***What Everybody Wants to Know***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno, June 4, 2023*

*based on Matthew 28:16-20*

The voice in this morning’s text isn’t the peasant, Jesus who tells stories and blesses children. This is the voice the church came up with for him that they thought suited the risen Christ. You hear this story and in it you can’t help but sense a mythological tone. This isn’t Jesus on his way to Jerusalem or at a pool in Jerusalem. This setting is highly staged. He is standing on some elevated ground which the early church saw as fitting to launch a great ecclesiastical enterprise. In ancient literature big moments like this often happen on high places.

My translation says that the eleven met Jesus there “and they worshipped him, but some doubted.”

That’s kind of an odd juxtaposition. It’s actually more ironic than that. The literal version is, “they worshipped him and they doubted.” It’s odd but it’s also very believable. Most Christians do both, but not everyone acknowledges that.

I mentioned once in a sermon here a young man who was youth director in my first church long ago who painted some fundamentalist jargon on a wall in our youth room. It was a saying that was popular at the time about the Bible. It went, “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.”

But, of course, nothing ever “settles it.” We’re human beings. If we have a brain at all we will be skeptical about spiritual matters. The real problems arise when we are not.

So, Jesus draws for us a picture of the launching of the church with these words, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. I want you to go into the whole world and make disciples.”

Now some people misinterpret that word “make.” They make it sound like Jesus is asking his disciples to go into the world and coerce people into becoming his followers. That’s not what he is getting at here. A closer reading of that verse would be that he is saying, “Go out there and *disciple* folks.” It’s a verb.

How do you *disciple* people. Well, I imagine you do it the way Jesus did. He showed them affection, he taught them, he did his best to help them, but he didn’t ever coerce anyone.

There was a rich young ruler who came to Jesus one day who said to him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” And it says “Jesus looked at him and loved him and said to him, “Your life is so cluttered with material things and the cares that go with those things. You need to give that stuff away to really start living. Why not do that and then come follow me?” Bu it says the young man became very sad, confessing he just couldn’t so that.” It was a hard ask.

Notice that Jesus doesn’t beat the young man up verbally afterward. No, he gave him room to say, “No.” Because if you aren’t given room to say “No,” then “Yes” won’t mean anything. There is no coercion with Jesus.

There are so many tragic example of people being coerced into following Jesus. One of the hallmark ones happened long ago in Germany. A poor Jewish couple lived in the midst of a community of Protestant Christians. They couldn’t find work, though they tried their hardest.

“We’re qualified,” they said. “We are highly skilled clerks. We can work for a court of law, or any business you can think of.” But no one would hire them. Why? Because they were Jews. They weren’t in the church. And so to avoid starving, the couple converted and submitted to baptism.

Well, they had a son who saw this happening. His name was Karl. Karl Marx. Karl was so incensed that his poor parents should be treated this way; so disrespected, having been coerced in the extreme. So he dedicated his life to opposing the powers that would do such a thing. And out of that outrage sprang Marxism, for good or ill, partly because of a misinterpretations of the scripture we are looking into today that encouraged coercion.

One day Jesus went through a village preaching and blessing everyone, but most of the people were dead set against listening to him. So the disciples went to Jesus and they said, “Do you want us to call fire down from heaven on these stubborn villagers?” Jesus said, “Of course not. Let’s just go somewhere else.”

Jesus let people be who they were. In John chapter 6 Jesus preaches a very demanding sermon and people walk away because it shakes them to their cores. And then Jesus turns to his disciples and asks them, “Well, do you have a mind to walk away too?” And Peter says, “Where can we go? You’re the most compelling teacher alive?”

No coercion, no blackmail, no phony emotional manipulation. Just ultimate respect for people’s freedom of choice.

Making disciples is all about giving people room; letting them be their own agent.

Jesus once told a parable about a man who sowed wheat in his field. And soon after, when it started coming up, a couple of his servants came to him to say that weeds were coming up in the same field. “You want us to pull those out,” they asked their master?

And in reply he said, “No, you leave those weeds alone because if you start pulling them up, sure-as-shooting you will pull up the wheat as well. Just leave it all alone.” Jesus was giving them a lesson in discipling and the lesson was – don’t coerce people. Don’t judge them; leave them to their own conscience and to God.

Now Jesus didn’t stop with the idea of discipling. No, he also said, “Teach them. Teach them all I have commanded you.” He was making the point that the business of living the Christian life isn’t “one and done.” It’s not about getting your reservations in for a spot in heaven. No, it involves how we live, how we behave toward others, how we treat the earth, how we manage our money. It’s a host of things. There is a cost to discipleship, as many have said.

Maybe this is why so many professed Christians behave so abominably these days and are often hate driven. If Christianity is only about conversion then only the front door is important. With such a shallow faith, I guess they think they can behave anyway they want. And, dang it, they do.

When I was in my early twenties I served for a short time as a youth director in a Presbyterian church in Spokane, Washington. You know, nothing prepared me for that work, except for having been a teenager myself.

It was difficult sledding. I have so much respect for Don and Kathy Ludwig, and also for Bunny Oliver who did that work too for many years.

I mean, young people challenge you. It’s their nature. They ask the best questions. They know what matters and often they don’t shilly-shally about it. They’ll just look you in the eye and ask, “Did Jesus ever say anything about sex? And if he did, what did he say?” That kind of thing.

A sister of one of the adult members in that Spokane church took her own life. The surviving sister told her teenage daughter that she’d been taught growing up by her minister that suicide was the unforgivable sin. The lady didn’t ask me or our pastor about that, but her daughter did.

I’m saying this because we have a top-flight youth program here and I want you to know what the stakes are and how important supporting Don and Kathy and these great young people is.

I remember one youth asking me, “Am I going to hell if I don’t love my grandfather? Because there is no way I will ever love him, and I’d like to know now.”

Another youth once asked: “If Jesus was the Son of God, why did God let him get crucified? I mean, what is the point of worshipping God if you can’t get out of bad stuff?” Good question.

That is all why Jesus said, “I want you to teach them about these things, because it’s important that we take one another’s questions seriously.”

Recently I read a memoir by a good friend of mine, my age, whose father was one of my mentors. Before I knew him, he was a missionary to Ethiopia. There’s a place in the book where she writes about being a young teenager. She says, “Dad said God is so pure and holy He can’t abide sins … Dad said God wanted everyone to hear about his plan for forgiveness. That’s why we had come to [Ethiopia].

So, being very logical, my friend asked her father what happened to the people who lived in Ethiopia *before* they got there? Were they in hell?

She said, “I argued with him until I was weeping. If God was love, why would he be so careless, so sloppy as to leave some people out through no fault of their own?”

You know, everybody has questions like this; not just young people. Every single person on earth wants answers to core life questions that trouble them and if we don’t know the answers we should at least take the questions seriously and do our best to find meaningful ways to respond to them. It’s the least we can do.

What I am talking about here is this – I believe that every one of us on this planet has a loneliness in our core. It’s a loneliness that nothing earthly can assuage. In fact, you may come to realize this when you are the happiest when it comes to relationships – because you may find you are still lonely and wonder why. It’s that wondering that may open you to your creator.

“Our hearts are restless until they rest in God,” said St. Augustine. We do our best, you and I, to try and fill that loneliness with other things – earning money, finding amusement, whatever, but at one time or another we will find that, try as we might, we will come up empty. And we will find that our essential loneliness is a defining factor of who we are and that trying to fill it with things that help temporarily doesn’t really work.

Let me end with a poem that gets to the core of this. It’s by the wonderful Sufi poet, Hafiz …

*Don't surrender your loneliness
so quickly.
Let it cut more deeply.

Let it ferment and season you
as few human*

*or even divine ingredients can.

Something missing in my heart tonight
has made my eyes so soft,
my voice
so tender,

my need of God
absolutely
clear.*

Absolutely clear

Amen