



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
June 7, 2020
Sermon: "Therefore GO"
Graduation Sunday
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block
Matthew 28:16-20

Matthew 28:16-20:

⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

~

Where do we go from here? These past few days have not been easy for us as a country, as a community, as people of faith.

Violence inflicted on peaceful protestors.

Our most sacred text used as a prop.

A medic area destroyed in our city.

A spike in North Carolina COVID cases.

Not to mention our individual struggles and concerns.

I have had numerous conversations with GCPC members - young and old - trying to prayerfully discern how best to respond to the pressing needs of our time. The events of this week have continued to expose the ways in which white supremacy infects our systems and structures, trickling down into our daily interactions, and into dangerous, even deadly encounters between police and people of color.

In the midst of this hard look at our collective brokenness, and the long-dismissed cry: "Black Lives Matter," I have been grateful for the conversations and for the questions you have been wrestling with. Questions like:

Should I attend this rally – when it puts my health or safety at risk?

Should I confront my family member about a Facebook comment that feels short-sighted?

How do I talk to my children about racism?

What should I be reading? Who should I be listening to?

Which gatherings are being led by the black community?

Can I take my small child to that march?

How should I feel about the violence I am seeing?

Am I being too silent? Am I being too loud?

Is it wrong for me to stay home?
How do I know if I am being helpful and not hurtful?
How is it that things are not much better after all this time?
Can anything *really* change?
What does Jesus want me to do?
What can I possibly offer?

These questions, your questions, are all so important. And the answers are far from simple, or in many cases, different for every person. We are each in search of direction, resolution, maybe fundamental change, maybe the return to something-anything familiar. As people of faith, we ask: *where do we go from here?*

~

There were only eleven that day. Eleven disciples who climbed the mountain, sometime after Jesus's body went missing from the tomb. They were short one disciple, of course: the one who had taken his own life after betraying Jesus in exchange for silver coins. And so the eleven remaining disciples stood on the mountaintop and there, Jesus appeared to them.

Scripture tells us that upon seeing him, some worshipped, and some doubted. Even after all they had been through together, even after seeing him standing before them, still, some questioned. Still, some doubted. This can seem surprising to us, but surely we can relate. How often do we experience God's presence in such a visceral way, and only moments later find ourselves doubting what we saw or what we felt?

This story has come to be known as "the Great Commission." What's important for us to notice about it, is that in this moment Jesus does not dismiss those who doubt him. He does not separate the certain - from the uncertain, he does not only call upon the most loyal and ready. Rather, Jesus commissions all of them - all eleven together - to go out and make disciples of all nations. *Why is this?*

Perhaps, for Jesus, to be a disciple means much more than feeling secure about our role and the road ahead. Perhaps doubts and questions are important, because it is in these questions that our faith opens wide - making room for discernment, the chance to be challenged, the opportunity to go deeper, the willingness to listen for God's voice (instead of our own).

Where do we go from here? We can imagine the disciples asked.

The eleven were being commissioned during a time of immense chaos. No, they weren't facing our slew of 2020 concerns, but there were a great deal of similarities. They were living in a time where the injustices were many: to be poor, to be Jewish, to be sick, an immigrant, a slave, a woman, not a part of the Roman elite meant that you were a second class citizen (if you were considered a citizen at all). Your life had little value. Your rights were next to none. Your role was to keep your head down and serve the powerful. You

lived a life always on the edge, constantly under threat of abuse, violence, cruel punishment.

To be a follower of Jesus, on top of this, was subversive and dangerous. And now, to be one of the eleven commissioned to go out and openly teach about the One crucified by those in power, was an even more costly, even more deadly task.

The cross that Jesus had been crucified on was a Roman torture device that those disciples could be sentenced to at any moment. So, “*where do we go from here?*” was most certainly a question even the most faithful were asking. Jesus knew the danger of this invitation to discipleship. He understood their questions, their doubts and fears, and still he called upon them, because they were the ones he needed to continue his world-shifting work.

Through the years, we have too often lost sight of the cost of discipleship – the cost of this great commission. We live in a predominately Christian society, where we can be casual followers of Christ, we can rock crosses around our necks, and step in and step out when we hear the cries of the oppressed.

Dr. James Cone, known as the Father of Black Liberation theology challenges our cavalier discipleship, and our inability to see how our Christian identity is wrapped up in the work of justice. In his book, *The Cross and Lynching Tree*,” he writes:

“Unfortunately, during the course of 2,000 years of Christian history, the cross - this symbol of salvation has been detached from any reference to the ongoing suffering and oppression of human beings. The cross has been transformed into a harmless, non-offensive ornament that Christians wear around their necks. Rather than reminding us of the “cost of discipleship,” it has become a form of “cheap grace,” an easy way to salvation that doesn’t force us to confront the power of Christ’s message and mission. Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a “recrucified” black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy.”ⁱ

James Cone is speaking out of an American context – one that for too long has enslaved and brutalized black bodied people. Jesus’ disciples would be setting out to be prophetic voices in their own contexts. They would each experience different pitfalls and challenges, different hardships and questions, different dangers and death sentences. But they did not turn away from this calling put before them. “*Where do we go from here?*” They asked.

Jesus says: “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 that I have commanded you.” *What does this mean for us?*

Jesus’ commission is not a passive one, but an active calling for the eleven then, and each of us now. Therefore go and love your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. Therefore go and love your neighbor as yourself.

Therefore go and speak truth to power.
Teach and lead by example. Listen and learn with compassion.
Dare to be as vulnerable, foolish and faithful as you can.
Extend the sort of radical, inclusive love and hope that the world hungers for.
Therefore go and embody the good news – for all people to taste and see.

Each disciple, like each of us, is called to do this in our own way, our own style, our own context. But all of us are called together – to go out and serve the Lord with fearless faith.

This past week I have been grateful for the questions members of our GCPC community have been asking, and moved by the ways you have found your bodies answering today's cries for justice. Some of you have been posting messages on social media, some of you have been holding up signs at rallies, some of you have been attending bible study – praying for change and seeking God's direction, some of you have been listening to the stories of black Ashevilleians speaking hard truth that we must hear.

On Thursday's rally on Church street, Sheriff Quinten Miller asked that we as a community hold law enforcement and those in power to the highest standard. He said, "So, I ask you today please hold us accountable. I ask you today to please help us in fixing what is wrong. I ask you today to be at the table from the beginning, not at the end - because we want you to be a part of the solution."

Siblings in Christ, the work of discipleship has only begun.
The road will be long and exhausting and critical.
And for too long in this country, black bodied people have had to carry the heaviest load.
There may be times when we want an easier Christian life.
There may be times when we don't feel equipped to do this work.
There may be times when we want to charge forward, instead of stopping to listen.
It is in these times, when we can open ourselves up to Jesus' final commissioning words: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
When we feel uncertain, lost or filled with doubt, we can raise our questions to a God, who promises to never leave our side.

So, where do we go from here?

~

Today, on this Graduation Sunday at GCPC, we take time to honor our Senior high graduates as they begin a fresh chapter of life. Soon, they will move into new contexts, to share their gifts and voices, and to continue to impact the world in their unique ways.

Young people, as they have done time and time again, are certainly leading the charge these days: standing on the front line, demanding change, walking the walk. How good it is to know that we have youth, who can speak from a place of faith – into a society in need of much healing.

The Great Commission is more than a graduation speech or a sweet farewell, it is a daring invitation for us all to step into the unknown with boldness, to risk everything to stand up for something bigger than ourselves, to use our different voices, our particular talents, our whole lives to build God's kingdom here and now, and to trust that Christ is with us wherever that road leads.

Jesus says: "Therefore go."
So, let's go and serve the Lord - no matter the cost.

ⁱ James Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Orbis Books: New York. 2011. pg. xiv-xv