

## **“The Great Commission”**

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Trinity Sunday

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*<sup>16</sup>Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>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, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*  
(Matthew 28:16-20)

These concluding verses of Matthew’s gospel are often read on Trinity Sunday, mostly because this is one of only two passages in the New Testament that use the formulaic words “Father, Son, and Spirit” in one sentence. The language suggests that a Trinitarian theology developed very early on in the history of the church – an understanding that the Lord our God is one, but also “distinct in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost” (*Scots Confession*, Chapter 1).

But there is much more to this passage than the mention of the Trinity. A lot happens in just five verses. In the immediate afterglow of Easter Sunday, Jesus gathers the disciples together to conclude one chapter and begin another. It is significant that they are in Galilee, the place where Jesus first invited them to follow him and become fishers of people. It is also significant that they are together on a mountaintop. Just as God revealed the sacred revelation of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai, Jesus now reveals a new covenant structure to his disciples. They would carry on with a new job, new clarity, and new responsibility to God and to each other.

The lofty instructions Christ gives on that mountain are so central to the life of faith that they have been given an equally lofty name: the “Great Commission.” Interestingly, that term has no root in the text itself, nor is it of ancient origin. The first time a reference to the “Great Commission” appeared in print was less than 200 years ago, when the British Protestant missionary Hudson Taylor was trying to recruit more people to spread the gospel in China. Looking to bring in more soldiers for the evangelistic platoon he was forming, Taylor thought the military usage of the word “commission,” referring to orders and assignments given to an officer by a high-ranking leader, would be an effective marketing slogan.

While that metaphor is strong and descriptive, the military imagery muddies the waters a bit. Honestly, it is hard to imagine Jesus choosing a military metaphor, given his aversion to violence and his focus on more peaceful kinds of service. For that reason, I want to explore a different way of understanding our “Great Commission.” Yes we are given a job to do by a higher authority, but I prefer to think of us not as soldiers in an evangelical army, but rather as artists on a mission. Artists also receive commissions, contracts they accept from a patron who promises to support and reward them in return for the creation of a new, unique, and specially-crafted work of art. That, I believe, is the kind of commission we



are given in this passage. And it is also the kind of mindset we ought to maintain while living into the call of this commission, an awareness that the task Christ has given us is to create a work of art... something unique to each of us, something beautiful that carries deep meaning, emotional power, and lasting value.

Before we try to unpack this interpretation of our commission, I recognize that many of us do not see ourselves as artists. We could be more analytical or scientific than creative. We might be more comfortable with an organizational flowchart than with a free-floating, "let's see where this takes us" mentality. Maybe self-expression or emotional sharing makes us feel uneasy and vulnerable. So let me say up front, if any of that rings true for you, that is OK. God is not asking us to be anything but ourselves – just the people God created us to be. Whatever art God is looking for from you, you have everything you need to create it.

And everyone has doubts like these. First of all, it is helpful to remember that the original Great Commission was given to people who were struggling mightily with low self-esteem and debilitating self-doubt. Looking closely at the text, we see that the very first phrase refers to the gathered group of disciples as "the eleven." It was a not-so-subtle nod to the fact that until very recently there had been twelve disciples. Unfortunately, one of them had decided to betray Christ. As a group, they were wounded and diminished.

And then we have this admission that, even among this group of very committed of followers, "*they worshiped him; but some doubted.*" Not everyone was convinced about what had happened with Jesus or what was happening with them. There were some doubters. Actually, the Greek could also indicate something else that rings true for us. Another grammatically correct translation of the sentence is "*they worshipped him; but they doubted.*" By that rendering, no one was 100% believer or 100% doubter. Everyone was a bit of a mixed bag; everyone was at least a little uncertain.

But again, this is OK, because even art's greatest masters make mistakes, and plenty of them. The famous American portrait artist John Singer Sargent was known for looking at a feature of a painting and, if it wasn't exactly right, aggressively scraping all of the paint off of that section so he could redo it. In some of his works, the underlying figures he tried to scrape away still found ways to bleed through as years went by. Michaelangelo, when he was working on his masterpiece on the Sistine Ceiling, had bouts of extreme self-doubt. "I am not in the right place," he would mutter while up on the scaffolding. "I am a sculptor, not a painter." But the patron who had commissioned the work was none other than Pope Julius II, also known as the "Warrior Pope," and Michelangelo didn't have much choice but to carry on. Later, as he looked back on his illustrious 75-year career in art, he still said "I regret that I am dying just as I am beginning to learn the alphabet of my profession."

The point is this. If the original disciples weren't perfect, if even the great masters have moments of self-doubt, then we do not have to be perfect either. As one of my seminary professors repeatedly told us, the greatest tool we have for ministry is ourselves. As an artist commissioned by God, you have been given a very particular set of skills and a very particular set of weaknesses. You will have good days and bad days, successes and failures. But that does not mean that the work you create for God cannot be truly beautiful.

So, now that we know our art does not need to be perfect, what exactly is God commissioning us to do? What are we being asked to create in service to God? In a nutshell, the specific commission is a command: "Go out and make disciples." Again, I need to say that I understand that this assignment may not be comfortable for all. Some may associate the making of disciples with an aggressive kind of evangelism that motivates faith

with fear or social pressure. But I will contend that we need to reclaim the word disciple. We need to get reacquainted with it, and eventually comfortable with it, because that is exactly what we have been commissioned to make: disciples.

I will say again, however, that God has not commissioned you to be anyone other than your authentic self. Many of us here, I expect, would not be comfortable walking up to someone in an airport and asking, with Bible in hand, "Have you accepted Jesus Christ to be your Lord and Savior?" Not that there is anything wrong with that. If you are gifted with the heart and moxie and skill to do that effectively, God bless you. I myself am not. That is why I am glad that making disciples is an art, not a science. The key is for each of us to be true to ourselves – to being the unique artist God created each of us to be.

As for me, making disciples is not about confrontation. It does not demand acceptance of a certain set of doctrines, nor does it paint portraits of fear or manipulation or bullying. That is no way to make a friend, and it is no way to make a disciple. For me, being a maker of disciples is a life-long attempt to live in such a way that the people around me might catch a glimpse of God every now and then. In short, in my own walk I see making disciples as an act of invitation, not compulsion.

This type of evangelism fits well into our Reformed brand of faith. In the Protestant tradition, we often refer to the "Great Ends of the Church." It is a to-do list of six basic jobs we have as Christians in the church, and the culminating job, the last and ultimate duty, is to be an "*exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world*" (*Book of Order*, F-1.0304). In other words, our calling is to try to show the world, on a daily basis, what heaven is like. It is, I think you will agree, an incredibly high bar. Let me ask this: how many times a week do you pause and think, "Boy, I hope the people around me are getting a good look at this, because I am being so holy right now!" Even on my best days, I don't think I have ever thought that. It is no easy task to devote every moment to being a living ambassador for God's peace, love, faithfulness, and goodness. We can never and will never do it perfectly. Nevertheless, that is the product we have been commissioned to make. Each of us is invited to be a traveling exhibition of what God is like... and what the kingdom of heaven is like.

I think Christ knew we were going to need a little help getting started, so he gave us two verbs – two actions -- to point the way. The first is to baptize; the second is to teach. Neither of these can be forced or coerced. Both of them, by nature, are acts of welcome and invitation.

Take baptism first: "*Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*" By design, baptism has always been voluntary. When adults seek baptism in our church, the first question we ask them is "Do you desire to be baptized?" In infant baptism, the parents are asked if they desire their child to be baptized. But even then, the voluntary nature of the ritual has to be respected. I distinctly remember one baptism of a young two-year old. He was big for his age, more than an armful. And when I began to bring the first trickle of water over to his head, he raised his arms up and ducked away. I tried again, and pulled away again. I thought to myself, I don't think it is right to forcibly baptize this child. I remember looking over at his parents, and I gave them a look that clearly asked, "Are we doing this?"

And they gave me a look back that clearly said, "Oh yeah, we are doing this." So I forged ahead, and it went OK. But on that day I was particularly grateful that God exists in only three persons, because if I had put my hand on that kid's head one more time, I was gonna get toddler punched right in the face.

Teaching is the same way. You can't teach someone who does not want to learn. When Jesus commissions us to "*make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you,*" I believe is asking us to teach by example... to make God known through the way that we live, love, give, and serve. We cannot force someone to learn, but we can invite them to want to know more about the realm of God by showing them, as best we can, how blessed we are when we live unselfish, loving, generous, and joyful lives. If they can see that authentically, chances are they will crave more knowledge.

This is the real difference between a soldier's commission and an artist's commission. A soldier claims ground by force and wins the battle by imposing their will on anyone who will not voluntarily comply. An artist, on the other hand, invites others into a new creation. An artist uses the brush strokes of everyday life, painting with thoughtful words and caring deeds to create something beautiful, something real and meaningful, something so authentic and genuine that people will run to be part of it.

So that is our Great Commission. That is the work of art God is inviting us to complete. We invite people in, and welcome them into the artistic process. Grateful for our own baptisms, we baptize others. Grateful for the forgiveness we have received, we forgive others. Grateful for the lessons we have learned from Christ, we teach others what Christ can do for them. That is how we make disciples – we create a collage from these beautiful pieces of faith, hope, grace, and love.

But do not worry, artists of God, if you are looking over your work so far and the picture you see on the page is kind of a mess. Do not fear, because there will never be a time when God is not standing beside you, with a hand on your shoulder, encouraging you with a divine love that will never let you go. With every stroke we make, God's own hand is helping us to hold the brush, guiding our lines, filling in our gaps, and cleaning up our inevitable mistakes.

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," Jesus assures us. "Go out and make disciples. In your own way, paint something beautiful that honors me. Being yourself, paint a portrait of what love looks like, and what service looks like. If you mess up, that's OK. Just scratch off the paint and try again. And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." **Amen.**