

Worship/Sermon Series
Disciples: Who We Are & What Holds Us Together

“Mission: Engagement”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 13, 2019
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Matthew 28: 16-20 (NRSV)

Resource Book: DISCIPLES: Who We Are & What Holds Us Together,
By Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn (CBP, St. Louis, 2019)

Together, the Courage to Engage

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And 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 [Creator] 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.”* (Matthew 28: 16-20)

Today, as we focus on the mission of the Church for Disciples of Christ,
we are going to lift up Jesus’ use of the word teach.

A Sunday School teacher at Sunrise Church in Rialto CA
was teaching the little children in her class
that God loves them all the time, even when they are grumpy.
“And Happy!” exclaimed little Jeremy.
“And Sleepy and Dopey and Bashful and Sneezzy and Doc!”

When Jesus commissions us to teach, He first calls us to model,
to become modelers of God’s grace in and with the wider community.

Grace is love in action.
The action we are discussing starts from within.

Our identity and mission as Disciples of Christ
are inseparable
from living from the inside out
our love for God and one another.

“The word “teach” in the text is matheteuo,
which literally means “to disciple, to enroll as a scholar, to instruct,”
suggesting that the English translation “make”
creates the false impression
that Christians can make “disciples” out of people
when in fact it is the work of the Holy Spirit.
Moreover, the translation “make” tends to overshadow the fact
that the best teacher is one who models what is being taught.
Thus, the church is an effective teacher of the gospel
only insofar as it models the gospel.” ^[1]

“The mission of the church is not something we do.
It is something we are.” ^[2]

The bravest, riskiest,
most joyful, most political,
most loving, most life-giving experience
the Church of Jesus Christ can do is to be the Church.

Reconciliation is what we do
because it is what we are: *reconcilers*.
Community service is what we do
because it is what we are: *servants*.
Engagement with people wherever they are in life is what we do
because it is what we are: *engaged*.

“*The church is the church,*” said Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “*only when it exists for others.*”

This is the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ: To exist for others.

Together, the Courage to Engage

No so long ago, members and friends in this significant congregation
met in small groups in homes and in various rooms in the church,
and then altogether as one Body of Christ
to engage, connect and listen to each other.
We gathered in the Fellowship Hall to study Jesus’ Great Commission to the Church,
in Matthew 28.
Just before Jesus Christ ascends to heaven,
He offers words of instruction,
which is more akin to a commission,
an empowering message, to do the will of God.

Jesus said:

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the [Creator] 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.”*

As I said, we were in the Fellowship Hall.
We broke up into small groups around tables.
Each table of church members and friends
 was given a different sentence from Jesus’ Great Commission
 to unpack and explore and interpret into our contemporary context.
When we reconvened, we shared insights and interpretations.
Suddenly the Great Commission sounded like this:

*“Go out in the neighborhood.
Empower people to love each other.
Help them listen for their call to be the people God created their souls to be.
Teach them by your actions about God’s unconditional love for each and all.
And, lo, I will be with you until the end of the age.”*

We call this: “The Great Commission Based on Matthew 28
According to First Christian Church of Decatur.”

Together, the Courage to Engage

Our neighbors hunger & crave this elusive thing called community.

I dare say that folks are sick to death of polarization,
 yet for the life of us we can’t figure out how to find our way out of the morass
 without imagining we’ll lose face or friends or foundations.

The way we’ve chosen to present our commonality, our beauty, our precious life
 is in serious need of re-tooling.

Norman Cousins considers this truth, calling us to a higher plane.

Norman Cousins says,

*“The great failure of education—not just in the United States
 but throughout most of the world—
 is that it has made people tribe-conscious
 rather than species conscious.*

It has put limited identification ahead of ultimate identification.

It has attached value to the things [humanity] does but not to what [humanity] is.

[Humanity’s] institutions are celebrated but not [humanity itself].

[Humanity’s] power is heralded but the preciousness of life is unsung.

There are national anthems but no anthems for humanity.” ^[3]

Jesus commissions us to be the antidote to such small thinking;
here we sing a song of God's hope for humanity,
if only there were champions who'd live their faith inside out!
The bravest, riskiest,
most joyful, most political,
most loving, most life-giving experience
the Church of Jesus Christ can do is to be the Church.

The antidote and the cure are one and the same.
It's not what we do; it's who we are: Disciples of Jesus Christ.
So many of our neighbors in the neighborhood want and crave
what is being lived out here,
here in this significant faithful congregation of amazing folks.

Disciples minister Holly McKissick reminds us that
unchurched people want a spiritual faith community.
However, unchurched folks are not interested in churches
that "are all hung up on gays or straight, black or white,"
but rather churches that celebrate the range of God's creation
and help each other through the difficult complexities of life.

Many of our unchurched neighbors say,
*"If I could find a church that isn't trying to own Jesus,
but to simply follow Him, I would go."*
What they mean is that they dream of a sacred place, a safe place,
a spiritual home and community
where they could go with their questions and doubts
and still be accepted, belong, be engaged.

If only they could find a church
that was not trying to divide the world
but seeking to find ways to serve together.
If only they could find a church that wasn't trying to own Jesus
but simply follow him on the Way,
rejoicing as we go!
If they could find a church like that,
they would go!

We are catching a glimpse of the hunger and hope
during our new, fledging mission called Community Dinners.
Come, see, join in the joy of gathering for free food, no agenda,
with folks from all walks of life.
We aren't hung up on tribes or cliques of social status;
we're focused on learning names and sharing bread and stories.

We're living this inside out, embodying love,
Loving, following, modeling a God who loves us
whether we are Grumpy, or Happy, or Bashful...

Together, the Courage to Engage

In the Great Commission in Matthew 28

Jesus invites us to be disciples, to make disciples, and to grow disciples.
We know that it all starts with telling our stories, with being present,
with trusting the Holy Spirit to make the connections.
Jesus is not asking us to make cold calls,
to start knocking on the doors of unknown folks
and suddenly inviting them to have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

When I served as pastor in Jackson TN
in my first two years I made 500 cold calls on newcomers,
netting one visitor.
That lone visitor was Kathy Jenniges.
She not only visited, she belonged.
Kathy joined, became an elder, and later as a mid-wife helped birth our daughter Katie.

Speaking of evangelizing, there's a legendary story in my family from my childhood days
about the day my mother Buffy was in a back room of the house
and she heard a knock on the door.
My brothers answered the knock, and being only 5 or 6 or 7 years old,
said loudly, "Daddy is not home!" and then promptly slammed the door.
Buffy hustled to the front and reopened the door
and helped to smooth a church member's ruffled feathers.
That afternoon she taught her sons how to open the front door very wide
and then say, "Won't you please come in and have a seat?
My mommy or daddy will be right with you."
A few days later she was taking a bath when she heard a knock on the door,
and then a young voice said, "Won't you please come in and have a seat?
My mommy or daddy will be right with you."
She hustled to get dressed, and when she walked to the front of our home
she found the living room full of Jehovah's Witnesses.
Two hours later Buffy was silently wishing
she had qualified the hospitality lesson she taught her sons.

Together, the Courage to Engage

The point of the Great Commission
is we are empowered by Jesus Christ to embody & model God's love.
That is our mission and our identity:

to teach by being present and sharing what we've learned,
and then to get out the way of the Holy Spirit.
The point of the Great Commission is that we are not in control,
yet we still need to make the effort, the effort to connect.

We are not in control of anyone else's faith choices or responses to our faith stories.
However, we still need to make the effort, the effort to connect,
to let someone else know they belong.

The first step to making and growing disciples of Jesus Christ is to be one.
Be one.
Your living faithfully may be the only sermon your neighbor experiences.
Love someone. Serve somebody. Do justice.

Then, the next step is, for goodness' sake, tell someone!

We inform from a distance;
we impact from up close.

When you get a chance – and trust me, God will give you plenty – use it.

As Yogi Berra said, when you come to a fork in the road, take it.

Take two minutes to tell your story, to share your passion, your hope.
Practice opening the door, the conversation, the window of possibility
and inviting someone in.

My Lord and my God!

We are richly, deeply blessed to be given a few minutes to make a world of difference,
and sometimes that's all we get.

So let's use every second to drive home our passion,
our creativity and resourcefulness, our love for humanity,
our hope that there are others, thousands and millions of others who care
and want to make a world of difference as well.

Yesterday at the Atlanta Pride Festival,
we shared a booth in Piedmont Park
with two other Open and Affirming Disciples churches.

Dozens of Disciples from our congregations signed up
to meet and greet our LGBTQ+ neighbors,
to hand out brochures, offer real smiles, and invite folks to worship.

To be honest, I had some fear and trembling going in.

I imagined the reception
from those who have been shamed and shunned by the Church
might be a curt, "Thanks but no thanks."

I was so wrong.

Yesterday, I participated in the first few hours of the Festival.

We gave out hundreds of rainbow heart stickers, one at a time.

We handed to people a brochure listing the 3 Open and Affirming churches in Atlanta.

To my surprise and joy, my personal encounters and open invitations
were received with curiosity, gratitude, delight,
and even a tear.

Two young adult women in matching t-shirts holding hands
accepted the stickers, read the brochure,
and listened to this modeler of Jesus Christ say
that God loves them as they are,
that love always wins, that all means all.
“It’s only 10 AM,” one said, “and I’m going to start to cry.”

The end of the story is our new beginning.
We testify, we teach, we model the love of God every day
because we’ve witnessed mission made real:
the lame walking and the blind seeing,
the thirsty drinking and the stranger being made welcome,
and the polarized, divided nations
discovering grace anew around a common Table.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

^[1] DISCIPLES: Who We Are & What Holds Us Together, By Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn (CBP, St. Louis, 2019). P 75.

^[2] Ibid. P. 77.

^[3] Norman Cousins, Human Options, WW Norton Pub., NY. Page 27.