

Message: Matt 28:16-20. Commissioning

Preface:

Jesus has risen, just as he said he would. He's greeted the women who believed him, who were on their way to do as God's angel asked them to do. He interrupted their journey just to say hello, and repeat what was said to them already: Go to Galilee, and tell his disciples that he'll meet them there.

And the scene changes. We're with the disciples, who have trudged from Jerusalem to a Galilean Mountain, some previously-agreed-upon place. We'll talk about what happens then in a moment. First Let's pray.

Prayer:

The End of Matthew:

The scene, again, and the mandate Jesus gives us:

16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 and

teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

There are so many ways to talk about this passage.

It's the end of Matthew, of course, but just the beginning of the Church. Matthew makes no sense without Acts, without the Spirit being set loose among God's People, and the Church being set loose in the world with power, with freedom, with purpose. In the last analysis, this whole book, we realize has been prologue. We look to the epilogue, and Jesus' return. Today, right now, we're set loose, starring in these later chapters.

But we're not set loose on the world, alone. Jesus doesn't just give us a great mandate today, he gives us a great promise, too.

The Great Promise:

“Be assured,” he says, ***“I'm always with you all, to the very end of the age.”***

This “until the end of the age” is a Matthew quirk. It shows up now and then in parables, in Jesus' warnings about the future. We've seen this over and over in Matthew, and so it makes sense that the very last words of Jesus that Matthew

gives us remind us, one more time, that Jesus will return. That this “age” we live in, this period of time in between his resurrection and his return is temporary. The world as we know it is temporary.

The Great Promise: God With Us, Really:

But for as long as it lasts, God is with us in it. “Be assured, I myself am with you all.” Although our English translations never quite communicate it to us, Jesus doubles down on the “I,” here, saying “I myself am,” which is as close as the Greek can get to having him echo the name God tells Abraham is his own (cf. John 8:58).

Jesus’ Lifelong Demand of us is supported with a Great Promise: He is with us, even as we do what he asks. Matthew told us, 25 chapters ago, as he walked us through Jesus’ birth, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).” In some very real ways, God wouldn’t be with His People, Jesus wasn’t really “Immanuel,” until after the resurrection, until death no longer had a hold on him, and he can go on to give us something even more intimate than God in the flesh right by us, but God alive in our guts, in our hearts, the Holy Spirit in and among us.

The Great Promise: Disconnection: First

There are two great disconnections that we have with Jesus’

great promise, though. Both of them are, oh, *cultural*, let's say.

First, Jesus' promise to not abandon the Church, to always be with his followers, just doesn't impact us all that much. It's not a promise that we think about, or care about, all that much.

We want to make sure that God hasn't left our own congregation, Smoky Row, alone. But we're not facing an existential crisis, a concern that we won't exist next week or next year. And we're not worried that the wider, capital-C Church is going anywhere. In fact, if we're honest, we wouldn't mind some congregations we hear about disappearing, because we so deeply disagree with their practices or their theology or the posture they take before the world. Matthew's people--small in the world, dislocated from their culture, their religion, all their security because of their new trust in an undead-forever Messiah, considered fools taken in by a rumor--they cared that Jesus was with them. They needed Emmanuel. We're fat and cozy in our self-sufficiency, capable, wise, used to the Spirit supplying us with the answers we need, and pretty sure that God really does help those who help themselves. We're just so far removed from their desperation, and from the desperation of Christians in so many places. It's not something to feel guilty about, but it is something to own, because if we don't recognize our need to recognize Christ

is with us, then we'll stray into a thousand errors, and never even realize we've strayed.

The Great Promise: Disconnection: Second

Our second great disconnection with Jesus' great promise of presence is that, honestly, he didn't promise it to each of us, individually. We each have the Spirit alive in us, yes. But Jesus in this moment isn't saying "Be assured, I'm always with each of you until the end of the age." He's saying "Be assured, I'm always with you all until the end of the age." He's speaking to his group of disciples, the men and women gathered there. He's speaking to the Church.

And again: We in this room, right now, just by and large don't sink or swim based on the group we've aligned ourselves with or have been born into. The closest most of us will get to the sense of corporate success or corporate failure comes when we get raises, bonuses, or our company shuts down and we're out with it. But for Matthew's church, the Christians he was writing to--Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women equally able in their new free society to do all that God called them to do--they needed to know, deeply, deeply, deeply, that God was with their fellowship, that their congregation, and the Christians in other congregations that were scattered like puzzle pieces around their great big world, they needed to know that God was present with them, because if God wasn't, they had wasted everything. They were failing at all the relieved wisdom

about what it meant to be human, simply by being together, and casting their lots with each other. In that situation, a situation in which your group is the only outlier, believing a ridiculous, un-heard of miracle that affected everything from who you spoke to to what you ate, in that moment, you needed to know this was the place where God was. This was the community, the society, the fellowship, where the creator of everything resided, affirmed, blessed with his presence.

But we can imagine, we far-removed people, how important it would be to know that this community we've found ourselves in, this society full of weird-beliefs that challenge the heart of the way the world works, a fellowship that's inherited every promise God ever made to His People, how important it would be to know that this family would never be abandoned by Jesus.

Jesus who is not just the Messiah our ancestors long-awaited for, not just God With Us, but God With Us in power.

The Lifelong Demand:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

Jesus says, when he greets his disciples and the women who told them about him. “All authority in heaven and on earth

has been given to me.” Matthew means for us to remember Daniel’s prophecy, which Jesus already made reference to, about the way the Ancient of Days, God Himself, would give his authority, his right to rule, to judge, to bless creation, to the “One Like A Son of Man,” that name that only Jesus ever called himself.

This is an absolutist claim. The Pharisees, the elders, the Chief Priests...the God who they wholeheartedly served, aggressively and evilly missing the boat the entire time, has given all His rights and responsibilities to the Messiah that they killed--condemning him (cf. Matt 26:64) for the exact claim he says has finally come true.

And the work that Jesus demands of his disciples, which he has every right to demand? Here it is:

19 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, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

The Lifelong Demand: Highlighting Things

This is the demand Jesus makes of the disciples. It lingers in the life of the Church which they, in their obedience to it, helped create.

We get that it’s important. Hundreds of books have been

written about this “Privileged Opportunity,” “Lifelong Command,”--Great Commission. There’s a Mariana Trench of stuff written on this, and I’ve got enough time left for us to kinda wash our hands.

People lift up things: Jesus uses “name” in the singular here, then lists off “The Father,” “The Son,” and “The Holy Spirit.” It’s one of the first New Testament seeds that flowers into the mystery we call the Trinity, the way Father, Son, and Spirit are both One, equal in every way, united, and yet three distinct agents, “persons,” at the same time. Solve that mystery and you’re automatically included in the Trinity. The Quartet, or whatever it becomes, querty? And yet, we do experience God as Father, God as Son, God as Spirit differently.

Baptism is here, a baptism not of repentance, as John undertook, not a ceremonial baptism, which was a common part of religious Jewish Life during this period, although we ignore that. Jesus instead presents a baptism of re-alignment, a baptism that, as Paul will go on to articulate it, aligns us to and links us with Jesus’ own death and resurrection. We present ourselves, in baptism, to the world as those who have joined with the Messiah’s society, have cast our lots with this group who has, uniquely in all the world, access to God in a way no other group can have. We embrace baptism for the world, we embrace it for all the reasons that Jesus revealed in all his words and deeds, but

we embrace it because we believe, before it's even done to us, that Jesus was not lying when he said "All power and capacity to use it in heaven and upon the Earth has been handed over to me. Be assured, I'm with you all until the end of the age."

Do we still believe? I mean, the end of Matthew ought to remind us of our own baptisms. It ought to remind us that this who we've bound ourselves to, this Messiah, who claims all power and freedom to exercise over creation, and then promises that he will not forsake his people, no matter what. The end of Matthew forces us to deal with what we believe.

And not just what we believe, but what we do with what we believe. Because Jesus does command his disciples, here.

The Lifelong Demand: All authority, and this is what you do?

He says,

"...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 I have commanded you.

And, look, this is weird of Jesus. Why would you command

the Church to teach others to do what he said and did when you could just, you know, exercise your power. Flex, and we'll fall on our knees.

This is the greater mystery at the heart of this Great Commission. The real question here isn't, you know, "What's the relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit?" which is where people hang out. The real question is what the heck is Jesus thinking giving his dope disciples this task? What is he thinking giving it to us? "Why use your power and ability to flex it, all authority in the seen and unseen realms, power over death, to simply tell us to go make disciples, go baptize, and go teach them to obey your commands?"

Why not, you know, keep babies from dying or something? Give people a living wage? Give me the power of flight...or invisibility, or both. Make trees that grow candy. Stop slavery. Come back, for God's sake?

Why just tell the Church to be ever-growing, ever-expanding? And that's what he's doing, here, right? Expand yourselves. Persuade people to bind themselves to me the way you've bound yourselves to me. They'll become bound to you, too. And teach them to do what I've said. Teach them to become like me. And then they must do this, too. Until the end of the age.

The Lifelong Demand: The Best Way

Jesus believes in the Church. He believes in us. He has rights to exercise all the creator's power over creation, and chooses to give his disciples, and us, his own work. And it makes no sense to do this unless Jesus really believes that the Church can do it. That we're the very best way to reveal God to the world. It's through us. We, working together, are meant to become him and do what he did. We're the best way to reveal God to the world.

See, we tend to think that right now Jesus couldn't do anything else. As if, since his ascendance into Heaven, he lost, somehow, his authority, and now he's dependent on us to get the message out about what God hopes for humanity, and probably, if he was being really honest, he'd communicate a little bit of disappointment.

But he's not. Jesus could intervene at any moment. God could decide on another way--any other way--to reveal Himself to the world. Pat the Church on the head, say "Thanks, you gave it a shot at least. I do love you." And God could just get the job done, you know? Correctly, for once, without all our squabbling, and our insecurity, and our being taken captive by political and economic powers.

But no. God, in 2,000 years, hasn't intervened. Hasn't interrupted what we've been doing. I mean, there were the crusades, you know? Inquisition! Phillips, Craig, and Dean!

I'm kidding.

Jesus believes the Church is the best way to reveal God to the world. Jesus believes in us. He has made us, created us around him, filled us with his power, promised us his presence, to reveal God to the world, exactly as he did. We're to become him: Each of us, in faith, binding ourselves to him, in baptism uniting ourselves to his death and expecting our resurrection with the rest of the Church's. All of us, trusting his assurance that he is with us, until he returns. And when we have most turned to him, trusted him, and emulated him, we have proven his belief in us isn't empty.

So:

I don't want to leave us guilty. I could, you know? That's the way these things go? Are you helping make disciples? Are you inviting people to church? Are you teaching people to obey God's commands?

We know! We know what the Church is for. We get it. I believe in us, in Smoky Row, in our capacity, more than anyone. What I want to do is leave us with this:

I want to leave us in awe that Jesus believes in us. Still. He believes in his Church after all this time, after all our failures. Because, of course, he sees all our successes. They

shine brighter than the sun, and they'll outlast it. He sees every moment of faithfulness, every morning we drag ourselves out of bed, and give some deep expression of ourselves to the world in his name, for his glory. He sees each upward heave we make into greater obedience, greater trust, more consistent command keeping. Jesus rejoices over his Church, and rejoices over Smoky Row.

We're not meant to leave Matthew guilty. We're meant to leave Matthew in awe. That all of this has happened. That Emmanuel was born, that Emmanuel is real. That we are Jesus siblings, now, bound to him, bound to each other, privileged, together, as citizens with all the rights of citizens in both realms that he has all authority over. We're children of God, and we exist to reveal God to the world, by word and deed, obeying Jesus' commands, baptizing as we're able, teaching others to do the same, and praising God for every moment that we do it well...even as we repent of our failures, in character or in action.

What are we doing here if we aren't rejoicing in this? What are we doing here if we don't believe God is with us, not against us, and will never abandon us. What do we do with the truth that Jesus believes we are the ones for the job at hand? What we do, I hope, is exactly what he asks of us.

We go and make disciples. We baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. We teach the disciples we make to

obey all Jesus has taught us to do in the world. We carry each other into deeper commitment in all these things, and we rejoice that Jesus' presence never leaves us, no matter what. And the places in the world that we touch are blessed by us, without qualification.

Conclusion:

What do we believe? Even in this moment, some fell on their faces in worship while some doubted, to be persuaded in time. We have all our lives to be persuaded into deeper trust in this Son of Man who won't leave his Church without him. And this world has all its life, until Jesus returns, to discover God among us, through us, in us. I hope that we can realize the great confidence God has in us, not because we're so capable, so powerful, so wise, but because He is, and won't stop revealing it to the world through us.

Matthews end sends us back to its beginning, forced again to ask how much this Messiah means to us and what we believe about everything because of him. It's always good to consider these things.