

## “I Am With You Always”

Matthew 28: 16-28

A funny thing happened this week....I went on a mission trip with our middle schoolers and gained a better understanding of the name “disciple.” Let me explain: Last Sunday, I took off with three of our middle school youth and John Batts to Bethany West Virginia. Why Bethany, West Virginia, you might ask? Well, Bethany was the home of one of our founders for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Alexander Campbell. We went to learn a little bit more of Disciples history and to do some work around the area surrounding Campbell’s house. Or at least, that was what I was hoping would happen. I never guessed that my sermon for this Sunday would also be waiting for me in West Virginia as well.

As I was living with this text this past week, a text that is known throughout Christian tradition as the Great Commission, a text that compels us to go and make disciples, I was also listening once again to the wonderful words of why we call ourselves disciples as a denomination. You see, Alexander Campbell, one of our founders, believed that there was one Body of Christ and that through this Body of Christ, our mission as believers was to be disciples of Christ always by, embracing our call to follow Jesus’ words in everything that we do and say. And he stated that we do this the best when we live out this calling by breaking down the barriers

that separate us and divide us as the church. He believed that we were disciples of Christ first and foremost because we were believers who have experienced the power and the promise of new life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ in our lives. We were to call ourselves disciples because that was who we were at our core. Disciples of Christ and that was the only title we needed to claim as people of faith. And our job as disciples of Christ was to heal and unify the church, to make disciples of all nations, baptizing, teaching, healing, restoring, all the while showing the world God's love. Campbell never wanted to create another church. Campbell simply wanted to restore and heal the Body of Christ here on earth. Campbell simply wanted people to go and make disciples of all nations by unifying the Body of Christ here on earth through the welcome and acceptance of all of God's children. That's our history. That's our heritage that we claim as modern day disciples of Christ. Seems pretty easy, doesn't it?

But the funny thing about it all is that some two hundred years later, today, as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), regardless of what one of our founders believed, we are still trying to figure out how we are actually supposed to be disciples, how we are supposed to go out and make disciples of all nations while still claiming our disciple heritage of creating one Body in Christ. We haven't figured it out yet. But we still call ourselves Disciples.

So this was where I found myself as I was working on this sermon. it was through this interesting questioning of how to go about making disciples while still claiming the One Body of Christ, where my sermon found me, in the hills of West Virginia, with our middle school youth, painting a fence at the Campbell mansion.

It all started because I kept thinking all week, “Why are we teaching Disciples’ history to these youth when we know that most of them may not even be Disciples when they grow up? They may find another denomination or another church that fits all their needs.” I say this because the sad news is that not many people in our Disciple churches are life long disciples anymore. And we are not alone. All other mainline denominations are facing the same thing nowadays as well. So knowing all of this, I wondered if we were doing a disservice to our youth by teaching them history they may not use in their lives.

But then I found myself sitting on the ground with a paint brush in my hand, talking with our kids, talking with them about school, talking with them about friends, talking with them about family, talking with them about life in general. And then it struck me. This is what Campbell meant when he called us to be disciples first. This is what he meant when he said we were one body of Christ and reminded us that our calling is to break down barriers that separate us . By being disciples first, Campbell reminding us that it is through These moments of fellowship, These moments of friendship that we heal and reconcile all of God’s

children. Those moments when you can just tell that the Spirit of God is there, connecting everyone. That's the reason we claim the title disciples.

And it was in that moment that I realized we had made disciples on this trip, maybe not life long disciples of Christ Church members, but disciples still the same because maybe one day, when the youth look back on this trip, they will remember that someone took the time to listen to their stories, took the time to include them in the mystery of God, took the time to share his or her life with them, took the time to show them God's love and grace. And because of this time, this connection, this relationship, these youth grew in their faith, grew in their experience with God, and hopefully will pass the same experience on in their lives to others they meet as they go through life.

And I realized that this idea wasn't entirely Alexander Campbell's in the first place. That he was simply reclaiming and living out what he understood to be his calling from Jesus given to him and the disciples through the Great Commission. My insight didn't come from Campbell but from a new understanding of this text. What I was experiencing and realizing is exactly what Jesus meant when he said Go and make disciples. He didn't want more numbers in God's Kingdom. He knew that there wasn't a quota of people that had to enter into God's Kingdom before peace came on earth.

When he was commissioning the disciples at this point in the Gospel of Matthew, he was beginning the process of restoring and healing the people of God. He was sending them out to show God's love and God's mercy to all of God's children, not just a select few with the right title or label.

When he tells the disciples to go and make disciples, he is not telling them to forcibly convert people but rather He wants his disciples to learn the people's stories. He wants his disciples to build relationships with the people that they encounter and to show them God's grace and mercy, just like he did when he was with them on earth, preaching and teaching, healing and feeding their spirits

And now because of their relationship with Jesus, the disciples understand the wonderful blessing that is God's love. Because of their connection with Jesus, the disciples now understand the powerful promise of new life. Because Jesus took the time to listen to their stories and took the time to really see the disciples for who God created them to be, the disciples now are able to go and do likewise. They are able to pass the experience on in their lives and their lives, spreading the good news about God's love and God's mercy.

When Jesus gives the disciples this great commission, Jesus knows that healing, teaching, preaching, and baptizing won't happen in a vacuum. They happen when there is a connection, when there is a relationship, when the people experience the Spirit of God unifying the Body of Christ. Jesus also knows that the

Kingdom of God will only truly come about here on earth when people break down the barriers that separated and divided each other and really began to see each other as brothers and sisters, as beloved children of God, as ones created in God's image.

By sending them out to go and make disciples of all nations, Jesus is really telling the disciples to remember that the only thing he is really asking them to do is to love others as he has loved them, to remember the Greatest Commandment, to remember the promise of the resurrection given to all who believe and to live out these teachings as their calling as their mission through everything that they do every day. Just like Jesus showed them during his time on earth with them.

The blessing that they now could claim is that They were now disciples because Jesus took the time to listen and to hear their stories. They were now disciples because Jesus built a relationship with them. They were now disciples because Jesus made a connection with them.

And that is the good news for us. We can claim the same thing today! We can call ourselves disciples because at some point in our lives, we made a connection with someone. We can call ourselves disciples because at some point in our lives, we developed a relationship with a person who changed our lives and challenged us to grow in our faith. We can call ourselves disciples because at some

point, someone took the time and saw us for the amazing person that God created us to be.

And today, the good news is that we are now asked to do the same thing for someone else! However despite this good news, this is the part we begin to doubt and to wonder because this is the part where it gets scary. This is the part when we usually start looking around to see if the minister is talking to anyone else but us. This is the part when we think we don't have the right gifts or talents for such a calling.

Well, there is still more good news for us as disciples of Christ. Jesus knew that the disciples would be afraid to go out into the world and make disciples. Jesus knew that it wouldn't be easy. Jesus knew that in reality, if the disciples had their way, they probably would have gone home after the resurrection. But before the disciples could give excuses or reasons as to why they couldn't go, Jesus gave them a promise, a promise that he would never leave them alone. Jesus would be with them always. Jesus would be guiding them and walking beside them, supporting them, encouraging them, giving them the words to say. All they had to do was go and make disciples. All they had to do was go and live out their faith every day. All they had to do was become the people that God created them to be by sharing God's love and mercy with all of God's children. And the rest was up to God. And the rest was in God's control. And the rest would come about because

God was working through them to help bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth.

That's the wonderful news that we never seem to remember. We always think it is all up to us. we forget that there is more to it than go and make disciples. We tend to think that this great commission of Go and make disciples was the final word to the disciples and to us as modern day disciples.

And that is not true. The thing we must remember is that All Jesus asks us to do is to go out and claim our heritage as disciples, as ones who will work to help bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth by breaking down the barriers that separate us, as ones who believe that we are called to live out our faith through everything we do in our everyday lives, as ones claimed and named as God's beloved. The rest is up to God!

As we embrace our heritage as disciples, we must remember that The blessing that we all can claim today is that we call ourselves disciples as ones whose lives have been changed by knowing Jesus Christ. And now we are called to respond by going out and sharing that knowledge with a world that is hurting and in need of some good news. And that is where we start! Go and make disciples. Go and heal the world. Go and teach. Go show God's love and mercy to all of God's children. And know that God is with us always.

We call ourselves disciples, claimed and named as God's own. Now may we go out and share this wonderful blessing with all of God's children. Amen.