



“The Great Compassion”

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Matthew 28:16–20***

Today’s scripture reading is one of the most powerful in the entire Bible. Powerful enough that I suspect that most of us wouldn’t be sitting here today if these five verses were never included in Matthew’s Gospel.

This text is often and simply called the Great Commission. It is the Gospel of Matthew’s dramatic conclusion to the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. If you remember, two Marys have been to tomb, found it empty, met an angel, and run away in fright, only to come face to face with Jesus himself, who asks them to relay a message to the disciples to meet him on a mountain in Galilee. Upon their arrival, the disciples are shocked to see Jesus, who utters the fateful words that have resulted in so many of us being in the same place today.

We are all here because the Great Commission became the basis, if not the most important rationale, for missioning activity, not only for the earliest Christians in Matthew’s community of the first century, but also for the centuries of missionary activity that followed, up to and including the present day. Christians have, from the very beginning, taken Jesus’ command to make disciples of all nations quite literally and seriously. Let me give you a little sampling of what the Great Commission has spawned:

In the first hundred years after Jesus, the apostles and their converts left Jerusalem and traveled to Turkey, Greece, and Rome, baptizing Gentiles in the name of Jesus. By the 4th century, Christian converts were reported in the areas we now know as Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, France, Monaco, Sri Lanka, Portugal, Morocco, Britain, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, and Iran.

In the next 500 years, between the years 500 and 1000 CE, missionaries are sent from these areas to Ireland, China, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. Between 1000 and 1500 CE, missionaries arrived in the Congo, Russia, Finland, Iceland, Mongolia, India, Indonesia, Senegal, Kenya, and Angola. In 1493, on his second journey, Christopher Columbus took Christian priests with him to the New World. Around the same time, missionaries were also arriving in Japan and in the Philippines. After Christopher Columbus, missionary activity to the

New World accelerated dramatically. In the 15th and 16th century, well before our Declaration of Independence was even a twinkle in an eye, Franciscans began establishing missions in California, Jesuits arrived in Mexico, French missionaries arrived in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, and Quaker missionaries arrived in Massachusetts and the Carolinas. In the 1700s, as America is contemplating Revolution, Franciscans arrived in Texas, Jesuits in Illinois, and Anglicans in the soon-to-be former English colonies. At the same time, Americans began sending their own missionaries out to convert the Native Americans, including one of our church grandfathers, Jonathan Edwards, who, when banished from his church in Massachusetts, went as a missionary to the nearby Native tribes.

These highlights show how rapidly Christianity expanded through missioning and why we have so many different cultural heritages here in our own congregation. The list goes on, of course, right up to the current era, where the Great Commission is cited frequently by all denominations actively engaged in missioning, both abroad and here at home.

American evangelical Christians, in particular, view the Great Commission as an important scriptural validation of their missioning work, particularly their intensification since 1974 to reach every ethnic group in the world, especially those they consider “unreached” or “unevangelized,” which they estimate to be about 2 billion people. Most of the “unreached peoples”, according to evangelical missionaries, live between 10 and 40 degrees north latitude in a window ranging from West Africa, across the Middle East, to East Asia. The countries within this window represent 35 percent of the world's land mass, 90 percent of the world's poorest peoples, and 95 percent of those who have yet to hear anything about Christianity. That the current residents haven't receive the Christian message is somewhat understandable, however, since most of the countries in the 10/40 Window are also predominantly Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist.

From history and the media most of us have heard of some tragic and cruel missioning methods of the past, the most damaging of which was the forced separation and assimilation of children to Western ideals and behaviors, and the subjugation of the non-Christian populations to Western corporations and governments. Modern missionaries, of course, have refined or replaced the missioning practices of the past and adopted new ways of doing business. Evangelical Christians now focus less on sending resident missionaries of one culture to convert a different culture group and more indigenous evangelizing. They use radio and web broadcasts about Christianity, mail-order Christian correspondence courses, church-planting groups, and training and recruitment in the language of the target population, preferably by missionaries of a same or a related culture. These days, evangelical groups seem primarily interested in church planting and building, energized by their belief that the Great Commission, by connection to Mathew 24:14, makes reaching all the nations a precondition for the return of Christ.

Other Christian denominations, including the United Church of Christ, prefer to establish partnerships with organizations within foreign countries and send missionaries only at the request of the partner organization for a very specific need like capacity-building to enhance self-sufficiency or healthcare. In 2010, the UCC and the Disciples of Christ, through its partnership Global Ministries, sent a total of 126 missionaries to serve in 43 countries at the

request of partner organizations. Global Ministries helped partner organizations develop their leadership and organizational capacity to speak out on issues of peace and justice, poverty, and human rights. Global Ministries also uses the Great Commission as one of the scriptural foundation of their efforts, interpreting Jesus' words, not specifically as a call to baptism for the sake of baptism or church creation as a means of reaching the unreached, but as a call to create new communities of resistance and hope to implement God's reign of justice, peace, and the fullness of life.

As we here at Eden Church individually and collectively contemplate our proposed Compañeros Ministry, a church outreach program to and on behalf of our local immigrant community, and the possibility of travel to Mexico, it's a good time for us to take a closer look at the Great Commission and see what it has to offer us today. Like the ending of many good books, the ending of the Gospel of Matthew is easier to understand if you read the whole book, but I'll give you a few "Cliffsnotes" into what some contemporary Biblical scholars say the Great Commission means today.

If you have a pen or pencil, you might pick up your bulletin and find the scripture. In the quotation from Jesus, circle these words: "go," "nations," "baptizing," and "teaching." Some say these four words are key to understanding what the Great Commission means. Let's look at them one by one:

Go: In the original language, according to Robert H. Smith, a Biblical scholar, "go" is not a command but an auxiliary which emphasizes the urgency of making disciples or followers of God. He notes that all the usual early Christian words for sending, mission, preaching, proclaiming, as well as the related words of gospel, repentance, and forgiveness, are all missing from the Great Commission. Without these familiar words for missioning or evangelizing, the scripture can be interpreted simply as the command "Quickly!" or "Now!", meaning right now and without delay.

Nations: In Matthew, the word "nations" is used to describe all non-Jews. Earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus specifically asked his disciples to go nowhere among the non-Jews, meaning the Gentiles and Samaritans. By this instruction, Jesus asked his disciples to honor the law that held Jews separate from others for the sake of honoring God's command that they worship no other gods. Jesus, however, routinely transgressed this religious and cultural boundary as a teacher and healer. Now at the conclusion of Matthew, Jesus is saying to his people: It's time to open the doors to those outside our group.

Baptizing: Using inclusive language, Jesus instructs the disciples to make disciples through baptism in the name of God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit. Whereas other early baptismal formulas were in the name of Jesus alone or in the name of the Holy Spirit, Matthew's baptism, written in 70 CE, is one of the few references in the New Testament to the Trinity and it shows that newcomers to the faith were to be introduced not just to Jesus or the Spirit but to the God of Israel who was considered both creator and recreating the world through Jesus and the Spirit. By washing the newcomers in water and uttering the Trinitarian formula, the disciples were to show the people that the Christian God had the power to transform and renew individuals and communities.

Teaching: Disciples were also to be made by teaching what Jesus commanded. Many scholars and pastors, including Smith, say that the gravitational center of Jesus' teachings is not the law, theories, or doctrines, but the higher righteous embodied in Jesus' debates with the Pharisees. Through these intense conversations, Jesus argued for and taught his disciples a new ethical system that was based not on an overturning of Jewish law but a re-prioritization of values found in the Torah. He argued that the command to love God and love neighbor found in Deuteronomy was more important than all other 612 laws found in the Jewish law. He placed the Ten Commandments above the purity and Sabbath requirements in Leviticus. He also prioritized mercy for others over other ritual practices including Temple sacrifice. In other words, Jesus taught that of all the requirements found in scripture, compassion for others was the most important; and laws that prevented compassion could and should be broken or given a lower priority.

By looking at these key words, today's scripture can be read this way: "Now, open the doors and show all the people the power of renewal and the importance of compassion." Interpreted this way, the Great Commission with its extensive missionary history and its work abroad becomes a new command for us: the Great Compassion of today and the future—something that we can do here. It sounds a little easier than going abroad to a foreign country, doesn't it?

Maybe not. We often speak of compassion like it's easy, but I think for most of us it isn't. It's actually quite hard to live a life where we put compassion ahead of all things, even the law and our personal theories and doctrines.

If we revisit those debates between Jesus and the Pharisees in the Gospel of Matthew, we can get a little insight into one of the reasons it's so hard. The Pharisees, with their adamant emphasis on hand washing, resting on the Sabbath, and not eating with or touching so many different people and things, do seem sort of silly to us, and we are often harsh on them because they seem focused on the rules and the laws instead of helping people who Jesus sees are clearly in pain or in need.

In a recent class, my Professor David Balch put the Pharisees in a new light for me. He pointed out that the Pharisees' hardcore insistence on obeying Israel's identity laws was a product of religious values intensified by generations of life under foreign domination and state terrorism, at the height of which the Selucid emperor Antiochus Euphianes demanded, under threat of extreme violence and death, that they abandon their religious practices, including their purity requirements, the honoring of the Sabbath, and circumcision. He sold the High Priesthood and also desecrated the Temple by turning it into a shrine to Zeus, forcing the sacrifice and eating of pigs, which the Jewish people had long regarded as a sacrilege.

While the Roman Empire, which dominated Palestine at the time of Jesus' birth, was more lenient when it came to Jewish religious practices, the occupation of their land and control over the people fragmented the Jews into many sects with different views of how to regain their liberation. One of these, the Pharisees, clung to a piety that strict adherence to the Torah would please God and result in their liberation from the Romans and their salvation.

With our 4th of July holiday approaching, I couldn't help but think of the classic American values that flowed from our own period of colonial repression. As we threw off the British government, we created legal documents that we honor to this day: The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, and the Pledge of Allegiance. Most of us were taught that these documents say that all people are created free and equal, but that freedom and equality of all people will be achieved through a system of law. Many of us, especially those of us who are white and middle class, grew up in social settings where there was never any question that the system of law was fair or just or correct, mostly because the laws were written and implemented by people just like us. As a result, we not only believe in the rule of law but we see it as integral to our identity as Americans and the one value that ensures our national survival in a world where individual liberty, including the freedom of religion, is constantly being challenged by the corrupt and the dangerous.

The downside to our belief in the system of law is, like the Pharisees, we are not very adept at seeing when adherence to the law is preventing compassionate action. Take immigration as an example: even when we live as neighbors to an immigrant community in dire need, we pause to wonder about how they came here and what impact their possible unlawful entry into our country has on our future as a nation. Or, another example, when we hear someone is walking away from a house that is no longer worth half of what they were coaxed by unscrupulous lenders into paying for it, we wonder about the validity of contracts and what it means when people don't honor their agreements with banks and mortgage companies. Or when a community gets upset over a less-than-hoped-for verdict and sentence for a heinous crime, we can't see that justice isn't always served when the criminal process completes its work. As we struggle through today's problems, we forget sometimes about events in the past when our laws resulted in conditions that we all acknowledge as criminal today, like slavery, the internment of the Japanese, Jim Crow, and redlining people of color out of loans and neighborhoods. Because we value the law, we forget that sometimes the law is broken and life needs to go on in a more compassionate fashion until it can be fixed for the better and forever.

And that's just one of the reasons why making compassion the center of our lives and an important component of our church outreach can be so challenging. Like the Pharisees, we have conflicting values that we need to reflect on and come to understand. And like the early missionaries, we need to be aware that our conflicting values may make our goals inconsistent with the needs of those we, too, see in pain and in need. And, as Americans who just happen to be Christians, we need to remember that our system of law is good but not always perfect, and that we, each and every one of us, can be agents of change and social justice.

Whether we call today's scripture the Great Commission and travel to foreign nations to plant churches and help others find peace and justice, or whether we call it the Great Compassion and stay here in our own neighborhood, Christ, who is with us always, calls each of us and says: "Now, open the doors and show all the people the power of renewal and the importance of compassion." What a mission! Amen.