

“teaching them”

Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 22:23-31

Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 28:16-30

We gather today at the gate, the embarkation point, the starting line of an eventful season. Caps and gowns, summer jobs, family vacations, family obligations, new careers, career changes, corporate relocations, college orientations, weddings, summer camps, goodbye to Mrs. Maisel, reunion with Raylon Givens (*Justified: Primeval - I'm so excited!*), outdoor concerts, walks on the beach, hikes in the mountains, naps on the couch, college checklists, steaks on the grill, doctor's appointments for pickleball elbow, unexpected family crises, ethical conundrums, global warming, culture wars, neighborhood tensions, severing relationships, birthday parties, funeral visitations, baseball rivalries, and all manner of life transitions, traumas, and aspirations. We walk out of here today into a season pregnant with possibilities and portents.

The same could be said for those road weary, emotionally traumatized eleven disciples warily walking up a mountain close to home. What a year it had been; a long sojourn to Jerusalem in the company of One whose presence, power, word, and calling could not be ignored, but could only be followed. *Immediately, they left their nets and followed him.*

A regular exercise among small groups and youth groups in church is to have participants share the highs and lows of their day or week or year. Well, if a facilitator had joined the disciples for that hike up the mountain, they never would have gotten out of the parking lot for all the self-reporting because everyone present had experienced the highest of highs and the lowest of lows — call stories, literal mountaintop experiences, miracles, life-changing/life-forming lectures, fearful sea crossings, the arrest of their Lord, the terror of what may become of them, the crushed dreams and grief of seeing Jesus on the cross, the confusion spurred by Mary's report of a risen Lord.

Highs and lows! By the time the disciples finished sharing there'd be no time left for the hike. Yet, perhaps still clouded with confusion, the hike was marked with nervous silence. Matthew says that when the disciples saw the risen Jesus, *they worshiped him; but some doubted*. But isn't that true every time people circle up for everything from Sunday services to Bible studies to saying grace around the family table — a mixture of worship and doubt? In fact, isn't that true to what is happening within us individually every time the subject of God breaches our defenses? A mixture of worship and doubt. I think Matthew here is only acknowledging our inevitable

reality. Certitude is not a sign of but an obstacle to faith. Don't you think that when Jesus meets us here, he knows he is seeing in each of us a holy mess of muddled motivations and emotions. I envy the confident, I truly do, right up to the point of seeing so clearly how arrogance blinds folks to truth.

So ... confused, sleep-deprived, exhausted — both emotionally and physically, the worshiping, doubting disciples stand on the mountain in the presence of the risen Lord. You know, each Gospel is unique, and it is notable that Matthew chooses to end his gospel, not with some concluding theological observation, not with a summary of the journey thus far, not an account of the disciples' trip back down the mountain, but simply with the voice and words of Jesus. Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Now, there are two things I want to say to you about these words: one is a warning and the other is a challenge. This warning and this challenge

are pertinent to all of us, and perhaps particularly germane to our graduates today.

Graduates ... How ya' doin'? Congratulations. It's a big deal ... Now, I realize there's a decent probability that many of you already checked out somewhere between "The Lord be with you" and "Holy, holy, holy." I know I probably rank right up there with the teacher in the classic movie calling roll (*Bueller... Bueller*), or maybe the teacher in *Charlie Brown* (*Wa, Wa, Wa*). Yet, I hope you can hang with me and catch something of this warning and challenge, because how you deal with these words of Jesus will have a significant impact on the world you are entering and the paths you will follow.

The warning: These words of Jesus are dangerous, not intentionally, but dangerous in how they have been and continue to be misused and abused by Christians through history even to today. Professing Christians have misread these words as a summons to triumphalism and a call to conquest, and have continually used them as rationale for crusades, conquests, and missions, ways that have resulted in untold deaths, incalculable suffering, and perpetual injustice — the Crusades, Manifest

Destiny, the displacement, persecution, and slaughter of indigenous peoples, slavery, Colonialism, Holocaust, Apartheid, Jim Crow... Throughout all of these occasions, these words of Jesus have been twisted into a rationale of or justification for dominion and power over other populations. Just this week, laws were passed in Uganda that would cast the LGBTQ+ community into an environment of persecution and imprisonment using as one of its rationale the narrow, distorted lessons learned from fundamentalist American missionaries schooled in Christian dominion. The ethos driving this Christian triumphalism, Christian nationalism is the notion that if you don't believe what I believe, or live like I live, then you are somehow less than; that you remain outside God's community, unless you do as I do in the manner I tell you. It's an ethos that says, I don't want to partner with you; I want you to fit in the box I made for you.

We cannot deny that bullet point in the Christian resume. It is no surprise that people hear of this dark chapter of religious history and decide they don't want to hear any of the other chapters.

The tragedy here is at least threefold: First, the suffering endured is inexcusable and devastating and calls for repentance. Second, the misuse of

this text is a complete departure from Jesus' intent and denies his very character.

Look at Jesus' words, look at Jesus' deeds, look at the cross — All of it represents a rejection of religious exceptionalism or any other form of exceptionalism. All of it points to a love that is merciful and always self-giving. "Love your neighbor as yourself." "When you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place." "Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves." "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Wherever arrogance increases, wherever pride pushes anyone outside, our witness to Christ diminishes. The misuse of Jesus' words and the complicity of Christians in the suffering of others is in effect a denial of the Jesus they say they are defending. Jesus doesn't need our defending. Jesus asks for our love. The triumph of Jesus Christ is never over others, but always a triumph of love over fear, over hate, over exclusion, over prejudice.

A third tragedy in the misuse of Jesus' words is the way it prevents others from seeing the Jesus who is. Do we really want to be complacent when the impact of much Christian witness is in effect a rewriting of an old

hymn — *They will know we are Christians by our hate?* Is that what we want the world to hear?

Jesus said, “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.” We must always read these words in the light of who said them, and how Jesus’ life interprets them for us. This is not a prideful call to conquest. Making disciples is not about coercion and certainly not about dominion. Making disciples is about modeling the self-giving love of Jesus in thought, word, and deed; representing love as revealed in Jesus in everything we do. This is a call to welcome and generosity — “all nations” — no one is excluded from God’s love; all are welcome. “Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit” — God for us, God with us, God at work in us. Baptism is never something we confer, but always something we celebrate as a sign, not of what we are doing, but of what God is doing in ways both profound and mysterious.

God’s love is always expansive, in ways far beyond our imaginings, which brings me to a word of challenge for our graduates and to us all. The

challenge? Think theologically in this complex, broken world. You enter a world that to a certain extent appears like a carnival midway, with barkers, auctioneers, tik-tok-ers, evangelists, sinners, saints, and salespeople calling for your attention, luring you to their attraction/your distraction, filling you with notions, ideologies, cures, promises, sales pitches, visions of riches, playing on your insecurities, manipulating your emotions, stoking anger, fomenting fear, labeling enemies, manufacturing crises.

And all those voices will be coming at you, pulling at you at the same time you will be making fundamental decisions that will frame the decades before you; choices about what career you will pursue, who you will commit your love to, what ladders you will seek to climb, what lifestyle you believe will bring you comfort, what friends you will value, what objects you will prize.

So, as you walk through this loud and chaotic midway, upon what ground will you stand? What values will inform your choices? What will you trust to help you choose what path you will follow, who you will embrace, what you will invest yourself in? What will define your journey, guide your mind and heart? Will it be the emotion of the moment, the scratch you want



itched, the path of least resistance, or political expedience, or self interest, or greed, or fear?

What will form your moral gyroscope, your ethics, your heart? I'm asking you to consider where Jesus fits in, not the Jesus pandered in pride and in pursuit of power; rather the Jesus as revealed in his life, his words, and his self-giving love. You may say you don't have the time for all that; or you'll someday get around to it; or it's irrelevant to the career you choose or how you will live. But, knowing something of the challenges before you and before this world, I am called to tell you, you cannot afford not to pay attention to Jesus' witness of self-giving love. For if the paint color of your front door or the perceived insult from your frenemy is of greater concern than the welfare of your neighbor, then this world and all our lives will always be less than they could be.

Jesus' last challenge to his disciples and his permanent calling to us was to teach all that he had commanded us. The beauty of this is its simplicity, for all Jesus taught us comes down to this: merciful, self-giving love in all things, at all times. And look, he doesn't ever expect us to do it alone. "Lo, I am with you always; even to the end of this age." Amen.