants us to put our gifts to work! I am not going to tell you how to share the gospel. You know how to do it better than I do. You know your friends and neighbors better than I do. Your relationship with Holy Spirit is unique and personal.

I do not want to miss an opportunity to speak directly to anyone here today looking for answers. Thank you for being here. It is no accident or mere whim that you are here today. You are here for a reason.

Maybe you have questions. Is Jesus real? What does he have to do with me? Will I go to heaven? Can I be comforted by Jesus with the things that I am going through? My personal witness to you is yes, Jesus is real. Yes, I believe Jesus has prepared a place for me in heaven. And yes, Jesus is a great comfort in times of need. But how do I know all that? Why even believe me? If you knew me well, along with all my faults, you might say, oh brother. But let me tell you, you should have known me before. All I can tell you is from my personal experience, I know it's true. I know it's true in my daily life and I know I am a completely different person than I was before I came to know him. My life is profoundly and irreversibly changed by Jesus.

We're ending today with a reading from Jesus' sermon that took place on a hillside overlooking the Lake of Galilee. If you wish, you can follow along in your bulletin. Or if you wish, just hear this paraphrase from Eugene Peterson, a Presbyterian Pastor who wrote "The Message". Listen now to Jesus' words from Matthew chapter 5:

"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

“Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

And that is the word of God. Amen.