

“Who Me? Yes, YOU!”

Matthew 28: 16 – 20

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There is so much packed into these four short verses in Matthew. We find ourselves on the mountain again, i.e., closer to the fullness of God, a sacred place. We've been there a lot in Matthew; with the temptation story, the transfiguration story, and of course, in Matthew, the sermon on the Mount. Today's text and we find ourselves up on the mountain with the disciples diminished in number but not in call. Up on the mountain with some of them doubting – leaving room for those days when we find ourselves doubting too. To the mountain to hear the final instructions of the risen Christ – the one upon whom all authority rests – the instruction to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything he had commanded them.

We refer to these final words of the risen Christ in Matthew as the ‘great commission’. I may be going out on a limb here but I would surmise that there are more of us here who are more uncomfortable than comfortable with these words; to go and make disciples, it's so eerily close to that ‘e’ word, you know - evangelize, go tell the nations, translated, the foreigner, the one not like us, about Jesus, teaching them to obey his commands. Go and make disciples! Who me? Yes, you! But, but, my faith is a private thing, I don't want to be pushy, I tolerate all religions, I don't want to be thought of as judgmental, literal, narrow minded...you know, all of those labels that are so often attributed to Christian these days.

Since it's the month of June and ‘Pride Month’, I thought it would be appropriate to share a ‘coming out’ story. It was more than a few years ago, probably around 2000 or 2001. I was gathered with a couple of hundred others, many of us clergy, at a rally on the steps of the Capitol building in Olympia, Washington. (About an hour south of Seattle.) We were gathered in support of civil rights for people who were Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgender. A young woman went to the center of the stage, took the microphone and introduced herself. I will always remember that introduction, or, I suppose I should say, a part of it. I don't remember her name. I don't remember the name of the organization she was with but remember that it she was the lead organizer for the rally that day. What I DO remember clearly is the third part. She said, “Hi, my name is (so and so) and I work for (such

and such) and today I want to come out of the closet. Today I stand here before you and tell you that I am Christian! I am an out of the closet Christian!

Now that might not hold as much significance here on the edges of the Bible belt as it did in the Northwest where more people check the none box, as in n-o-n-e, for religious preference than in any other part of the country. People here do tend to be more open about their faith and share that they go to church. Even so, there is still that illusion among many in the general population that Christians are judgmental, intolerant, narrow minded because, well, it seems that words of hate and intolerance make the news, make impressions and are shouted more frequently than words of acceptance and love.

The other evening, Ken and I had the pleasure of going to the play “Birds of a Feather”, described as ‘a true story about two gay penguins who nurtured a chick...but penguins can’t talk.’” If you have time in next weekend, check it out. There was one unfortunate part of the script, however. When talking about the two male penguins who were in a relationship, a conservative, evangelical, intolerant preacher appeared and spouted out how abnormal it all was, so contrary to the Bible. People got a chuckle out of his acting but still, I cringed inside. Looked around at so many sitting there who have only heard the Bible and the teachings of Jesus interpreted in this closed-minded way. Wouldn’t it have been great if another pastor entered, stage right...or left probably, preaching Peter’s words in Acts that ‘God shows no partiality’ or the words in 1 John, “God is love and to know love is to know God” or even the words from Jesus to ‘love your neighbor’.

Go and make disciples...who me? Yes, YOU! Please, you!

I read an article this week titled, “Dangerous Moments for Christianity” by Brian McLaren, author, speaker, activist, and public theologian. Although I don’t agree with everything that McLaren writes, I found myself nodding with much of this article.

McLaren wrote about Greg Gianforte who just won a special election to Congress in Montana, even after assaulting a reporter and dare I say, lying about it. I won’t mention which political party he is a part of; I don’t think it’s relevant here. I’m not out to ‘party bash’, won’t do that from the pulpit even if our governor says that we preachers should have the freedom of speech to do just that. But I will mention that Gianforte and his family are Christian and attend an Evangelical Bible Church. He is a young-earth creationist and biblical literalist.

Then McLaren added, and even though that first part is troubling to many, this is even more so; McLaren wrote that Dave Daubenmire, an Evangelical Christian with a popular web-cast said, “The only thing that is going to save Western civilization is a more aggressive, a more violent Christianity.” He praised the newly elected congressman saying, “People are sick and tired of it...They’re saying, ‘Yes, a fighter! Go, dude, go!...Who won? The dude that took the other dude to the ground.’”

Finally, McLaren ends, “Christians are constantly asking Muslims to reject “violent Islamic extremism.” It now remains to be seen how many Christians will speak out against this call to violent Christian extremism and invites Christians to be a part of a vital alternative to the growing violent white “Christian” nationalism. His final words are the most pointed. He writes, “We have lots of aggressive churches in the Religious Right. We have lots of passive, declining, or paralyzed congregations in our traditional denominations.”

That is sad, scary and pretty darn accurate.

So, when we read this passage from Matthew, having experienced Easter joy and empowered by the Holy Spirit, when we read those words, “Go therefore and make disciples” know that if there is a little voice within asking, “Who me?”, know that the answer is, “yes, YOU”. You, me individually and ‘we’ collectively as church, need to be out there, out of the closet Christians, teaching people to obey all that Jesus had commanded! Wait, what IS it that Jesus commanded?

Our lists may differ a little but mine includes:

1. Loving your God with your entire being and
2. Loving your neighbor as yourself.
3. Caring for the lost and the least
4. Speaking truth to power
5. Living not by the sword, i.e. working for peace, not slugging reporters
6. Having a heart of compassion
7. Repenting, turning toward God.

Go, Woodland Christian Church and make disciples. Who us? Yes, especially you. Respecting other faiths while at the same time telling the world what Jesus commands of you, how, as Bishop Shelby Spong states, ‘the teachings of your traditions don’t solely define God but point you in the direction of God.’

Go, and teach all that Jesus has commanded you. Who me? Yes, you. Because if you don't, because if we as a church that is open and affirming and loving don't, well, it's a dangerous time for Christianity.

“You are the seed that will grow a new sprout; you're a star that will shine in the night.

You are the yeast and a small grain of salt, a beacon to glow in the dark.

Go, my friends, go to the world, proclaiming love to all.

Messengers of my forgiving peace and eternal love.”

And that last sentence from today's scripture? Oh, we can't leave out that last sentence. In Matthew, they are THE final words, closing words, words of benediction from the risen Christ. They read, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Many scholars say that ‘remember’ reads more accurately as ‘behold’, propelling us back to the gospel's very beginning, to chapter one, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel which means ‘God is with us’. To the end of the age, ‘always’ each and every day, each and every moment. The risen Christ departs from his disciples with this promise to them and to us.

Thanks be to God.