

## “THE GREAT COMMISSION”

Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20

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These next three Sundays I want to share with you messages about the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ. The messages certainly apply to our congregation, but to any Christian Church. In the aftermath of Easter, we are especially sharing the call to The Great Commission this week, and then next week the call to The Great Commandment that God gives to us, and then also The Great Opportunity will be shared on Confirmation and Capital Sunday.

Jesus Christ never intended for us to keep it a secret, the good news of His amazing great, great love for us. As I share this passage of scripture with you, I want you to for a few moments, as I read it, to think of those people who were most influential when you were becoming a Christian. Think back on their lives and what it was about them that helps you today to want to know Jesus Christ as your savior. In the ending of Matthew’s gospel, it says:

*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 is a legend that, when Jesus came back to Heaven, Gabriel was noticing the nail-scarred hands and he saw the wound in His side, and he said, “They were pretty rough on You down there, huh?” He said, “Yes, they were.”

“Did they know that You love them, Lord? Do these people know that You love them?”

He said, “Well, not everyone, but a few of them do.”

Gabriel was kind of concerned about that, “Well, exactly how many people know?”

“Well, Peter, James and John know, and the plan is for them to share this love with a few other friends and for those to share it with others. In fact, the sharing is supposed to continue until everyone on the face of the earth knows that I love them.”

Well, Gabriel knew about Peter, James and John and knew that, well, what poor stuff they were made of at times, and said, “Well, Lord, what if Peter, James and John and the others grow weary of this task and what if, well, people don’t share this good news, and what about, way down in the 21st Century, and people just simply don’t share it? Don’t you have some other plan than being dependent on these people?”

“No. I have no other plan.”

The Great Commission is needed as much today as it has ever been needed. Oftentimes, though, Christians come to it with fear and trepidation like the only people that can participate are great evangelists or extroverted people, but I want you to simply hear today that, if you know Christ, God wants your participation badly in The Great Commission. Yes, He can use you, your life, your witness, everything about you to reach other people for Christ. And it is His heart's desire that people will know Him and know about this great love. Jesus said it this way:

*The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Pray you, therefore, that the Lord of the Harvest will send forth laborers into His harvest.*

Jesus needs laborers today. He needs people that really want to, not just keep this great Christian faith to themselves, but they want to live in such a way that they will build a bridge across hearts — the heart of God to the heart of other people.

When it comes to The Great Commission today, Christians and the Church are going to be effected. There are three questions that you need to be able to answer and answer well.

First of all, what is The Great Commission? Jesus had gathered His Disciples together and first of all, He said, "All authority ... has been given to me."

So, it's not something we think of, but it's from God; it's the Lord's idea. He has the authority and He says, *Go therefore and make disciples ...*, that is learners, people who want to learn the Christian faith, want to learn to walk in the ways of Christ and mature in their Christian faith. It's for all people on the face of the earth.

Jesus said, *All nations ...*, And you would think: Well, that's an extremely daunting task, and it is, but then He promises, *Lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age.*

When Jesus was explaining The Great Commission to Nicodemus, He summed it up well, as Nicodemus just couldn't just quite understand about this being born from above, being born again. And He said, *God so loved the world, Nicodemus, that He gave His only Son, and that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.*

It's the good news of God's love. The Apostle Paul, one of the greatest missionaries of the Christian faith, who was writing to the Romans, said:

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*

Paul knew that his life had been changed by Christ, and oftentimes you find him, in his writing, going back to his testimony about how he had been changed by Christ.

But hear this, the good news: The Gospel is Good News. What is some good news that you have heard lately? You know, when my children were born, we weren't embarrassed by it; we were excited about it. You know, we called people; we shared with them; we had pictures. You do that with children and grandchildren. When we got married, it wasn't as big a to do as yesterday's wedding, with Charles and Camilla, but we did have our choir there, since we had met in

the choir. But we wanted everybody to know we loved each other and we wanted them to come with us. I remember coming out that day and looking out and thinking: There are empty seats; I can't believe it. The greatest event of all times and people aren't here. But still, Liz came and that's the main thing, and agreed to marry me, and sticks with me and that is wonderful.

And you, I can't let it go, that about midnight, I got some calls from my boys and this past Monday night, and they weren't calling for money; they weren't calling to wish me a happy birthday; they were celebrating that the Tar Heels had won, and it was great. And I stayed up late that night, watched it all, and was glad that my daughter was one of those down on Franklin Street celebrating. Well, I'll be humble about it today because I realize that Carolina and God — for a lot of people — that's an oxymoron: it doesn't mix. I know this from experience because when I went to my home Church and asked them to recommend me to be a Methodist preacher, I went to the Staff Parish Committee and they took me seriously; they wanted to hear about my calling, wanted to know why I believed that God was calling me to be a preacher. I went to the Charge Conference and, you know, you can't be a Methodist preacher unless you go to Church and believe that God has called you. And so, I went; I was a little bit nervous. I remember the minister there; he got up and he was sharing about, "This is John Fowler... He went to Carolina..." Well, when he said that, about two rows in front of me, these two guys started laughing. And I understand what they were laughing about: they thought it was hilarious that God could find *anybody* on Carolina's campus to preach the Gospel. But I was a good boy; I was kind of indignant at the time, but I realized then that for some people, God and Carolina, they just don't mix.

But the Gospel is good news. It's the good news of God's love that He sent Christ on the cross to die for us.

But, secondly, why should we participate in it? I remember when Charles Kyker was here, he shared that George Barnes says that 95 percent of Christians will never share their faith. I don't know where George got that statistic, but I just hope he is wrong. I understand that people are quiet about it; it is personal and maybe they are a shy personality, but I just can't fathom that you could go through a lifetime and not even share with your family or share with friends that the Christian faith is important to you.

But why should we share? Well, certainly because Christ calls us to, but the primary reason is that lives will be changed. It never was intended that we keep it to ourselves. In the Gospel of John, when Jesus has an encounter with someone, they are never the same. In John, chapter 4, there is this woman who has all kind of relationship problems. You know somebody like that, don't you? They just can't hold on to a relationship for anybody, or it's just lightning and thunder. But this is a woman who has been married five times. She is now living with a man, and Jesus begins to speak to her about a well that will never run dry; there is water that you can drink of and never be thirsty again. And she finds out that well that He is speaking about is Him. But she invites Christ into her life and has this encounter with Him and it is not enough for her to keep it to herself and keep it kind of quiet. She goes and shares with other people. She doesn't know any better. She doesn't know you are not supposed to do that. She just goes ahead and does it. And you are supposed to do that. Her life is never the same. I

think of John, chapter 9. There is a man who was born blind. When Christ touches his eyes, he

is able to see. His parents don't want to have anything to do with him. He's gotten religious and they don't want to have anything to do with him. The religious leaders of that time said, "Well, what did he do?" They are more interested in analyzing Jesus than they are in just knowing Him. He says, "Well, all I know is, I once was blind but now I see." His life was changed.

Peoples' lives are changed when they have an encounter with Jesus Christ. Christian Schwarz, who was the head of the Natural Church Development Institute, developed a great guide to a healthy church that we have used, because it is healthy churches that reach people for Christ, and that's what you want. And the greatest tool of evangelism today is the body of Christ. When the body of Christ is strong and healthy, there is nothing like it, and it is still God's primary plan. But he points out that, oftentimes, when we hear people talk about evangelism, you have to remember it's people who are gifted in evangelism. And most surveys on spiritual gifts will tell you about ten percent of the congregation is very gifted in that. That means that 90 percent are gifted in other ways. They are gifted administratively; they are gifted pastorally, or teaching or other ways. But that doesn't mean they are left out. It just means that there are some people that are more gifted than others, so don't think you have been left out, it's just for specialists. And also he points out that most everyone has about eight and one half contacts with people who are un-churched. (I'm not sure about that half a contact) It's not something that, "Well, I'm already busy — I've just got to add on..." No, you already are around other people. It's family; it's people you work with; it's people you are in clubs with that have drifted away from Christ or they don't know Him. Their lives can be changed when they see genuinely that Christ has come into you life. I think of Andy Lambert, who was with us several years ago. He talks about the domino effect in his book, *Fuel for the Journey*. First of all, he says it this way:

It all started when Blanche introduced Peggy to Ray. To be more accurate, it all really began when my uncle Roy met, fell in love with, married Blanche, who then met Ray, Roy's younger brother. Blanche worked in a factory with Peggy. (Now pay attention or you'll get lost, if you're not lost already). Blanche played matchmaker and convinced Ray to go on a blind date with Peggy. Well, as a result of that particular date, Ray and Peggy eventually fell in love, were married, produced two adorable boys, Tim and Andy (I'm sure that's Andy Lambert). And you need to focus because this is where it gets complicated. Gay, Peggy's brother's wife, offered a slice of pizza to Peggy's brother's wife's nephew Andy, also known as Ray's son, Roy's nephew and Tim's brother, who for the very first time sampled this scrumptious concoction of dough, tomato sauce, cheese and pepperoni. This began my lifelong addiction to pizza. Blanche introduced Ray to Peggy, which, ultimately, led me to pizza.

But then, he shares though, of a widow in his congregation who just simply invited a nine year old neighbor, a little girl, to church. The little girl came to church. Several weeks later she invited Christ into her life. This little girl went home and just shared simply about what had happened in her life to her mom. The mom next became a Christian. Two brothers became Christian and then her dad, who was a rage-filled alcoholic — it took about nine years — but he became a Christian. But it really didn't stop there because his family had

been so changed by Christ with this domino effect, this chain reaction, that they went forth, those two brothers, and became preachers. But all of them realized that — Christ has changed me; I want to share with the world how He has changed me. (tape change)

... how much you got to see of Pope John Paul's funeral. I knew that he had a world wide ministry but I had no idea that he would have that big of a response for his life and his witness. Think of this man who loved Christ and lived passionately for Christ. I have a book that he wrote; really it was intended to be a book of encouragement, I think, to his priest on the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination. But there is one line there that says we are to be tireless evangelists of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He took John Wesley's motto, "The world is my parish," very seriously, going throughout the world sharing Christ, having a courageous witness for Christ. But today, most of us will never have that kind of world wide impact. But that's not the point. The point is that a committed life to Christ, dedicated, being faithful, can really have an impact on other people's lives.

Why do we participate in The Great Commission? Because lives will be changed.

The third question is, How do we participate in The Great Commission? How do we participate? How do we do it? We do it by being faithful to God's will for our lives and we make the decision that we want to participate; we don't want to be a spectator; we don't want just to be an admirer of Jesus. We want to, all right — this is not some elite activity — it's for me.

You know, the Master's golf tournament that is going on, I'm just still always amazed when you watch them on television how, especially when they tee off and all those people are lined up — I think, if I were teeing up, you wouldn't get that close to the golfer; you'd be running for your lives. But I think of Jack Nicklaus being urged to participate, not only a great, great golfer and, as he says, this is his last time, but after the personal tragedy — his grandson had died the first of March — and at his son's urging, he would still play golf. It's time to go back and live again. And what courage he is showing in participating.

God wants us to have courage in participating in this Great Commission that God has given to us. Rick Warren, in his *Purpose Driven Life*, says that one of the ways we do this is through sharing our life message, that is that we live the faith, but also, as we are able to, we articulate the faith. Our life messages — he has some questions here to jog your memory. That is, what has God taught me from failure? Or, what are some life lessons that God has taught me from the lack of money? What has God taught me from pain and sorrow or depression? What has God taught me from waiting? What has God taught me through illness? What has God taught me from disappointment? What have I learned from my family, my church, my relationships, my small groups and my critics?

I like the way he says it this way: "Shared stories build a relational bridge that Jesus can walk across from your heart to others."

What is your life story? How has God changed you? In my life I am very thankful for the variety of people that God used — Sunday School teachers, my parents, preachers. I think of strategic people that God put in my life to help bring me back to the Christian faith. It wasn't just

one. It was a variety of people that God used and still continues to use to inspire me. How does it happen specifically? One, we pray. And second, we love people into the kingdom. It's really not that difficult.

Let me close with this example. When my father was about my age, I don't know why, but he drifted, went away from the Church. I don't know what happened in his life; I just know he went away from the Church he had grown up in and which he had been a part of all his life. But after I came back to Christ, made the decision to enter the ministry, for about five years there, I just felt led, every stoplight, I would pray for Dad. I would pray for Dad to come on back home. And I realized too that I couldn't argue him into the Kingdom, *back* to the kingdom, in that case. I did try to live the faith before him. I really believe in "stoplight praying", and that's a good time to, instead of just thinking, I wish it would turn green, go on and pray for some people that are on your heart. I did that for five or six years. I tried to do my part. But you know what I really think made the biggest difference? Oh, I know he had a Christian wife; he had other people influencing him, but about 14 years after that, after he had drifted away, he had a by-pass operation. When he had that operation he was convalescing. That Church in which he had been inactive for 14 or 15 years, reached out to him. They showed that they still cared about him, that they still loved him. And I remember my Mom called me up soon after that and saying, "Guess where we went Sunday."

"Where?"

"We went back to Providence Methodist Church." His faith was reignited. Why? People prayed for him, but the Body of Christ was loving him back into the Kingdom. For you see, the Great Commission is the Good News of God's love, is the grand privilege He has given to us, the Power of the Spirit to share so lives can be changed. Let us pray.

*Our Lord, we ask you to open our hearts today that we would not keep this wonderful news to ourselves. Empower us by the Holy Spirit to use our personalities, to use our gifts, to use our opportunities to share this good news. Lord, help us to be Your ambassadors as You seek to make Your appeal to us. For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*