

Beach Body of Christ—Why Be Beach Ready?

Salem United Methodist Church

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Therefore, Go. Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the holy spirit. And remember I am with you until the end of the age.

Wait. That's the whole thing?

That's all the instructions?

Does anyone have a Bible? What happens next?

That can't be all.

[flip through Bible]

Ah, no. That's really it. This is the day of Jesus resurrection. The women go to the tomb, see an angel, run to tell the disciples and are intercepted by a risen Jesus. He tells them to tell the boys to meet him in Galilee. The disciples do it (which is a miracle in itself!). Then, it's our scripture. They worship, some doubt, then BAM. Instructions. And that's that. That's the end of the book. Turn the page and you'll be in Mark.

This is it. This is Jesus' final moment with his disciples. These are his last in-person words. His final instructions.

And they're fine, I guess.

But... there's nothing about love. Or care.

Many of us would summarize Jesus mission with the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Or, maybe we'd summarize the Gospel with the iconic scripture in Micah: Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly with Your God.

Our conference has summarized the mission as, "Therefore, Go." That's been the theme for conference, for different trainings...

But these words... alone... are actually a bit perplexing.

And, honestly, this scripture knocked me off my feet this week. It's such an iconic passage: "The Great Commission"! I, ah, I thought this sermon was going to be easy and light. Great for Mother's Day.

But this week it feels a lot heavier and harder to understand.

But, when you know how Christianity spread, yikes.

I won't go into the whole history¹-but let's just say converting people by the sword is more than a passing thing. Whole societies were "converted" when Christian troops marched in with a priest, splashed water on the covering peoples, and declared them saved. This is how most of the world was converted. It generally took 3-4 generations after that for the society to take on Christian values and beliefs.

I mean, come on. This is like crushing a riot, then bringing a fire hose and a priest to subdue the masses with religion.

¹ <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/interview-converting-by-the-sword>

Its horrible.

It makes me sick.

But, when I read the passage, I don't see anything about being nice about baptizing and teaching people. That's what has me so bummed this week. Jesus left it super open and now we have this horrible history of forcing people into a weird non-consensual baptism.

That just doesn't make sense to me.

And, really...

This is really dangerous. People took this one passage and used it to oppress every corner of the world they could reach. It gets really insidious. They use God to justify all kinds of power grabs and atrocities.

What do we do with this?

Here's part of the problem: this is the reason most of us are Christians today. This horrible history led to the Christianization of the West, which leads to all kinds of religious changes, that leads to the major Protestant religions, and on.

Part of me wishes we could justify the history. Maybe say that it wasn't really that bad, or that God works in mysterious ways. Maybe we could say that the end justifies the means.

But that feels really thin to me.

I don't know about you, but I'm not okay with people using God's life-giving Word for destruction. I'm not okay with people coopting a word of love and grace and making it into a violent weapon. I'm not okay with it turning into real weapons, or it being wielded as words of shame and guilt. I'm not okay with that, so I can't pretend that it didn't happen or try to make it better. I'm going to learn from it.

I'm going to go back to the text, but I'm going to bring everything I have with me. Everything that makes me a United Methodist, everything that I know to be true about God. I'm going to bring that with me as I read, instead of reading in a vacuum, and see what God says.

As United Methodists, we believe that scripture can be illuminated by reason, tradition, and experience. If you want to know more about that, I can send you a cool video about it². If you were to flip through our hymnal, you'd see some of our tradition written down.

All our basic beliefs are in our creeds and covenants at the beginning of the book. You can see what we think about communion, baptism, membership, weddings. It's all there. It's not binding, but it certainly helps.

So, if we start with the "go out and baptize in the name of the father, son, and holy spirit" part, I'd go to what this book says to help me figure out what that means.

When someone wants to be baptized or join the church, I sit down with the family or individual, and walk them through everything they'd promise, and that we'd promise.

The way we do baptisms isn't about force, or magic. It's about consent and relationship.

And not just their relationship with God, but also our relationship with them.

I may have the initial meeting with the people, but then I present them on a Sunday morning to you. In the liturgy **you** promise to care for the person getting baptized. To walk with them, teach them, care for them. This isn't supposed to be a one-and-done day. This is the start of a lifetime journey. This is the moment we are fully brought into God's family.

And, each time we do a baptism, it's a moment to remember our own. To remember that people likely made these same promises over you.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtAiWoCUTaU>

Did it make a difference for you?

Did the people who promised to be there show up in your life?

I bet if I asked each of you individually, we'd get answers from "huh?" to "uh, I guess... well that one lady was always there..." to "oh, yes, it was important in my church." This isn't even taking infant vs. adult baptism into the question.

Our **experience** of baptism is, well, full of history. Some of it evil, most of it neutral, and some of it incredible. Okay, cool, so tradition is helpful here. This is good. I'm feeling a bit more... steady now. How about you?

So, Jesus commands the disciples to go out and do this. We can also use reason to zoom out and think about the entire context of what Jesus has been doing with the disciples.

Perhaps this isn't so much *prescription* but is *permission*.

Perhaps, for the disciples who grew up believing their faith was for only them, they needed permission to go out and share with the world.

Perhaps this faith felt so beautiful, and fragile, and new, that the disciples were terrified to share it beyond their own group.

"what if they think we're crazy?"

"are you NUTS? Of *COURSE*, they'll think we're crazy!"

Their tradition wasn't open to outsiders. That's their feud with the Samaritans and the rules against marrying foreigners. And don't forget about the new things that we're still struggling with: gender norms, class differences, caring for people who are vulnerable.

Yet, their leader, their Messiah, is born from a lineage filled with people who broke the rules. He touched the untouchable, befriended sinners, and let women ask him questions.

This guy was never going to limit salvation to a select few.

That's huge.

Jesus' inclusion was *and is* radical.

God chose the Israelite people to be a light unto all the nations way back with Abraham. Now, Jesus is asking his Israelite followers to do that in a new way. They are no longer supposed to keep to themselves. They are to go out and share the good news that has been revealed.

And that's pretty cool. That means that those faithful Jews took Jesus instructions to heart. So now, they go out beyond their borders. They go to new towns and countries.

And they go, likely, remembering the other times Jesus has sent them out. Jesus sent them out with the promise they would pack light, not take advantage of their hosts, and not to force a town to listen when they are not welcome.

No getting wealthy or comfortable off staying with a patron. No putting down roots and asking people to come to them. And certainly, no forced baptisms.

This story spreads without force because its incredible and its true and its worth sharing.

[Here's a story.] Perhaps you know who I'm talking about.

In 1982 a 28-year old alcoholic who dabbled in cocaine, mushrooms, and adultery broke up with her boyfriend.

A year and a half later, she's still living in her friend's basement, hungover, and pretending she isn't downing scotch when her friend, Pam, went to bed.

To hide her drinking she'd go to the liquor store every day for a pint, refill what she drank. Then, with the empty in a brown bag, she'd walk to a public trashcan to toss it.

She says she lived this time in fear. Fear someone would see her dropping the bottle- they'd know about her problem! Fear of Pam catching her drinking overnight.

She says this: "I was cracking up. It was like a cartoon where something gets hit, and one crack appears, which spiderwebs outward until the whole pane or vase is cracked and hangs suspended for a moment before falling into a pile of powder on the floor."

On her route to drop the bottles, she passed an Episcopal church she remembered from childhood. Every day, she passes it.

Then, one night, she is absolutely convinced that this is the end. She's going to die from something. She believed in God, but she knew that God couldn't possibly accept her. Not anymore. Not after everything.

Somehow... She decides to call the church number. To me? That's grace.

The pastor isn't really available but makes time.

She walks 45 minutes to his office (can you believe he waited?). She finds out that his kind of Christianity involves *really* listening and *really* caring. Before she knows it, she tells him everything. Even the affairs, drinking, even that she doesn't believe God loves her.

"God has to love you." He interrupts, "That's God's job."

This isn't the story of the moment she got sober. It's not the story of her miraculous conversion. This is one moment on her timeline where one person helped her to feel

worthy. This is a moment where that Christian is living the Great Commission, just by sitting with her and telling her of God's love.

The woman's name is Anne Lamott. She's a famous writer and this is all taken from her book, *Traveling Mercies*. If you aren't familiar with her, she is very real, and very in love with God and with life.

The Great Commission, at its best, means there are people who love God enough to care for people like Anne when she's trying to get better. We can do that. That's Good News.

NOTES LEFTOVER

This final bit of instructions isn't to **simply** care for others, **its to adopt them into God's family**. With all the rights and privileges of being a child of God. It is your job to make sure they understand what God's love is all about. It is your job to care for them and love them **as God would** because you have promised to bring them into the family and to love them so they can claim a relationship with God for themselves.

And if they choose not to? That's their choice. Your obligation is just to hold up your end of the bargain. We don't force, shame, or guilt people. We can learn from the mistakes in our history.

The scripture says to baptize them and teach all Jesus commanded them.

The best teaching is how you live.

Let's go out and live like we believe.

Being a Christian can mean that your life is borderless. You can care for everyone you meet-no matter their beliefs, their background, anything.

Yes, our history is hard. We can't ignore it, but we can't stay there. Let's live as commissioned people. Let's live as baptized people spreading God's love.

Here's the good news. We can live like people who embrace our baptismal vows. Vows to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. When we live like that, others will notice. When we live like that, we can even invite others on the journey. We can teach the people we love about what we're learning and doing. And when we do that, we are living out the bit of this commission that seems to be missing.

And, when you think about it, if you're really baptizing and really teaching what Jesus commanded, then its hard to mess it up. In fact, then the love and care are wrapped up in the command. Perhaps Jesus didn't say it because he thought that after all this time he wouldn't have to.