

## ***Making Disciples***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

May 5, 2024

Text: Matthew 28:16-20

Today's text is a simple one, the last four verses of the Gospel of Matthew. It qualifies as a resurrection appearance because this conversation between Jesus and "the eleven" (Judas had betrayed Jesus and supposedly killed himself) happens on the mountain from which Jesus will shortly ascend to heaven. One point worth noting in this text, and there are several, is that there is no mention here of Jesus actually ascending. The disciples just show up at the spot he asked them to come to and these seem to be his final instructions to them. The ascension is therefore implied rather than witnessed by the disciples here. This seems significant to me because it would seem to be intended not to emphasize the spectacular vision of Jesus rising to God on a cloud. Instead, what Matthew is emphasizing in these four verses is Jesus' final instructions to the disciples.

So, what are there? Matthew is pretty clear about that: First, Jesus reminds them that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him and he is sharing that authority with them for the assignment he is about to give them. And what are they to do? Jesus is very clear: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." This part of the instructions we are all pretty familiar with. But Jesus added a few clarifiers to these instructions that we don't always remember. First, the disciples are to teach these new disciples, these new folks coming in to the fellowship of the followers of Jesus that they are to "obey everything I have commanded you." Okay, this instruction to "obey" sounds more like something Matthew would say than what Jesus would say. Teach new people everything they had

learned from Jesus about God, share with them all they had seen and experienced with Jesus? Absolutely! But obey? Something about that word seems off.

So, ever true to my scholarly training, I did a little research on this part of the text and discovered that there are other ways in which this particular phrase has been translated. One of my favorite scholars on these translation issues is D. Mark Davis. Davis goes back to the original Greek and dissects it bringing him to the conclusion that this particular phrase which the NRSV translates as “to obey,” is more accurately translated as “to attend to carefully.”<sup>1</sup> This makes sense to me. This sounds like Jesus. Thus Davis would translate this phrase as “while teaching them to attend to all that I commanded you.” So the disciples are to teach these new folks to be especially attentive to the teachings of Jesus. That seems right. But Davis then raises an important question. “What has Jesus commanded?”<sup>2</sup> This leads him back to Matthew’s accounting of Jesus teachings we know as “the Sermon on the Mount” as the only place in Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus commands anything.<sup>3</sup> Davis then also suggests that this mountaintop exchange with the disciples is not only a predecessor to the ascension. It is also a tangible reminder to them of that first great teaching session about God on a mountain. Thus, this mountaintop imagery also connects Jesus directly back to Moses, “who went up onto the mountain to receive instruction from God that was given in the law.”<sup>4</sup> This makes sense to me. Matthew wanted folks to be very clear that Jesus was in the same category as Moses, the lawgiver and the person who led the Israelites out of captivity into freedom.

There is then one final exhortation from Jesus to the disciples, the last words Matthew recounts coming from Jesus’ mouth:

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/06/galilean-rendezvous.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

“remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” These words have offered great comfort to so many over the millennia, reassuring us that no matter how crazy things get, no matter how discouraged we become, no matter how fearful we are of the things happening all around us, Jesus is still with us, still guiding us, still present to us and for us with all the authority on heaven and earth in his possession. Unfortunately, though, this is one of those phrases we hear and appreciate without really taking it to heart. “Yeah, sure, Jesus is with us but ...” I still have cancer. I’m still worried about paying my bills. I’m still afraid about all the divisiveness and violence in our society. We trust that you are with us, Jesus, but sometimes it still feels like you are a million miles away with no clue what we’re dealing with.

I know I’ve felt that way at times. I think we all have. Sometimes life is just hard. Too often these days it’s just too scary even to watch the news! So, where is Jesus anyway? How do we find him in the midst of so many frightening things on so many days? That, dear ones, is a real question. If we trust that Jesus is there with us always, as he promised, then where is he during these days in which we are living? Why does he feel so far away? This makes me wonder if perhaps the whole notion of what it means to make disciples in this day and age has been turned on its head. Maybe it’s not so much about finding new believers as it is helping the folks who have loved Jesus for a long time rediscover what it means to love and follow him in *these* times. Perhaps this search for Jesus is itself what it means to be a disciple. Perhaps one can already be a believer, a follower of Jesus, a person who prays and reads scripture and yet that need to search for Jesus as real and tangible in our lives is still pressing. Perhaps our paths to discipleship in this day and age call us first to recognize that we must search for Jesus in the midst of so many things in life that would pull us away from Jesus.

So what do I mean by that? Well, I think it's entirely possible, if not likely, that we can get caught up too easily in doing what we think is the good thing to do, the right thing to do, the best thing to do, in a given situation, without stopping to consider or even look for Jesus in the situation. For example, anti-abortion activists tend to be conservative Christians who believe without a doubt that they are doing God's work as they protect the lives of what they call the unborn. Defining just what "unborn" means has become the purview of politicians and lawyers rather than the medical community who are charged with caring for the lives of mother and fetus equally. These anti-abortion folks, the ones who claim to be Christian at least, completely dismiss the other faithful Christians, not to mention folks from other religious traditions and no religious tradition who do not share this narrow world view. There are many faithful folks who believe a woman's life and bodily autonomy should be the final determinant for medical care in this situation. Both sides of this divisive debate believe they are faithful disciples of Jesus. But where is Jesus here? Both sides claim they know, and it's on their side. But that gets us exactly nowhere. If we ask the discipleship question of where Jesus is in this debate, the answer becomes a little easier to see. Jesus would be on the side of love. Love God with all that you are and all that you have and love the other as much as you love yourself. Is it loving to force a 10 year old raped by a relative to carry a baby to term, ripping her child's body to pieces in the process? Is it loving to prosecute the doctor who performed the abortion this child so obviously needed? Is it loving to force a woman who is miscarrying to wait until she goes into potentially lethal sepsis before granting her permission for a medical abortion? I see no love of Jesus here, because it's not.

And what of those ongoing campus demonstrations happening in response to the war in Gaza? I have to admit as I watch the coverage

of these demonstrations happening at college campuses all over the country, I am reminded of the virulent anti-war demonstrations at college campuses right at the time I was applying to college. I remember the violence that followed on both sides. Students occupying buildings and trashing them while other students stormed draft offices (the draft was still active then) and poured pigs blood all over everything. People were outraged! What's wrong with these kids, they would say! The police were deployed to break up protests with tear gas and water hoses. Still the students demonstrated, determined to stop what they saw as a pointless war costing thousands of lives of the Vietnamese people and the US soldiers sent there to fight. Some states – like Ohio – eventually deployed the National Guard in response to what they saw as students out of control. The situation got worse and worse until one day – May 4, 1970 – when the National Guard deployed to Kent State University in Ohio opened fire on the students, killing four and wounding nine more, one of whom suffered permanent paralysis. These shootings triggered a massive response across the country – a student strike which closed 450 campuses; a protest rally in Washington, DC which turned violent; and other attacks on students at other universities. At this point we should note that sentiment was against the student demonstrators rather than the war they were protesting or the Nixon administration who had supported the harsh responses. It took a while for the public opinion about the war to shift.

So, does all this sound familiar? It should because we are witnessing the same thing right now as students protest in support of the Palestinians and against the Israeli army which has killed over 30,000 Palestinians in response to the Hamas attack which killed 1200 Israeli Jews. Most problematic about all this to me is that the student protests are being labeled as antisemitic because they are protesting against the actions of Israel. This is an unfortunate misuse

of the term “antisemitism” because it is conflating the nation of Israel with the Jewish people themselves. There are many Jews protesting among the students and the demonstrations are supported by a segment of the Jewish community. Are these Jews themselves antisemitic because of their objections to the actions of Israel, actions which are systematically eradicating the Palestinians? This is a real question demanding thoughtful, and not knee-jerk, answers and yet none are forthcoming.

So, again, if we apply our discipleship metric to this situation where is Jesus in these campus protests? Are these students being unduly influenced by “outside agitators” as some have alleged? Are the university administrators just too lax, as some have implied? It’s so interesting to me that in the Vietnam War Era protests, no one was questioning whether or not the university administrators were doing their jobs. Everyone blamed the students for not respecting authority. It was a sad and scary time. But what I most remember about that whole time frame when I was old enough to be among the protestors was a friend I made the first semester of college in 1972. Her name was Sue and she was from Cleveland, Ohio. It was clear from the first day of orientation that she wasn’t as happy or excited as the rest of us. She eventually explained to us that she had really wanted to go to Kent State but her parents wouldn’t let her because of the shootings. They were afraid of “what kind of kids” would be surrounding her at that school. She understood why her parents were afraid, but she felt their fears weren’t a good enough reason to keep her from the school she wanted to attend. I wasn’t surprised when she wasn’t back at our school for winter term. I just hope she was at Kent State.

Back to our question of where is Jesus, where is discipleship, in this situation of campus protests? If we accept the notion that Jesus’ instructions to the disciples were “to attend to” all that he had taught them, it would seem to me that those in these situations who are

treating everyone – not just the people they agree with but everyone – with kindness and respect, this is where we find Jesus. He's not with the students hurling insults and threats at Jewish students, nor is he with the administrators ordering the dismantling of the protest camps by police. He's not at the congressional hearings accusing university administrations of not doing their jobs. He's not anywhere present where violence by anyone is used to protest injustice. He is with the people in Palestine – Arab and Christian – who have been killed in relentless bombing raids by Israel on civilian targets in case Hamas was hiding among them; who are slowly starving to death because Hamas sympathizers might get some food along with the others if aid organizations are permitted in. Jesus is with the students who cannot let the enormity of these injustices go unnoticed, who cannot stand by while an entire population is killed. Dear ones, where else would Jesus be in this mess?

Dear ones, Jesus is in the midst of all this turmoil we find ourselves enduring every day. Our call to discipleship is the same every day, in spite of all of these things that make it sometimes feel like our country is being pulled apart. In fact, it is precisely these divisive and frightening times in which our call to discipleship takes on new meaning. We are called to attend to Jesus and what he teaches us about loving God and loving the other. We are called to look beyond the headlines of scary news stories to see the people behind them. We are called to respond to every situation as members of the beloved community Jesus has invited us into as God's people in this crazy world. And what is our response to be? Love. If there is no love, Jesus is not there. If there is only hate and distrust and determination to be right no matter what the consequences, Jesus is not there. If books are seen as evil, if people are seen as evil just because they want to live as they know God created them, Jesus is not there. If the color of one's skin matters more than how one lives one's

life, Jesus has no part in that. God has no part in that. Such hatred, that's all human. And the ugliest part of being human at that. This is not the discipleship to which Jesus calls us. It can't be.

So what then? Remember what Mark Davis explains to us. We are to attend to all that Jesus taught. That means we are to study it, remember it, and do our very best to live it every day. This is what it means to be a disciple. This is how we convince others that being a disciple is the best thing possible. This is how we change the world. And it all begins with you and me. Thank you, Jesus! Amen.