

DATE: May 31, 2026

TEXT: Matthew 28:16-20

THEME: God calls us to make disciples, starting with ourselves.

SUBJECT: Discipleship

TITLE: Disciples of Mercy and Compassion

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: What does it mean to make disciples?

Prayer: Gracious and loving Spirit, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

Happy Trinity Sunday everyone! This is the day when we give a special nod to the doctrine of the Three-in-One, the Godhead. The relationship between God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit is alluded to several times in the Younger Testament (AKA New Testament), but Matthew's way of mentioning the Godhead is somewhat of an oddball when he records Jesus' commandment to make disciples, "baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In no other place in scripture is this Trinity formula used in that way. For all the emphasis on this particular way to designate the Godhead, you'd think that it appears throughout the gospels and Paul's letters. But it doesn't.

In Mark, the earliest of the gospels in our Bibles, the writer takes 12 verses (1:1-12) to include all three Persons— God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit—and they aren't strung together quite so neatly as in Matthew. Most scholars place the writing of Mark about 30 years after Jesus lived, so it would seem that the doctrine of the Trinity was still just a twinkle in Mark's eye. The apostle Paul likely wrote his letters a little earlier than Mark. How does Paul talk about the Trinity? From time to time, he speaks in ways

that point toward a belief in the Three-One God. In 2 Corinthians 13:13, for example, Paul writes: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” (This is where you gasp <pause> because it’s out of order. It’s not decent and orderly at all!) Jesus is listed first, then God, then the Spirit. In Galatians 4:4-6, Paul mentions all three again, but in a different order: “God sent the Son ... to redeem those under the law, that we might receive full rights. Because you are sons (and daughters), God sent the Spirit of the Son into our hearts.” OK, so Paul got ‘em all in there again. There are other places where Paul talks about all three, but they’re not in any consistent order and the list never begins with the Holy Spirit. Then there’s the business about “sending” and, if I can be heretical for just a moment, in Paul’s letters, God sends the Son and the Spirit, but the other two never send God - and in some people’s minds this might set up a hierarchy where one Person of the Trinity could be seen as having more authority than the other two Persons. Claiming that, however, would be heresy.

I have to mention at this point that the word “Trinity” is mentioned nowhere in scripture at all. But if you want to know more about this doctrine, St. Augustine wrote quite a lot about it 1600 years ago in this thin easy-to-read volume, *De Trinitate*. (If you’re having trouble sleeping, I’ve got just the prescription!) I also want to mention that the book of Matthew was written over 1900 years ago. Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, confirms that this was long before the church learned to speak and confess in a trinitarian way, and even longer before a formal declaration of “the Trinity” emerged. For that reason, he says, “[we need to be cautious about] trying to find too much precision in the New Testament’s ways of relating (or uniting) Jesus to

God and to the church's experience of the Holy Spirit's power" (*Working Preacher* commentary on Matthew 28:16-20 for Year A (2026)).

As for the importance of using the trinitarian formula "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" in baptism, an examination of Paul's letters and the book of Luke-Acts show that the early church originally baptized people in the name of Jesus. Back to an earlier point, if Jesus had emphasized the (now) traditional formula (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), why didn't Paul and Luke-Acts mention it? Not even once. I can think of two reasons why Matthew used this phrase. First, it may reflect a liturgical phrase that was specific to Matthew's community at a specific time. Second, it could be that Matthew didn't include the Trinitarian designation "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" at all when that gospel was first written, but was added later on. I know many of you are familiar with the *Jesus Seminar*, an investigation of about 50 scholars and 100 others during the 80s and 90s that sought to discern what Jesus actually said in the gospels. Controversially, they used colored beads to vote on the authenticity of about 500 Biblical statements and events in the gospels relating to Jesus. Voters cast a red bead if they believed Jesus said a statement, a pink bead if they believed that Jesus probably said something like it, a grey bead if they believed Jesus did not say the passage but contains Jesus' ideas, and a black bead if they believed Jesus did not say the passage, but that it comes from later admirers who redacted and changed the original gospel. For what it's worth, the Seminar scholars gave a black bead to the "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" formula in Matthew 28:19. They argued that the Trinitarian baptismal formula was a later invention of the early Church, reflecting its evolving liturgical practices rather than the historical

words of Jesus himself. The uniqueness of the formula in Matthew would seem to bear this out.

So what can we gain from Matthew 28:16-20 on this Trinity Sunday? Maybe, rather than pinpointing a formulaic designation of the Godhead, our time and attention would be better spent exploring not so much about how to baptize a person but rather about what it means to be a Christian disciple. Matthew 28:19-20 is known as the Great Commission and it begins like this: “Therefore, go and **make disciples** of all nations.” Does that mean that we should go out and try to get people to come to church? Inviting people to church is a good thing to do, but it’s not really what making disciples is about. The Greek term used for “making disciples” here is μαθητεύσατε from the root word μαθητεύω - which means “to learn” or “to understand through inquiry and observation.” μαθητεύω, of course, sounds very similar to the name Matthew, which may suggest why the gospel of Matthew was written—that is, as a tool to be used to make disciples.

Well, what is a disciple? In the ancient world, a disciple was more than just a student sitting in a classroom. A disciple was something like an apprentice who was completely devoted to a master—living like them, learning their teachings, and imitating their way of life. When Jesus said, “Follow me”, he wanted people to follow him. In ancient Galilee, to become a disciple of a rabbi meant leaving your life behind to follow him everywhere. Because roads were unpaved and dusty, students would walk directly behind their teachers. Out of this practice emerged a saying — a blessing — a hope that one would learn all they could as a disciple of their teacher: “May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi.” That is, may you follow your teacher’s example, teachings and life so closely and attentively that the dirt kicked up by his sandals will coat your

own clothes. THIS is what it meant to be a disciple. The Great Commission is based on the understanding that we who seek to make disciples are already disciples ourselves by learning about the teachings of our rabbi and by imitating his life—to be covered, figuratively, in the dust of Rabbi Jesus.

If we start from there, then we might begin to think about inspiring others to imitate Jesus' life and to learn his teachings - but, again, only if WE have committed ourselves to doing these things first. To do otherwise would be inauthentic and perhaps even presumptuous. So, if we don't get any farther than becoming earnest followers of Jesus' example ourselves and eager learners of his teachings, that is enough. Inviting people to church is important, but even more important is our own transformation. A disciple once asked her master: "What's the difference between knowledge and enlightenment?" The master replied: "When you have knowledge, you use a torch to show the way. When you are enlightened, you become a torch." The main task of the disciple is to become a torch.

So, how do you become a torch? According to the Great Commission, it starts with **learning** — through inquiry and observation — and learning that isn't simply about gaining knowledge, but about changing behavior. That's why Rabbi Jesus also talks about obedience in his commission. He said, "[teach all nations] to **obey** everything that I have commanded you." As it turns out, Jesus' commands in Matthew's gospel focus largely on showing mercy and compassion, especially to those most in need of it. In Matthew 25:31-46, for example, Jesus tells a parable about sheep and goats. It's a story that teaches the importance of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, inviting the stranger in, clothing the naked, looking after the sick, and visiting the

imprisoned. At its meeting in July of 2020, the Southminster Session committed to becoming a *Matthew 25* congregation at the invitation of our denomination to focus on one or more of the following three ways to show mercy and compassion. First, **build congregational vitality** by challenging members to deepen their faith and grow as joyful leaders and disciples actively engaged with their community, inviting new disciples to engage in ministry and longstanding disciples to further develop their faith. Second, **dismantle structural racism** by fearlessly applying our faith to advocate and break down the system and practices that underlie discrimination and prejudice of people of color. And third, **eradicate systemic poverty** by acting on our beliefs and working to change laws in our society that perpetuate economic exploitation of people who are poor. Session voted to adopt all three foci. True to the intent of Matthew's gospel, we are using that gospel as a tool to BE and to MAKE disciples so that we will become obedient to Jesus' commands to show mercy and compassion.

Have we strayed too far from the theme of the day: Trinity Sunday? True, we may be no farther along the way to understanding the nature of God and the doctrine of the Trinity. But even as we live with doubt and questions about who God is, we have no doubt about who we are and what God calls us to do. We are the image of God—diverse in our creation, free to love one another, sustained in relationship to each other—created to show mercy as we have received mercy, and to carry out acts of compassion as we have received compassion. We do so, not out of obligation, but out of a desire to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.

Do you want to make disciples? Be the change you want to see in the world. Be the torch you were created to be.