

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
August 30, 2026
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Psalm 8; Matthew 28:16-20

"The Great Co-Mission"

I remember the first time I saw a bicycle built for two. I was amazed at the technology to put together a limousine bicycle. There's a story about two people out for a pleasant ride in the country. At one point, when they stopped for a breather at the top of a steep hill, the man who occupied the front seat exclaimed in great gasping breaths, "Boy, that was a stiff climb!" as he perspired and looked absolutely worn out. "It certainly was," replied the man on the second seat, "and if I hadn't kept the brake on, we would have slid down backward."

Going uphill with the brake on is an apt description of the way many of us approach the Great Commission, the risen Christ's command to "Go and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19) Unfortunately, many of us view the fulfillment of the Great Commission as an arduous, uphill, unpleasant task, which we wish Matthew had forgotten to record. But if Matthew had deleted this commandment, we would still have to confront it in Luke. And if not in Luke, who also records this in the Book of Acts, then we would have to deal with it in the Gospels of Mark or John.

For those who commit themselves to follow and serve Jesus Christ, there is no getting away from our responsibility to make disciples for Jesus Christ. Most of us probably have very mixed feelings about this task of making disciples. In our best moments, when our souls percolate with enthusiasm following a wonderful worship service, a rejuvenating retreat, or a bona fide breakthrough of spiritual understanding, we want to take the front seat position and pedal for all we are worth to climb to the heights of discipleship.

But almost at the same time, there is within us a reluctance or even a resistance to such a mission. While part of us wants to burst through those doors leading from the Narthex to the world and shout the good news of Jesus Christ to anyone who would hear, another part of us prefers to sort of slip out gracefully so as to attract as little attention as possible.

We all fight this internal battle over our commitment to the Great Commission. And that's just the way Jesus would have it. We are not the first to struggle with this question of commitment to the commands of Jesus Christ. There were fellow strugglers on the mountaintop where the risen Christ appeared for the last time to the disciples before ascending into heaven.

Matthew reports that Jesus had summoned the eleven disciples to a mountaintop in Galilee. This was the risen Christ who had directed them to this particular mountain. For forty days following his Easter resurrection, the disciples had seen, spoken to, broken bread with and learned from the risen Christ. This was no ordinary invitation to gather with their extraordinary Lord.

Matthew puts it this way, "When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted." (Matthew 28:17) Those are Matthew's words - "but some doubted." It practically knocks the breath out of my soul, when I think about some of the eleven disciples doubting. These men didn't have the veil of twenty centuries obscuring their vision of Christ. They were there! They had spent three years with Jesus, living, laboring, laughing, loafing, loving, and learning at his side. They had been there to the bitter end. And they had met the risen Christ, in his perfected form, and had spent more than a month with him.

If even they doubted, with all their first-hand evidence, how can we, who see the historical Jesus only through the eyes and accounts of others, not harbor some doubts? That is precisely the point Matthew makes by including these three words in his report of the Great Commission - even the most committed of the disciples, men who one day would die for their Lord, had doubts.

The inclusion of this reality check assures us that our struggle with faith and doubt is normal. Not even the Apostles were exempt from doubt. But Matthew is not the only one who recognizes the normalcy of doubt. Our Lord responded to their doubt with the Great Commission. Not even the existence of doubt kept Jesus from entrusting the fragile life of the infant church to these disciples.

By extension, Christ includes us in this Great Commission, knowing full well that we will take our doubts with us as we work to fulfill its commands. The Great Commission begins and ends inclusively - it is carried out by those whose faith is shadowed by doubt and carried to those whose shadow of doubt requires the light of faith.

Embodied within the Great Commission are three commands - "go, make disciples and remember (that) I am with you always." The first two commands are intimately linked. To go, without discipling produces superficial, tentative faith which is too easily influenced by every politically correct cause. To disciple without going creates faith which is inbred, exclusive, and ignorant of the need for justice in the world. Jesus tied both commands together with a conjunction because both must happen simultaneously - we must "go and make disciples."

But Jesus didn't say to go and make disciples of people we know; those who are like us; those with whom we are comfortable. Jesus said to "go therefore and make disciples of all

nations." All nations in this context means all people, regardless of nationality, race or ethnic background. The gospel message is for all people, all people.

It must have been tempting for the eleven disciples simply to stay on the mountaintop sharing their experiences with one another. But Jesus' commission compelled them to come down off the mountain and go into the real world where there is both physical and spiritual hunger. Similarly, the only way for us to reach those unlike us is for us to venture forth from our spiritual mountaintops and go into the world with the good news of how Jesus Christ can resuscitate those who are drowning in life's sometimes tempestuous sea.

Our discipling is to be carried out by baptizing and teaching. Baptism is our introduction to the community of faith. Jesus didn't detail who or how to baptize. We are not told to baptize only adults or only children. We are not told to baptize with a river-full or thimble-full of water. We are told to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We don't baptize in the name of the Presbyterian Church, or the Southern Baptist Church, or the Roman Catholic Church, or the Episcopal Church or the Methodist Church. We baptize with the Trinitarian formula - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Our discipling begins with baptism and continues with teaching. Jesus charges us to teach obedience to his commandments. The most effective teaching we can do is through our actions. We are called to model obedience in our deeds as well as our words. The third command of the Great Commission is one that often gets overlooked - "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

It may seem odd for Jesus to command us to remember that he is with us, but the fact is that much of life works against that recollection. Life can be troublesome. It can be fraught with crisis, illness, loneliness, uncertainty, frustration, anger, and grief. These are events which can absorb so much of our attention that we forget Christ's continuing presence.

It is vital for us to recall that Jesus does not leave us alone. Life is not solitary confinement, nor is faith solitary commitment. In a life of faith, Jesus Christ is our constant companion.

Those of us who have lived through the death of a loved one know that there is a mysterious, powerful presence of the one we loved that continues with us. It is more than mere memory. There are days when I have been especially perplexed or agitated, that I was certain of the calming presence of my mother. If we can experience that sense of companionship with a resurrected loved one, how much more can we encounter the abiding presence of our risen Lord?

An ancient legend recounts the return of Jesus to heaven after his earthly ministry. Even in heaven he bore the marks of the cross and his shameful death. The angel Gabriel approached him and said, "Master, you must have suffered terribly for people down on the

earth. Do they know and appreciate how much you loved them and what you did for them?" "No, not yet," replied Jesus. "Right now only a handful of people in Jerusalem know." "Then what have you done to let everyone know of your love and sacrifice for them?" asked Gabriel. "I've instructed eleven followers to teach others and keep on teaching until the whole world knows," replied Jesus.

Knowing the reputation of Peter, Thomas and the others, Gabriel frowned with skepticism. "What if they get tired, or the other people forget? Have you made other plans?" responded Gabriel. "No," said Jesus, "I'm counting on them."

Twenty centuries have come and gone, and Jesus still has no plan other than, "he is counting on us." God counts on us to get the word out to the world. That is our commission, to go 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 Christ has commanded us. And remember, Christ is with us always, to the end of the age.

Having grown up in Texas, I say "Y'all" frequently. I was thinking, if the Great Commission were accurately translated into "Southern," it would sound like this. "Y'all go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...and y'all remember, I am with y'all always, to the end of the age."

This one small alteration helps us understand that our commission from Christ is really a "co-mission." We have to do it together. Christ is counting on us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen