

“Always”

It’s summer and we’re moving coffee hour into the Greenwood Room today, so I thought I’d change things up a little bit with the sermon too, and give you three things to remember right out of the gate. You may not want to work that hard, but I promise to try to make it worth your while. Here goes: two stories and an observation.

Story one: I have recurring dreams. Do you have recurring dreams? I know I’m under stress when I get this one: I’m back in college. It’s the last week of the semester and I discover that all semester long I’ve been registered for a class I’ve never been to. It’s way past the deadline to drop classes. So now I have like sixteen books to read and a thirty page paper due tomorrow along with three finals, one of which is for this class I’ve never attended. There are variations to this dream: I’m late for class and I can’t find the room; I’m a minister (imagine that) and I’m walking into a service and just found out I’m supposed to preach... or I’ve just realized that I’m late for a wedding, everybody is waiting for me but I can’t find my robe or I can’t find my service book or I can’t find the sanctuary. I have had this dream and its variants so often that I have even dreamt that I woke up and was relieved to discover that it was only a dream... but it *wasn’t* a dream, it was real! So now when I wake up it takes me a while to trust the sense of relief; but when I do it usually makes the rest of the day seem like a piece of cake... whew!

Story two: on October 5, 1960, my father surprised me. We had finished breakfast and I was starting out the door to school when he said, “Come look at this.” He was holding in his hand two tickets for that afternoon to game one of the World Series between the New York Yankees and the Pittsburgh Pirates. My sort of friend Larry Webb had tickets to Game two (there was to be no school that day) and he’d let me see and touch those tickets the previous afternoon, and that was pretty cool. But this felt very different. “Whose tickets are those?” I asked. “They’re ours,” my Dad said. “Do you want to go? You’d have to miss school.” The rest of that morning is a blur in my mind (I remember the game vividly; the Pirates won 6-4). But I do recall that for some reason I had to go to school to get something, but I wasn’t supposed to tell anybody I was going to the game

that afternoon. What do you suppose I did? I told everybody I saw! What fun would it have been not to tell? Good grief!

Now the observation, in the form of a question: Do you think that maybe you're getting just a little bit tired of people with their iPads? (Microsoft Word underlines "iPad" in red as a reminder it's not even a real word. ((It *doesn't* underline "Microsoft"))) I think I'm maybe just a teensy bit tired of these iPad people, sitting there with an air of nonchalance at meetings where I've got a twenty pound binder filled with documents while they're doing this languid flicking thing with their fingers while we're talking about minutes or financials and I'm wondering what they're *really* looking at over there. This week I had an email exchange with Angie. I do find it so helpful whenever I get a message from somebody with an iPad that there's a little tag line on the bottom that says, "sent from my iPad." What exactly is that supposed to tell me... that therefore the sender is not responsible for its content? So when I responded I added my own tag line at the bottom, "sent from my clunky old laptop." It's only six years old, weighs forty pounds and crashes every other week. I have pithed its little electronic brain—erased the hard drive and started over—three times. I don't want a stinking iPad... not me.

So... anxiety dreams, can't NOT tell, iPad envy. Amen. (I just like to watch the Deacons scurry when I say that.)

We know our scripture lesson for this morning is important because it comes at the very end of the Gospel According to Matthew. Matthew contains some wonderful things: the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, a moving account of Jesus' passion, an almost playful Easter story, and a passel of parables we'll be working our way through over the summer. But none of these things comes last, as the thing Matthew wants us most to remember. What comes last is today's lesson, commonly called the Great Commission; because Matthew wants us to understand that to be a follower of Jesus is to be on a mission to the whole world.

That mission launches from a mountaintop in Galilee. Followers of Jesus are not confined to the Jewish enclave of the Temple mount in Jerusalem. "Galilee of the Gentiles," as Matthew called it earlier¹, is a fitting place to inaugurate a mission to "all nations" (the Greek is *ethnos*, from which we get our word "ethnic"). And notice that the followers chosen for this mission are not just the ideal disciples, the ones whose faith is perfect

¹ Matthew 4:15.

and exemplary. When they meet the risen Christ on that mountain in Galilee some of the disciples prostrate themselves in worship, while others doubt. They're a mixed bag, just as we are. But they all receive the same message.

Jesus tells them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..." If you hear in these words an echo of the Lord's Prayer in which we say, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," your ears are finely tuned. All authority has been given to Jesus: not to Pilate and the Romans and their puppet government; not to the chief priests and the scribes and the religious authorities in Jerusalem. They have exercised all the authority they have. They have infiltrated and undermined Jesus' movement to lift up the downtrodden. They have tried to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the crowds who followed him. They have condemned him to death on trumped up charges in a sham of a trial held in the middle of the night. They have tortured him at the hands of skilled and ruthless executioners in a public act of state-sponsored terrorism, hanging him out to die beneath a sign that said "King of the Jews" as a warning to any who would oppose Roman authority by claiming any sort of sovereignty for themselves.

And so this mountaintop announcement proclaims God's vindication of Jesus and all that he taught and all that he stood for and died for: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." The contest is over. Love wins.² And the whole world that has been anguishing in an extended anxiety dream can wake up. Wake up... don't be afraid... love wins.

The disciples, the followers of Jesus, are to be the world's alarm clock. They have only recently awakened themselves from a protracted nightmare in which they denied Jesus, betrayed him, ran away from him and misconstrued him in almost every imaginable way. They had seen their high hopes and great expectations dashed and seen the one hailed as Son of David turned into the man of sorrows. But now their eyes have been opened. Now they see how things are. Now they have received a message of good news they can't NOT share.

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," all peoples. Don't just go to the white ones or the rich ones or the straight ones or the educated ones or the Americans... all peoples. Baptize them: through the wonder of worship and water let them know that God has called them by name, called them "Beloved" as Jesus was called when he was baptized, and let them

² I know this is the title of a recent Rob Bell book; but thirty years before that it was the title of one of my Easter sermons, and I can't believe it was original to me then, either. It's too obvious a truth to copyright. Love wins!

know there is nothing for them to fear. Wake them up from the dark dream that tells them they're not good enough or virtuous enough or smart enough. Tell them this is nothing they have to earn: they're not loved because they are worthy, they are worthy because they are loved. Let them know that love wins over all the barriers we throw up to separate ourselves from one another and from God. Baptize them with water and with welcome.

Baptize them, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Uh-oh. Is this another bad dream? Is God a committee? No. But God *is* a small group. God is a community. God is the love that takes different things and makes them one, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And as we become a part of the God community we teach one another the things that Jesus taught. We teach one another to love God with all our heart and soul, strength and mind and our neighbors as ourselves. We teach one another not to answer violence with violence, to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, not to waste our lives worrying about what we are to eat or drink or wear, to commit our treasure to God's work because where our treasure is, there will our heart be also. We teach one another not to accumulate stuff as though it could save us; not to cling to life but to share it. We teach one another to pray in the community of God. And we teach one another that all are welcome: "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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

Wake up from your anxious nightmare, everybody, and hear the good news. We all have A's. This is so good we can't NOT share it... right?

Or maybe we can manage not to share it. Maybe we're afraid to share it, afraid that people will think we're smug and superior and self-satisfied like those people with their iPads: "Ooooh look at those churchy people thinking they're all so much better than we are." But iPad people aren't like that at all!

Maybe we think sharing good news would make us spiritual imperialists: I mean, who are we to tell other people how to live their lives? Maybe everything is working just fine for them and we're the only ones who know what it feels like to be living in an anxious dream. Yeah, right!

OK: this sharing good news isn't easy. I'll concede that. It's too important to be easy. It means we have to care about other people enough to

really hear their stories before we earn the right to share ours. It means we need to expect to learn from them and through them that the good news of God's love is even better than we knew: the circle is even bigger than we thought! It's not as though they're sick and we're not and we have the antidote to fix them; it's that until we all truly realize that we're brothers and sisters none of us knows who we truly are. We welcome others not to validate our sense of being right but because our God is a God of welcome. We welcome others because somebody welcomed us.

And so the Great Commission to share the love of God comes with a promise: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Who gets this promise? All those who are sent to a hurting world receive this promise. All of us receive this promise; because to be doing God's work of welcome is to know God's presence... always. Always. Always.

Amen

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