

“Learning to Express Christ”
Acts 2:22-32; Hebrews 5:9-14;
Matthew 28:16-20

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I’ve called this sermon series “Encounters with God” because it’s about Jesus’ appearances during those days after the resurrection. We have a season of Easter that goes through this week, and then next week we conclude the Easter season with Pentecost Sunday.

As we think about this final gathering that Jesus had with his disciples in Matthew, we may reflect on how this particular conversation has been part of the way we’ve understood Christian faith. So I would like to walk through it again because I think there are times where we get caught up in particular ways of understanding.

One of the things that struck me right away is the word, “Go.” Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Then he says, “Go.” When I looked at that in Greek, I thought I would find an imperative verb that mean to *go into the future*. It turns out that the verb, instead, means *have gone*. It’s a tense in Greek that is in the past but is continuing on. I guess translators picked “go” to emphasize the continuing part.

But it’s interesting to me that Jesus’ injunction starts out in the past, because the suggestion is, as Jesus is talking to these folks, that there are already people who are on that journey. They are already on their way. It’s interesting that this term “go” has more connotations in Greek than it does in English. There’s a sense of transport, of going from one port to the next port, taking something from one place to another, being on a journey that has a mission. That makes sense. He starts out talking about how the disciples are to be on this journey that has a mission. So he’s really talking to people who have already recognized their calling to be his disciples.

Peter talks about this in the Acts 2 passage, using David as his spokesman, saying that Jesus has made known the ways of life and makes the follower full of gladness in his presence. Jesus knows he is talking to people who already recognize this and he’s going to continue to invite them into a life of following him and expressing his purposes in their lives.

He invites them to go and disciple the nations. Usually that’s translated as “make disciples,” but as I spent time with the Greek again, the word means “to disciple.” It’s an imperative. Maybe I’m dealing with semantics a little too much, but for me there’s a difference between making disciples and discipling. It was interesting that HELPS Word-Studies, which are provided in BibleHub.com, gave this definition for “to disciple:” *helping someone to progressively learn the word of God to become a mature, growing disciple, literally a learner, a true Christ-follower.*

It’s interesting that in this word, *to disciple*, there’s a sense of progressively learning. It’s always been my experience that in following Jesus, there’s a sense of progressively learning. We are going deeper into the kingdom in some ways. I keep finding ways that my life needs to change. There’s a transformation at work. Sometimes I fight against

that more than others. But there's this work that Christ is doing as we follow, as we are disciplined, and as he invites his disciples to disciple the nations.

I want to note that he's inviting them to disciple *all* nations. Really, the word for nations there is the word that is the root of *ethnic*. They probably weren't thinking of nations the way we think of nations. The word can be translated "tribes." The word *ethnic* is probably as good a way of thinking about it. It not only has some genealogical perspective, but encompasses the customs, culture, and traditions that define a people. So when Jesus invites his disciples to disciple all the nations, he's saying all the tribes, all the ethnic groups, all the people of the world.

We have a history, as people, of separating a few that look different in some way, or have a different tradition than ours, or have a different culture than ours, and defining them as "less than." If you look at the race history in the United States, it's just incredible how we tried to define a group of people as less than human. When Jesus invites his disciples to go to all the tribes, all ethnicities, all nations, he's inviting us to remember that we're all children of God, and we're all given the gift of God's grace.

In fact, he wants them to go baptize everyone. And what is baptism but this ceremony we do to commemorate dying with Christ and rising with him, to recognize the struggles of our lives and how God transforms us into something new—the dying and living anew, the new life that is given in baptism—he wants to give that to everyone.

He says, "Go and teach them to obey what I've commanded you." I really struggle with the way we translate sometimes because it feels like we take our human hierarchies, our ways of militarizing our speech, and lay them onto the text. Here, to obey is *to observe*, and commands can also be translated as *goals*. He's inviting us to see that he's showing us a way, giving us something to live toward and to become, and not simply to try to live a set of rules. It's more expansive than any set of rules can be. It's something we live into and are continually learning to do. It's living rather than being defined by machine-like qualities, or a militaristic lock-step. Jesus invites his disciples to pay attention to the goals he reveals which are central to truly living.

We hear a little bit about the kinds of things that we are going to be taught, or that discipleship is about in some of the other texts we read today. In Psalm 119, we are encouraged to "live the righteous ordinances." At least that's the way Eugene Peterson translated it. It's the idea of beginning to find a way to live our relationships in a healthy, transformed, and loving way. Then, the passage from Hebrews is always a little shocking to me. I'm always wondering, "Am I the one getting the milk or am I more mature?" But he points out what a mature disciple looks like. He says the mature disciple is one "whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil." There's a lot in that. Whose faculties, whose way of seeing and understanding, have matured through the ability to learn through practice to distinguish good from evil.

Then, Jesus says he will be with us till the end of the age. I think that's a way of saying he will be with us through the rest of our lives. I read this as an invitation to recognize that we've been given a gift of love and grace in Jesus Christ that we get to share with everyone. But I have to recognize that I'm not sure this has always been understood with humility. When you read about making disciples, we have too long a

history of really trying to MAKE people disciples, and in doing so, causing some real human tragedies. For example, with the native population, we tried to make disciples, and now we are apologizing for the way we did that, because we too easily think of ourselves on the side of being the ones who are to do the discipling. And yet I read this passage and recognize that as Jesus was talking to those disciples, I was not part of the ethnic group. I was not an ethnic Jewish person. I was one of those “all nations” that Jesus invited them to go and tell about. What it makes me think about is how we are to disciple one another, how thankful I am for the disciples that came and invited me to participate in a faith that has shown the way to life. But it’s so easy to begin to think of myself as exceptional, better than.

I had an experience like that in college, where a guy came to my dorm room and decided he needed to tell me how to find Jesus. I had grown up in the church. I was part of a campus community ministry. He never once asked me. He just assumed that I needed Jesus because for some reason he thought I didn’t have Jesus. It’s that kind of exceptionalism that doesn’t listen, doesn’t find out, doesn’t hear, doesn’t care, doesn’t really love the person ahead of time. You can’t disciple someone without knowing them, without caring for them, and perhaps, without serving them first. If we look to Jesus, his way of discipling the world was to come to serve. “For even the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life for many.” (Mark 10:45 and Matthew 20:28)

So as we hear this Great Commission, for it is a Great Commission, he’s commissioning us to show who he is, to take on his ministry, to be those who serve our world in a way that disciples it into sharing the very love and grace that we’ve been given. As we come to the table we remember how Jesus gave his life for us. Too often Christian discipleship has been asking other people to give their life for me. In Christ, it feels the opposite. We give our lives in service, in love, in care, and find out of that that Christ is known, Christ is seen. We can’t make disciples. We can only invite, make possible, develop ways of learning, share in worship and study and service.

It’s interesting that we are invited to the table as a way of being Christ’s disciples. He’s still serving us—serving us the love and grace of God as we remember and participate in the meal. He invites us to share our meal, our life with our world, and through that, to allow the world to learn about the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the wonder of God’s Spirit among us. Amen.