

Marching Order for Foot-Sore Disciples

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 28:16-20

Why is the passage at the end of Matthew often called the “Great Commission?” First, it is great in the sense of saving the best for last. What makes it great is that these are Jesus’ final words to his people – his disciples then and his disciples today. Second, it is great because of the content of his message. These marching orders describe a great vision of the church. We hear the greatness of the vision in the repetition of the word “All” four times in Greek. Matthew’s listeners would have heard the commission something like, “**ALL** Authority (social, political, spiritual emotional, philosophical, metaphysical, physical, economical) has been given to me. As you are going *make disciples* of **ALL** Nations (universal, diverse, languages, tribes)... *baptizing* them in the name of the – Father, Son, Holy Spirit and *teaching* them **ALL** Jesus Commands. (Which in Matt 22 is summarized as Love God and Neighbor as yourself). And I will be with you at **ALL** Times.” With that bit of information let’s read these familiar words again. Read Matthew 28:16-20.

At the end of his gospel Matthew presents us with the all-powerful, always present, Jesus giving marching orders to eleven disciples. Did you notice that? There are only eleven disciples here! Why does he highlight the diminished number of disciples? One reason is to record that Judas is no longer counted among the disciples. But, there is more going on here. The number 12 is an important number in God’s plan of redemption. The number 12 symbolizes the complete people of God. For example:

- How many sons did Jacob have? Twelve!
- How many tribes did Israel have when they settled the Promised Land? Twelve!
- In the book of Revelation the New Jerusalem descends from heaven... how many foundation stones? Twelve. They have the names of the twelve Old Testament tribes.
- And how many gates in that city? Twelve and they have the names of the twelve apostles. That city represents the entire people of God – Old Testament people and New Testament people finally one!

Beginning in Genesis and ending in Revelation God’s Old Testament and New Testament people – the Church – are represented by the number 12. But when Jesus gives his “Great Commission” Matthew points out that the church is not so great. At the end of Matthew’s gospel the Church is incomplete, diminished. It’s wounded. The Bible scholar Dale Brunner says that for Matthew, the number eleven limps. As if to emphasize his point limping church, Matthew recalls that even though they worshipped Jesus, “some doubted.” So here are the disciples, less one, shuffling their way into worship. They lift their hands in praise, but somehow their hearts aren’t in it. They bow their knees in honor, but their minds are wandering and...wondering. Who is this Jesus? Jesus doesn’t look like a successful King to them. Jesus looks like the underdog to them... his hands and feet still bearing the marks of crucifixion and defeat. They can recall how he was arrested by the Jews and crucified by the Romans. If he is a king, then he is an underdog king.

At the climax of his gospel Matthew offers a strange picture of Jesus standing on wounded feet and lifting wounded hands, commissioning a limping Church. Tonight we will consider why does the Church of Jesus limp? And what does that have tell us about the Churches

authority (from Jesus) to “make disciples...”? To answer those questions we will have to lace up our hiking boots, because we will be trekking through Matthew’s gospel. Matthew shows us at least three reasons why the Church limps into worship to receive the great commission and limps back out into the world to participate in the commission.

The first reason for the disciples’ limp in the Gospel of Matthew is that the disciples are foot-sore. Jesus is on the move and calls his disciples to follow him. After his birth he is on the move – fleeing from Herod – he travels with Mary and Joseph to Egypt. And then when it is safe he travels from Egypt back to Israel, where he eventually settles in Nazareth in the north. Matthew describes Jesus ministry as that or an itinerant preacher who walks from village to village, and town to town. East to West and North to South. Jesus was quite a walker... and he calls his disciples to walk with him. It doesn’t sound like this is a leisurely stroll. Jesus calls over his shoulder to the disciples, “Hey guys, follow me, keep up, I’m going places...” Peter and Andrew, James and John, Matthew and the others try to keep in step with Jesus as he proclaims good news of the kingdom, and heals diseases (Mt. 4:23).

In the first four chapters of Matthew’s gospel Jesus is building up momentum. There is very little opposition to his Kingdom message and healing disease. He is quite popular and builds up enough speed to propel him up on the mountain with his 12 new disciples and crowds of people in his wake.

This brings us to the second reason for a limping church. Once Jesus gets to the top of the mountain he slams on the brakes and sits down and tells us that the Kingdom of God is for people who limp. We call Matthew 5, 6, and 7 “The Sermon on the Mount.” The sermon opens with the Beatitudes which describe people who limp. I find Dale Brunner’s summary of the beatitudes helpful. He says Jesus describes a kingdom for the helpless, helpers and the hurting. First Jesus says there is blessing of the “Helpless” - the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. They will inherit the kingdom, be comforted and be filled. Second, Jesus says there is blessing for the “Helpers” - the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. They will be shown mercy, see God, and be called children of God. Finally, Jesus says there is blessing for the “Hurting” - those who are persecuted because of righteousness. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

In the rest of the sermon Jesus says this is a kingdom where those who are first in the world are last in the kingdom of God, and where the last in the world become first in the kingdom. It’s where the love for enemies is stronger than vengeance and where adultery and murder are a matter of the heart. Jesus’ kingdom is where earthly treasure is consumed and heavenly treasure is eternal. And in this kingdom the wide fast road leads to destruction and where those who walk the narrow road of Jesus find life. In our me-first-winner-take-all-top-dog world Jesus describes his kingdom as an upside down kingdom for underdogs. It’s a kingdom for the *Helpless* and the *Helpers* and the *Hurting*. So, the second reason that the church at the end of the gospel limps is because the Kingdom is for people who limp.

The third reason the church limps is that the me-first-winner-take-all-top-dog people attack the upside-down-kingdom-for-the-underdog people. This attack begins in chapters 8 and 9. And then in Chapter 10 Jesus gives this Kingdom authority to his followers, the church. This is the first commission and he sends his disciples out to proclaim the good news of the upside down Kingdom throughout Israel. And so the disciples go North and South, East and West, village to village, town to town throughout Israel proclaiming this kingdom. But as soon as the twelve disciples receive the authority of the upside down kingdom for underdogs – helpless, helpers and the hurting – this is when Jewish authorities try to trip up the travelling disciples.

The top-dog-winner-take-all-me-me-first- kingdom people start to oppose the authority of the kingdom of God. From around chapter 10 until the end in chapter 28... every step that Jesus takes, and every step of the disciples is opposed by the powerful people. First the religious leaders and then the civil leaders – Romans. In these chapters Matthew tell us that John is imprisoned, and then killed. Judas trips, falls and betrays Jesus. Jesus is arrested. Peter stumbles and denies Jesus. Jesus is tried, crucified, died and is buried. So, after all that, is it any wonder that the disciples are foot-sore and find themselves limping into this worship service to receive the Great Commission?

But friends... there is more happening at the climax of Jesus' earthly ministry. When Jesus stands on wounded feet and lifts his wounded hands in commission... the disciples are reminded of the defeat. But they also see that Jesus' wounds are healed – the cross could not keep him. They recognize that the darkness of Friday was pushed by Easter Sunday resurrection. They see Jesus who went down into the grave has been raised up the Lord of life. And the disciples realize that the sacrifice of Jesus has authority that the world knows nothing about. The resurrected Jesus gives marching order to a limping church. By transforming death into life Jesus reveals the authority of the Church. The authority Jesus gives the church is the authority of the limp. It is Jesus plan that the Church follow him to the places where people limp.

The evidence of the church's authority of the limp is all around us. Tonight we were reminded by baptism. Babies are weak, helpless. They can do nothing in their own strength. And yet they are members of God's covenant family. They are welcomed through his grace. As they grow up in Christ they will have opportunities to participate more fully in that grace. But, baptism reminds us that adults too must be born again. Jesus said, unless you become an infant you cannot be part of the Kingdom of God. God welcomes children fully into his family and this is an opportunity to boast in Christ's power made perfect in our limp.

We have evidence that the Church has authority of the limp in the ways we serve. Just as Jesus consistently served, healed, and freed the helpless, helpers and hurting, the Church can still be found limping alongside those who limp; protecting the rights of the unborn, advocating for the sick to be cared for, welcoming the stranger, homeless, mentally ill, immigrants, orphans and widows. And it is not just the "Big C" Church doing these things. Our congregation does these things – tutors limp over to Congress school to mentor at risk students and teach children of immigrants English. Members limp to their kitchen tables and mentor prisoners through Crossroad Prison Ministry by grading Bible lessons and writing letters. Every month members enter Bellamy Creek Prison in Ionia to worship with inmates. Young people serve homeless folks and know them by name at Degage. Adults limp down to God's Kitchen to serve meals. On Sundays teachers and nursery workers limp to serve our youngest members. On Wednesdays GEMS and Scout counselors limp to serve young people.

The church limps into these difficult places and walks with helpless and hurting people because we follow the risen Lord Jesus Christ who stood on scarred feet and stretched out scarred hands and said: "All authority belongs to me... so do as I did. As you go into this world, make disciples by initiating them into my death and resurrection... and teaching them to love God and neighbor... and have courage... for I am with you always... even to the end." Amen.