

June 7, 2020

Trinity Sunday

Matthew 28: 16-20

Prayer: Dear Lord, We most fervently welcome your Holy Spirit into our worship service. Please guide our thoughts and words and understanding of your Scripture. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

'Howling at the Wrong Moon'

I remember in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic of thinking that at least the virus was a natural and common enemy. We could all agree: Virus bad. Science good.

The devastation we faced in terms of sickness and death, of unemployment and isolation and lost income, was not brought on by man's inhumanity to man. It wasn't like 9/11 or school shootings or imprisoning children at the border. It wasn't like white supremacy marches that ended in violence, or the shotgunning of a young black man as he jogged in neighboring Georgia.

We had a common enemy and a common goal.

But even the fears of the pandemic couldn't stop the explosion that occurred when an entire nation witnessed a black man being pinned down on a Minneapolis street, a police officer's knee forcing the life out of him over an agonizing 8 minutes, 46 seconds.

Protests erupted in all 50 states and another 20 countries. Twelve days later, they are still going on, with added street music and line dancing.

Unlike the peaceful marches of this weekend, some of the early nights of protest turned ugly. Looting and the burning of stores and restaurants of innocent business owners took the attention away from the real issue.

They provided a wedge for hate groups and opportunists to slip in.

They provided an excuse for those who *don't* want to restrain the police.

They provided cover for those who *don't* seek equality or justice.

Personally, I was heartbroken to hear an NPR interview with a wine bar owner in Charleston whose business was plundered and set on fire by a roving gang. Clearly, violence and looting are never the answer.

But just as clearly, we cannot let a sliver of bad actors obscure the very real pandemic of racial injustice that permeates our country and our law enforcement. When we do that, *Detroit Free Press* columnist Mitch Albom says, we are “howling at the wrong moon.”

We are howling at the wrong moon.

What an apt phrase! Because we are so easily distracted.

We must focus on the larger, systemic drum beat of black men and women shot and choked and beaten as surely as they were lynched by our forefathers. We must focus on the underlying poverty and inequality, the racism that has dogged us since we committed our original sin of slavery.

We've got to howl at the right moon.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It's a follow-up to last week's Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to the disciples in a great rush of wind and fire. Last week, I called the Holy Spirit our companion, the one who accompanies us.

He's the member of the Trinity who is with us during our moon howls.

You know, I imagine that the most painful part of the coronavirus pandemic for clergy – and for most Christians -- was missing worship on Easter and Pentecost. The entire church year builds to Jesus overcoming the cross through resurrection on Easter. And then the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

It is my profound hope that next spring, your new pastor will lead you and all the returned parishioners in glorious Easter and Pentecost celebrations in this sanctuary. And I hope forever afterward, we will never take for granted our ability to gather and worship.

Meanwhile, even in our weakened state, we will look this morning to our ancient Scriptures that have endured through centuries of wars, of massacres, of pandemics. Today's passage captures the last words of Jesus.

When Luke was writing about Jesus's last words in the book of Acts, he recorded them this way: **“Be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria and unto the ends of the earth.”** (Acts 1: 8)

Now we are going to turn to the gospel of Matthew and see what he recorded as Jesus's *very similar* last words. Remember: ancient writers didn't view historical writing in the same way we do.

If we had two reporters covering an execution, we'd expect a dying man's last words to match up, word for word. But that's a relatively modern construct. Ancient writers weren't worried about things like that.

Plus, while Matthew may have been present to actually hear Jesus, Luke was not. He was not one of the disciples and never claimed to be. He tells us he researched to get his information.

Both writers constructed the endings of their stories to reflect the portrait of Jesus their gospels portrayed. But I'd argue that both of them knew the power of last words.

So what were the last words Jesus wanted to leave his disciples? What was the final thought he wanted to leave his brand-new church?

I'm reading from **Matthew 28: 16-20**. This scene occurs after the resurrection when Jesus re-appeared to the disciples.

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.

¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go

therefore and make disciples of *all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

We call this the Great Commission, and you can see why. Up until now, Jesus has been the teacher. Now he is commissioning his remaining disciples to take over.

You can also see how people get the idea that we must tell everyone, baptize everyone, teach everyone. There's nothing wrong with honestly sharing the source of our joy and our passion.

But I fear this passage has led to a great deal of damage done in the name of mission and evangelism when we are more enthusiastic than we are wise. As a modern parable puts it, we Americans are an

elephant dancing with a mouse, and we can clumsily stomp the life out of the mouse in the process.

One of the books we study here is *When Helping Hurts* by Presbyterian missionaries Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. And the stories they share of Americans traveling to other nations – under the auspices of this Scripture – are chilling.

For instance, a non-profit organization wanted to assist a village in Colombia, South America, with its rice production. So it gathered the villagers into a co-op and bought them a thresher, a motorized huller, a generator and a tractor. Rice production boomed. The villagers sold their rice at the highest price they'd ever received.

Job done, the non-profit went home. Several years later, a staff member returned and found the co-op disbanded and the thresher, huller, generator and tractor out in the fields, rusting.

After 30 years of mission work, Corbett and Fikkert say this scenario occurs over and over and over. What's going on?

There are a lot of reasons, foremost among them an imposition of one culture upon another, and the fact that the recipients are not included in the planning. When the Americans driving the rice production left, the native farmers reverted to familiar ways. Clearly they hadn't bought into the project.

Another short-term mission team went to Latin America to build a house for a low-income pastor. About halfway through the building process, the pastor discovered they were building a bathroom in the middle of the house. In his culture, bathrooms are located at the rear.

He objected to the team leaders, but they said it was too late to change. At the end of their trip, the team happily flew back to the United States, thinking they'd provided a much-needed house. But the pastor wasn't sure he even wanted to live in it. He was ashamed of that bathroom in the middle.

When Helping Hurts gives the perspective of an American staff member working in an indigenous community in South America. He led Bible study as part of a local church with limited finances.

He said that after a short-term mission team flies in with soccer balls and fancy arts and crafts for a week of Vacation Bible School, the children don't want to come back to their local Bible study. It's not as flashy or fancy as what the Americans offer.

So what has been accomplished? The Third World children may have new soccer balls and cool art projects to post on their walls. But their knowledge of the Bible has been impacted negatively.

I would be willing to bet that somewhere in all three of those cases someone uttered Jesus' last words: **“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.”**

That is our Scripture. But we don't have to interpret it with a sledge hammer.

We can do it with patience rather than by giving sophisticated farm equipment to people who don't want it.

We can do it with respect rather than by building a house in a week without regard to local customs.

We can do it with nuance by supporting local churches rather than importing our Vacation Bible Schools to dazzle children for a week.

Humility. Humility. Humility. I think humility can go a long way in interpreting the Great Commission.

It can go a long way when we deal with people of other cultures overseas and with people of other backgrounds here at home.

It can go a long way in dealing with white privilege and enduring racial inequality.

With these final words of Matthew's gospel, we can also recognize what Matthew was doing literarily, narratively. Jesus was speaking to his first-century disciples. And his command to go to "**all nations**" was a calculated turn from his earlier instructions.

Back in chapter 10, when there were 12 disciples instead of 11, he commanded them: "**Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.**" (Mt. 10: 5-6)

Now at the end of the story, after the resurrection, he's opening the field. Go to "**all nations**," he tells them, to Samaritans, Gentiles, everyone. It's time to blow this story wide open.

In fact, in these few verses, Matthew is making a literary decision to bookend his gospel. Back in chapter 1, he wrote at Jesus's birth, "**... they shall name him Emmanuel,**" which means, "**God is with us.**" (1: 23)

Now at the end of his life, Jesus assures them, “**And remember, I am *with you* always, to the end of the age.**”

No matter what happens, whether I’m here in body or in spirit, I am with you. That’s the meaning of the Trinity. That’s the meaning behind Trinity Sunday.

I am with you always, to the end of the age.

And how is he “with us”? The answer is in the preceding sentence. Baptize all those nations, he says, “**in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**”

After the resurrection, that’s how he will be with us. As the Holy Spirit.

So ... how might we read this text known as the Great Commission in light of our current national crisis? How might we read it in a nation convulsing with protests, undergirded with a string of black deaths, inequality and unequal opportunity?

I think we might read it as a goal, as the potential for the greatest news we've ever heard.

Our beloved brother Jesus will be with us forever. And his message of love and mercy and grace is available to all nations, to all races, to everyone, to every single person.

The thing I will never understand is how someone can say they believe these words and think it's all right to live in an unequal, unjust society.

To think it's all right to let a white father and son go 10 weeks without arrest after shooting a black jogger in Georgia.

The way that Matthew opened his gospel *to all* in these last words is indicative of the inclusivity of the true Christian message.

We can best observe Jesus' last words ... by living as Jesus taught, by loving our neighbor in all its myriad forms.

St. Francis of Assisi has been credited with the popular saying: "Preach the gospel. If necessary, use words."

But I've read that what he actually said was: "It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching."

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In other words, live the gospel. Live the gospel. We can say we are Christians all we want, but if our lives don't reflect it, it is of "no use."

If we live as Christ taught, if we live as Christ commanded, we *are* living the Great Commission.

We *are* obeying his last words.

We are howling at the right moon.

Amen.

