

## Discipleship in the Lectionary - 06/04/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

**Trinity Sunday**

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, June 4<sup>th</sup>

**Matthew 28:16-20**

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### The Great Commission

This week's Gospel lection contains the closing verses of the Gospel of Matthew. It is an apt selection for Trinity Sunday. Even though it would be a couple of hundred years before the doctrine of the Trinity was understood (as much as a human can fully grasp this topic), we have each member of the Trinity referenced in this text. For the first disciples, their journey with Christ began in Galilee and Galilee will be the place of a new beginning. The specific lectionary text is known as the "Great Commission" and represents the final words of the risen Christ to His disciples. These words represent the mission and purpose, the communal identity, and the nature of life together for the movement that will become the church. The Great Commission today is still the fundamental command that underpins the great ends of the church.

#### Matthew 28:16-20 Commentary

The final section of this Gospel covers the resurrection and commission of Christ (28:1-20).

*<sup>16</sup> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.*

The angel who appeared to the two Marys at the tomb told them that Jesus had risen and was going to Galilee and there they will see Him (28:7). Jesus also appeared to them and said, "*Do not be afraid: go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me*" (28:10). The "disciples" in v.7 probably means the eleven and "brothers" in v.10 probably refers to the broader group of disciples. Galilee as the location is significant. Jesus was born in Bethlehem which was close to Jerusalem. After returning from Egypt, Joseph acted on the warning of the angel of the Lord and settled his family in the remote area of Galilee since Herod's son Archelaus ruled Judea. Galilee was also known as Galilee of the Gentiles (4:15). There are rich theological implications of the Great Commission occurring in Galilee versus Jerusalem. This would have been immediately obvious to Matthew's Jewish audience.

*<sup>17</sup> And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.*

Scripture is honest here – there is doubt. Alternatively, the Greek could also imply the disciples exhibited both reactions simultaneously - worship and doubt; being in two minds. The word rendered as doubt, *distazō*, conveys uncertainty and hesitancy rather than a state of settled doubt. During Jesus' life He rebuked His disciples for having little faith and thus it is hardly surprising such is the case here. But they were, however, in Galilee as he had commanded them to be.

*<sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

Jesus comes to His disciples. This is counter to the convention of the time; the Master approaches the disciples rather than the other way around. A similar thing happened after His transfiguration, another divine revelation, when Peter, James and John were in fear at what they saw (17:7). We are thus to understand the act of Jesus coming to His disciples is a means of His reassurance.

Jesus then does three things: First, he assures them of His power and authority. The resurrection confirms the identity of Jesus as the Messiah and how His work on the cross was accepted by God the Father. The disciples are working under a master whose authority in heaven and earth is unquestioned. Second, based on His authority, He commissions them. Third He promises them He will be present. There are several "alls" here: *All* authority, *all* nations, *all* the commandments and present *always*. Matthew begins His Gospel with God being present on earth by citing Isaiah 7:14 "... and they shall call His name Immanuel' (which means, God with us)." The Gospel ends with the assurance that God will always be present with us.

### Reflections

The grand finale of Matthew's Gospel is grounded in the brutal reality of brokenness from the opening verse of this text: "*Now the eleven disciples...*" (20:16). We are immediately reminded that one of Jesus' hand-selected twelve betrayed Him. We are further reminded of such brokenness by the fact that even at this point there is doubt and hesitancy among His disciples. Like disciples in every age, Christ's first disciples were imperfect. There was doubt and hesitation, yet Christ chose to commission imperfect disciples to make other disciples. We know the ability to make disciples is not a function of the capability of the disciple-maker but a result of the power and authority of Christ, the living Word of God.

The Great Commission is neither a call for Christian domination nor achieved through a surface-level presentation of the Gospel. Neither is the Great Commission satisfied by merely sending a check. It is a call to leave behind the world that idolizes the self and to embrace the giving of the self to others. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." If John's Gospel emphasizes the mark of discipleship is to reflect to the world the love of Christ through the way that Christians live in community (John 13:34-35), the mark of a disciple emphasized by Matthew is carrying out the Great Commission. It reflects the love we have for Christ to follow His commandments and a reflection of the love of our neighbor that invites others to share in such community and the way of discipleship. It is in this way that disciples make disciples who make other disciples, and it is through such communities that the Risen Jesus continues to transform the world in this age.

### Application

- How does your church community fulfill the Great Commission?
- How do you live out the Great Commission in your life?
- What is your understanding of "*nations*" in v.20?
- How does the changing context of Western culture influence how we execute the Great Commission?