

“Go Therefore and Build Community”
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
September 29, 2019 – John Knox Presbyterian Church

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 that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

So this is the text that John Franke chose for our All-Church Retreat, this past weekend. A group of folks are still at Pyoca today worshiping in God’s glorious nature this morning. Many of us know this as “The Great Commission.” But for my time with the children yesterday morning, I knew that many of them would not know what this means.

So, I gave them some background to this conversation that Jesus has with his disciples. We find Jesus out in the middle of nowhere, on a mountain with the eleven disciples. They are down by one because Judas, the betrayer, is no longer with them. Jesus has died on the cross, risen on Easter morning and has appeared several times to the disciples. It is time now for him to ascend to heaven.

But before he goes, he wants to gather them together one last time for final instructions. With all that these eleven have gone through, it is no wonder that some of them are doubting. They have ridden a crazy roller coaster of emotions with their dear friend, Jesus.

Here they are! This is it! Jesus instructions. He wants them to go! 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 everything that Jesus had commended them to do.

This was a pretty tall order. I am wondering if the disciples wished they could have fallen ill that day and told Jesus they simply could not have shown up. They were to go ...gogo ...and make disciples! Not just make disciples of the people that were like them. No, Jesus told them to go out and make disciples of all nations. This meant for them that it would be the Gentiles! People who looked different and came from a different background.

When I asked the kids, “Why do you think Jesus was asking this?” It was Michael Pitamber, who spoke up and said, “Jesus knew he was leaving. He had to have someone else teach others about the lessons Jesus had taught them. It was their job to do it!”

Now, I can say this because Michael is not here today. But, I was shocked! Just when I thought Michael wasn’t paying attention! I want to say to his grandmother and to his Church School teachers, “He is paying attention!” He gets it. He knew that Christ was calling on his disciples to build the church and pick up where he left off.

I also asked the kids to write down what a disciple is so that they were clear on what Jesus was asking the eleven on that day as well as all of us. Here are their responses:

- A disciple means all of us.
- A disciple teaches by example.
- A disciple follows Jesus and teaches others.
- A disciple helps others.
- A disciple shows love.
- A disciple is someone who will do things to others and help you.

- A disciple learns from God and shares what they have learned.
- A disciple is a devotion to an idea and a readiness to learn and teach about it.
- A disciple is God's love.

These are great answers and the kids really nailed it. But, this thing that Jesus asks of us is still a HUGE task. Thomas Long, a professor of Theology and preacher says, "It is as if Jesus is telling the disciples go into all the world and cure cancer, clean up the environment, evangelize to the unbelieving and, while you are at it, establish world peace. That is the point, or close to it. The very fact that the task is utterly impossible throws the disciples completely onto the mercy and strength of God. The work of the church cannot be taken up unless it is true that "all authority" does not belong to the church or its resources but comes from God's wild investment of God in Jesus the Son and the willingness of the Son to be present always to the church in the Spirit." (Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 3; Westminster John Knox Press; 2011; Thomas Long; p. 49)

The good news is that Jesus gives us this HUGE task but promises that he will be with us every step of the way...to the end of the age. One thing that John Franke pointed out during one of our morning devotions is that Jesus calls us to follow but he will lead us one step at a time. It doesn't seem so huge if we take it step-by-step.

What does disciple making look like? I go back to one of the definitions of disciple that the kid's used. A disciple teaches by example. I remember Kelly Simpson sharing with our Prime Timers about their time in Macedonia. This country is primarily Moslem and as missionaries they were not really permitted to talk about Jesus. They went over there to teach English. They had to teach others about Jesus by their actions and not their words. There is a favorite quote by Francis of Assisi that says, "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary use words." Only when asked about their faith and the love that they showed others, did they feel free to share about Jesus.

How many of you stayed for the Community Building Extravaganza on September 15? I don't know about you but I had a lot of fun. This year long grant will focus on building community within the Body of Christ. If we the church can become more connected in our relationships with each other, our hope is that our community will want to be connected to us.

Ritch Hostetler, our ULEAD facilitator, shared two quotes with our leadership team. Brene Brown says, "Connection is why we're here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives purpose and meaning in our lives, and without it there is suffering. I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgement, and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship." And then from John 13:34-35, The Message version, Jesus said, "Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples – when they see the love you have for each other."

Later today, I will leave for a 12 day journey to Spain where I will walk my beloved Camino de Santiago for 8 days. Last time I walked the Camino, I met people from over 20 different states and 15 different countries. Pilgrims come from all walks of life but there is this amazing bond of walking this common goal that is so strong. Many people knew that I was a pastor but I don't think it was my profession that spoke of my faith. I think it was my actions.

My dear friend, Nancy, from Denver describes herself as an Agnostic. And yet, this week when I called her because her sister, who is in her care, is in hospice and close to death, she said that she was so glad to hear her pastor's voice. On the Camino, she would pray in the morning with us and attend the pilgrim blessings in the church. I have had some of the most deep Theological discussions with her.

This past week my Spiritual Director, Bev, asked me what I thought the one thing that God wanted me to get out of this pilgrimage. The first thing that came to mind was peace. Then, I thought about all the amazing people that I am hoping to meet along the way. I want to be refreshed and renewed as I strive to fill my Spiritual well. Then, I remembered my last Camino.

There was an Australian couple that on their first day they met up with a very young 20-some year old from Germany. He had an extremely heavy backpack and was not conditioned to walking long distances. About a week into the walk, this young man's feet were torn up. This is where I met these three people. You see this couple had taken this young person under their care. They had asked a seasoned pilgrim to look at his feet. I watched this man take an hour cleaning, medicating and bandaging this guy's feet, instructing him on how to care for them in the days ahead. The couple had encouraged the young man to ship many of the contents from his pack home making it a lot lighter.

Toward the end of my hike, I ran into this young guy again. He was walking with some young girls and really enjoying himself. I asked him about his feet. He said it took about 2 weeks for them to heal and he was able to wear his hiking boots again. I also ran into the couple from Australia. They said that they were with this young man during the healing of the feet. About the time he got better, he was willing to walk on his own. They had no idea that the true reason that they were called to walk the Camino was for them to care for this young guy. They truly believed this!

Perhaps, this is what God is calling me to this place at this time. And that will be okay! I will soon find out.

Being a disciple and making disciples is something Jesus calls us to build the community of believers. What does that look like to you? How will you follow Jesus in this way? Praise be to God for Jesus who continues to challenges us in our faith and promises that he will walk with us to the end of the age. Amen.