

June 11, 2017  
Trinity Sunday  
Matthew 28:16-20  
Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8

## **MAKE DISCIPLES**

Years ago, James and I helped lead a confirmation class of ninth graders at First Presbyterian Church. One night we had dinner with one of the confirmands, his mentor, and a retired pastor and his wife who had been in ministry together for over 50 years. It was primarily an intergenerational social event, but we were talking some good theology. At one point I remember the young man saying "One thing I'm really having a hard time with is how Jesus could be both fully human and fully God at the same time." My brain went into high gear, just short of panic mode wondering how you get into that discussion with a ninth grader. The eighty-something year old retired pastor kind of gave him a serious look and said, "you mean with all your education and years being raised in the church you haven't figured out the one thing that no other theologian in 2000 years has ever been able to adequately explain?"

Today is designated Trinity Sunday on the Church Calendar. It is kind of a strange thing that we do--designating one Sunday to talk about the Holy Trinity--the Christian understanding that there is one Almighty God and that God is composed of three distinct, yet intertwined, inseparable, persons. It is a really hard thing to get our brains around if we think about it, so most of the time, those of us who are steeped in the faith don't think about it. And that is fine. In some respects, God will always be a mystery to us mere mortals.

But if you did not grow up going to church and Sunday School, going to things like Vacation Bible School and Dogwood Acres Summer Camp and the Montreat Youth Conference; if what you learn about God is what you pick up on the internet, and if instead of learning about God at home, what you learn there is

"get ahead," "everything is a competition and success is all that matters. Your school work, later your job, are the most important things in life" if that is the main message you learn growing up, and one day someone takes you to church and they start talking about the Triune God, you are going to feel like you have landed on a distant planet.

In fact, in the first century and the early part of the second century, the idea that Jesus was the everlasting, eternal Word of God who became flesh and lived among us, was probably the main stumbling block for the Jewish community and the reason the church spread more easily among the gentiles, who let's face it, were used to the idea of multiple gods, so it was an easier transition for them. Still, we can be pretty sure that the notion that a truly human being who was born, grew up, lived and died could be one and the same, light from light, true God from true God, is not something that would be intuitively obvious to anyone.

Still, those early Christians did not adhere to the "get them in the door, pander to their needs, and hope they want to stay" theory of growing the church. People who wanted to join the church spent at least a year studying the catechisms, studying the ancient Jewish Scriptures—what Christians now call the Old Testament, learning Jesus' teachings which in the earliest days were based on word of mouth; learning how Jesus was dead and buried yet rose from the grave and appeared to his followers.

After that extensive period of learning and training, they could be Baptized and only after Baptism would they be entitled to participate in Holy Communion. And they were lining up for the privilege. Go figure.

All the while Christians and Jews continued to be oppressed, suppressed and persecuted peoples. Being Christian was not the way to get ahead in the world. Yet they kept coming. There were a few wealthy, educated people among them, but most were poor and marginalized. There were virtually no Christians in positions

of political power until the early 4<sup>th</sup> century when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted and decided that Christianity would be the official state religion.

Constantine by the way was not Baptized himself until he was on his death bed probably because he didn't want to study all that catechism.

Anyway, things changed for Christians overnight. No longer persecuted, they became persecutors. Almost immediately, the in-fighting began. A huge debate developed about the Divinity of Jesus. There were two factions: one, led by a Bishop named Athanasius proclaimed the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as equal beings of the one true Godhead. Athanasius drew primarily from the Gospel of John--"In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God." It is never spelled out explicitly, but there are references throughout Scripture pointing to the Triune nature of God, such as each of our readings this morning: In the creation story, God breathed God's Spirit over the void. God said: **"Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;** [Genesis 1:26]. Jesus' final words to the disciples claiming all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him and commanding his followers **to 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.**

But there was another faction also led by a scholarly priest named Arius, who also studied and interpreted the Scriptures. Arius proclaimed the Divinity of Jesus but not his equality with God. Arius believed that God was the creator and that Jesus the Christ, was his most superior, divine, even immortal creature. But a creature. One created by the God who created the heavens and the earth.

The debate raged on and on over this very fine but essential point: whether Christ was one with the eternal, all-powerful creator God or was a divine being created by the all-powerful creator God. There was a lot of anger. The church was split. Christians fighting against Christians. Literally going to war over it.

So Constantine said "you guys get together and work this out." And they held the Council of Nicea. Basically, the first meeting of the General Assembly. Except that it was before the reformation so all the commissioners were male Bishops, priests and scholars from all over the Roman Empire, which was pretty much the known inhabited world at the time. They debated for months and ultimately came up with the Nicene Creed. The Arians were banished, branded as infidels and sent into exile.

But they didn't entirely disappear. When Constantine died, it turned out his son was an Arian and the debate resurfaced. It went back and forth for a few more decades--all told this debate sucked the life out of the church just as it was emerging from persecution, for about 40 years. Finally, there was a second council at Nicea, the Nicene Creed was reaffirmed as originally written. And the Arians faded into the shadows.

For decades, the subject consumed the attention of the church. All that time the church spent settling a fine theological point while Jesus' actual teachings were neglected. Heal the sick, feed the hungry, give to the poor, welcome the outsiders, love your neighbor, make disciples. It is particularly ironic that those who were so determined to defend the Divinity of Christ relied on this passage from Matthew where, in addition to claiming all authority on earth and in heaven equally with God, Christ tells his followers to go out—teach, share the good news of God's love with all people everywhere. That's how to make disciples

We might shake our heads and wonder how the church could have gotten so off track until we think about our own more recent history. At least the Arian controversy concerned something that is essential to our Christian faith. In the United States, the church spent about 200 years arguing about whether it is Christian for one set of people to enslave another set of people based on their skin color--that debate ending in the bloodiest war ever fought in American history.

Then we had another 100 years debating whether Christians could exclude other Christians from public parks, schools, hospitals and most shamefully from churches-- again based on skin color. And the last 40 years or so, and even still in many factions of the universal church of Jesus Christ, the church has been consumed with worrying about what other Christians are doing in their bedrooms and whether some Christians should be denied the blessing of marriage because it.

All this time spent arguing with each other about nonessentials, tearing the church down instead of building it up. Focusing inward instead of outward. Ignoring Christ's final commandment to make disciples.

The authority is his. He does not make suggestions or requests. He does not pander. He commands with all the power of God.

1. Go Out he said. Being the church is not about having your own needs met.
2. Make disciples he said. Show them by your words and actions what it means to follow Christ and they will follow you.
3. Baptize them he said. In the name of the one Triune God, baptize them so that they are signed and sealed as children of God.
4. Teach them to obey everything he has commanded you. You know, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, lift up the downtrodden, heal the sick, welcome the sinners and the foreigners among you.

Most of all teach the good news of salvation. Send them to Summer Camp and Montreat. Offer VBS to all children regardless of where they live, whether they go to church, or who their parents are. Show the love of God in Christ in everything you do and everything you say. Make disciples, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.