

Holy Habits: Sent Out

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 28:16-20

So we come to the end of our Holy Habits series. For the last five weeks we've been talking about the elements of worship and how we are formed by them. We've talked about how the Holy Spirit shapes us as we participate in weekly worship. We've gone through just about all the elements of worship, we've experienced its fullness of worship and now we've come to the end of the service. What's next? What does the Spirit form in us at the end of our service?

To address that question we go with the disciples to another ending place, the end of the gospel of Matthew. Because it seems to me that as the disciples stand on that mountain in front of Jesus shortly before he leaves them and ascends into heaven, they're standing in the same sort of spiritual position that we stand in at the end of our worship.

Think about it: at the end of Matthew, the disciples have experienced the fullness of the gospel. They've experienced the grace of his presence, they've felt the power of his call to repent and follow him. They've heard his preaching, his parables, his words in the sermon on the mount. They've seen his miracles and his acts of compassion. They lived the miracle of his death and resurrection. They've lived the whole story. And at the end of the service that's kind of where we are too. We've lived the whole story. Jesus has greeted us, we've fallen on our knees before him to confess our sins and we've received forgiveness, he's spoken his Word to us – his death and resurrection have been proclaimed. We maybe sat at the table with him and received his holy food. By the time we've been in this place an hour, we too have walked the road with Jesus! We've been immersed in this gospel story! It has surrounded us in the liturgy. It literally surrounds us in these windows. The disciples lived the story in Israel 2000 years ago; we relive it in this place.

But now that the worship is over, what's next? As we try to answer that question and as we look at the end of our worship service, let's see how Jesus ends things with his disciples in the gospel of Matthew.

So what comes after the worship? We've been immersed in the gospel story; what is it for? When I think about that question I think about the weight room at Calvin when I was in college. The weight room was downstairs in the old fieldhouse. It wasn't a great big shiny thing like Calvin has now; it was a middle sized room and as I remember it had some Nautilus machines. There were some free weights, and there were a few treadmills too. I do remember that the whole room was lined with mirrors. Mirrors all round. Mirrors on every wall. As far as I know that was the only room on campus walled with mirrors. That was actually pretty common back then I think. Most weight rooms had mirrors on the walls. Maybe that's still true. I don't know.

Why? Why would you put mirrors on the walls of a workout room? Why wouldn't you just paint them beige? Paint is cheaper after all. I think you all know why. People put mirrors on weight room walls so that they can watch themselves work out. They want to see the ripple in their bicep when they do those curls. They

want to see the definition in their quads when they do those squats. Those mirrors reveal the truth that a lot of workout culture is about feeling good about yourself when you look in the mirror. A lot of workout culture is about getting buff for the sake of getting buff. You aren't building strength because there is some task that requires strength; you are building strength for the sake of your own appearance.

There is a kind of strength training that is for something else. The high school basketball player works out because he plays in the post and he knows that it gets physical down there so he wants to put on some weight and strength so he can help his team. The middle-aged woman is going to Yellowstone with her college-age kids over the summer and they want to go hiking. She wants to go hiking too and so she's working out so that she can keep up with those young legs. The 75-year-old man sees the signs of dementia in his spouse and he realizes that he is going to spend some time as her caregiver. He starts working out and getting really healthy because he's determined to be there for his wife. All these people might look better in a mirror because of their exercise, but that's not why they're doing it. Their fitness is for others.

Worship is like a spiritual workout. We go through these elements of worship together to get our soul in shape. And the experience of this place is not for its own sake. We don't worship for the sake of the feeling we get in worship. Or so that we can look in the mirror and congratulate ourselves on being on the right side of the Jesus line? This Holy Habit is for others. It is for the world.

Jesus' time with his disciples is coming to an end. They have been immersed in his grace and his glory and now Jesus sends them to the world. "Go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." They've received Jesus' strength and Spirit, now they are sent out into the world on a mission. It's a complex and difficult mission. It is a mission to let the whole world know about the God who so loved this world and all its people that he sent his Son to die for it. This mission includes evangelism, telling others about Jesus and calling them to find their life in him. It includes teaching – passing on the teachings of Jesus to the next generation and helping new believers more fully understand his ways. It includes baptism and all the commitments of a church community – caring for each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. It includes the koinonia of the early church who cared for each other's material needs and shared all things in common. It includes the kind of charity shown in the early church when they would care all the poor of the land and not just their own. The disciples have been immersed in the grace and strength and power of Jesus, and now they are given a mission to the world.

This dynamic of receiving blessing and then getting a difficult mission is something you see throughout the Bible. All through the Bible, when God reveals his grace and glory to someone, the gift comes with a task. Moses gets to see a burning bush, but he also gets a call to preach to his people and confront Pharaoh. Abram is told that he will be blessed with descendants like the stars in the sky, but he's also sent out to live in a new land. Peter is blessed with an astonishing catch of fish; he's also given a mission to be a fisher for people. The disciples see the glorious appearance of the resurrected Jesus on the Galilean mountain, and they are also given the mission to make disciples.

And the mission is for us too. We receive grace every week in this place and we are given a mission to share the love of God with the world. It's a big job and people in our society aren't particularly receptive. Paul could go into the marketplace in Athens and all the thinkers there would come towards him curious about his strange new teaching. They'd want to hear more. In our culture, everyone thinks they already know everything they need to know about Jesus and they've already made up their minds. If you sit down with your coworker over coffee at break time and say, "Hey can I share with you the good news about Jesus?" ...well...let's just say it won't be a conversation starter. And on top of that, we're tired. We often feel overwhelmed by our own stuff, and our faith doesn't feel like a strong flame. "Lord I'm sometimes embarrassed that my faith isn't as strong as it should be, how can I bring other people to you?"

If you feel that way let me draw your attention to two little details in the text. Detail one: Matthew makes a point of reminding us that there are only 11 disciples meeting Jesus on the mountain. Commentator Dale Bruner says, "the number 11 limps." It reminds us that this is a broken community that has just been rocked by betrayal, conflict and failure. By inspiring Matthew to use the number 11, the Holy Spirit draws attention to the disciples' weakness. He does the same thing when we hear that some of the 11 doubted. Why did Matthew include that? Did he really need to add that note of uncertainty? Why mention the doubts? The doubts are mentioned because they are real and because they are normal for believers of every generation, and the doubts are mentioned because - along with the number 11 - they remind us that the church has always been a limping thing and the power for this mission comes from a different place. The strength for this mission do not come from the abilities of the missionaries, the strength for the mission comes from the One giving the blessing.

We call this passage the great commission and you can understand why. We are given a great task here. But as great as this commission is, it's sandwiched between two greater promises. The Great Commission is a sandwich. In the middle is our call, but that call is hemmed in, behind and before with the promises of God. Before he gives us our task, Jesus gives us the promise of his power. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." As you do this work, there is no place you can go where I do not reign. No city street, no country lane, no slum, no hospital waiting room, no drug house, no graveside, no courtroom, no classroom where I do not rule. All authority is mine. And then after he gives us our task he gives us the promise of his presence. He doesn't just rule those places from the dizzy heights of heaven, he is with us in the slum, in the hospital waiting room, at the graveside, on the streets. As we limp out to do our mission, carrying our fears and doubts, he is right there with us his hand on his shoulder saying 'do not be afraid, you are mine.'

You may look at today's church and see all the problems and the controversies and the infighting and you might say, 'Oh my goodness, this is bad. The church is in trouble. This is bad.' And believe me, I get why you would say that. But I ask you to consider these 11 men on that mountainside limping along with their doubts, you have to admit: God did quite a bit with them. There were only 11 of them and now there are how many Christians worldwide? 2 billion? God can do this. God has been doing this for quite a while.

And though there may be great resistance to this mission – particularly in our setting – there is great need of it. I read an article this week by a therapist in New York who was talking about the increase in suicidal thoughts among the young people he works with. His theory was that their state of mind was sign that our society was in trouble. These kids were the canaries in the coal mine. He observed that they had no identity, no rooted self. They were raised without religion. No governing story for their life. They were not given a sense of meaning.

As a typical example, he held up his conversation with a 13-year-old girl who was feeling the pressures of adolescence and wondering if it was worth it. Her parents were successful, but they didn't seem happy. They were unhappy in their work. They didn't seem to enjoy parenting. They were bored by their prosperity and they were constantly enraged by the political environment. And yet when they pushed their daughter toward anything, it would be the same kind of life they had. The same achievements. With their mouths they were sending the message, "You've got to do well in your studies and get into this school so that you can have success like us!" But the body language of their lives was anger, misery, resentment. "Why," she proclaimed, "*would she want any of this, and why do they want her to pretend as if she wants it? 'They don't even pretend they want it, really!'*" she exclaimed." The girl thought to herself, "If that's all there is, is life worth living?"

We have good news for her. She was made for more. Our souls are restless until they rest in Him. We are made for fellowship with God. We are made to be baptized, to be united with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. To love God with all our hearts and to love each other deeply from the heart. We are made to live our lives towards his eternity.

That life is real and it's good. This week at elders meeting we heard all the reports from the home visits. The elders reported on a long list of pastoral contacts. One of the elders reported on a visit she had made with a couple of members at the same time, two men, both over 80 who were old friends and who also happened to be widowers. She and her deacon partner went to the home of one of them and they spent an hour talking. The two men didn't get out as much as they used to and so they hadn't seen each other in a while. They were so happy to see each other. They talked about God's goodness in their lives. They talked about how hard it was to lose their wives, and how getting old was no fun. They talked about the hope they all shared in Jesus. All of it ended with a prayer together. 'It was such a wonderful visit,' said the elder. 'When I got in my car to go home I instinctively reached over to turn on my radio like I usually do, but then I stopped and I thought, no, I want to drive home in silence so I can keep thinking about the blessing of our visit.'

It's a small story, but it's a small story that points to the big love at the center of our life. That meeting was full of life and love and Jesus. That meaning was full of eternal life. And that's the life we have to offer the world, that's the life we are baptized into, that's the life we are sent to the world to proclaim. So go. Go with Joy for the news is good and He is with you even to the end of the age.

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