

SERMON FOR JUNE 15, 2014 (TRINITY SUNDAY):

TAKIN IT TO THE STREETS

(with special thanks to Michael McDonald of the Doobie Brothers, 1976)

OPENING PRAYER: Loving God: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.

The Lawyer Keeps His Promise

A dying man gives each of his best friends—a lawyer, a doctor and a clergyman—an envelope containing \$25,000 in cash to be placed in his coffin. A week later the man dies and the friends each place an envelope in the coffin. Several months later, the clergyman confesses that he only put \$10,000 in the envelope and sent the rest to a mission in South America. The doctor confesses that his envelope had only \$8,000 because he donated to a medical charity. The lawyer is OUTRAGED, “I am the only one who kept my promise to our dying friend. I want you both to know that the envelope I placed in the coffin contained my PERSONAL CHECK for the entire \$25,000.” (With thanks to Comedy Central)

Today’s reading from the Gospel according to Matthew is timely because this is the Sunday our church celebrates the doctrine of the Trinity, our way of attempting to explain the complicated nature of God’s relationship to us as Creator, living word as Jesus the Christ among us, and the Still Speaking God, with us today as the Holy Spirit. In preparing this message for today’s worship, I was surprised to learn that there is very little support or guidance about the Trinity contained within the books of the gospels themselves, other than the words from today’s lesson taken from the final chapter of Matthew. According to Matthew’s gospel, Jesus COMMANDS his disciples 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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Verse 19-20. We are certainly familiar with those words and we baptize children and new Christians two thousand years later in that tradition.

To me, more important than the Trinity reference from today’s Gospel reading, is the MESSAGE of MATTHEW’s gospel. This gospel is commonly referred to as The Great Commission. In an inspirational sermon, entitled “Jesus’ Other Last Words” authored by Pastor Michael Lindvall of The Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City from 2008, Pastor Lindvall makes the case that Jesus “last words on the cross” are given great weight and so should his “other last words” to his disciples as reported in Matthew’s gospel. He describes the background for today’s gospel lesson this way:

“The setting is just after Easter. Jesus’ disciples have gone to Galilee as they were told. There they experience the presence of their Risen Lord. They respond precisely as you might expect. Matthew 28, Verse 17: “When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted.” Actually, the Greek word translated “doubted” really means “wavered,” and for some reason the English inserts the word “some” that’s not in the Greek. So the verse really reads, “And when they saw him, they worshipped and wavered.” A perfectly understandable response: “worshipping and wavering.” ... As they “worship and waver,” Jesus speaks. These are what I am calling his “other last words.”...

But these “other last words of Jesus” are so familiar to Christians that we miss one curious thing about them. First, Jesus tells his disciples to go out into the world to make disciples among all nations, to baptize them. Finally, he promises that he will be with them, “even to the end of the age.” All this you might expect. But in between, precisely what he tells his followers to teach people is startling. You would have thought...that Jesus would have told them to teach people what to BELIEVE.

But that’s not what he tells them to do. Rather, in these “other last words,” Jesus tells his disciples to teach them “to obey everything I have commanded you.” And what has he commanded them over the last few years? According to Matthew, what Jesus has commanded is contained in several discourses, especially the Sermon on the Mount, his parables, and of course, the Great Commandment. And the sum of what he has commanded is to love God and neighbor, to show compassion, to practice humility, to welcome the stranger, and to live honestly. Here what’s curious: his last word is not exactly about what to BELIEVE; it’s more about what to DO; IT’S ABOUT ETHICS AND HOW TO LIVE! (emphasis added to original text)

So, what should you and I, as members of Emanuel Church and the United Church of Christ in Wisconsin take from these “other last words” of Jesus. How do they instruct us on how to live and seek to model our lives so that we might become Jesus’ new disciples? To paraphrase from the title of a Doobie Brothers song from the 70’s, “Takin it to the Streets,” I BELIEVE the Spirit is telling us to TAKE OUR FAITH TO THE STREETS! To go forth from our worship and feed hungry people at The Gathering; to bring food, clothes and encouragement to homeless men at The Guest House; to reach out to shut-in folks who may need help, transporting them to buy their groceries, or help get them to appointments with their doctors; to be advocates for children and victims of abuse or poverty; and to build relationships with all of God’s peoples who are discriminated against because of the color of their skin, their place of birth, or their choice of whom to share their lives and love. We are already DOING this mission work, and so much more! We are already taking our faith to the streets, and I am confident that this mission oriented congregation will find new and additional ways to accept Christ’s GREAT COMMISSION in the years to come.

The future DISCIPLES going forth from Emanuel Church will need to PREPARE themselves for mission work by recognizing their special gifts. Their passion for mission work must focus on the needs of the community, while being receptive to the gentle voice of the Holy Spirit of God speaking, guiding the pathway into that journey. Even as we gather today, a

team of our own disciples are on their way to Biloxi, Mississippi, to help restore hope in an area devastated by hurricane Katrina, where they will work under the guidance of Back Bay Mission, one of our UCC recognized CHHSM agencies.

How else might we prepare ourselves to transfer what we believe into plans of action that will change peoples' lives in positive ways? Do we need to study the Gospel and the core beliefs of our faith to ready ourselves for the journey? Are we already preparing to "walk the talk" as Jesus' disciples of the twenty-first century?

In preparing my thoughts for today's message, it dawned on me that something I read or learned when I was a student at the Lay Academy may have empowered me to answer these questions. The first book we were assigned to read at that time was entitled: "To Begin at the Beginning, An Introduction to the Christian Faith" by Martin Copenhagen. In that book, the author describes how Jesus transformed the "disciples, a word Jesus used for students" into "apostles, a word Jesus used to mean, those who were sent forth."

Copenhagen states: "Jesus first summoned people to him so that they might learn from him. But Jesus did not stop there. Jesus then sent them forth- that is, away from his side- into the world to carry out ministries in his name. In a similar way, we are summoned into the church to learn from Jesus. But then, just as important, we are sent forth to complete our calling. We are called into the church and then called to leave the church." Id @ p.238

During this time of the year many students and their families are celebrating graduation; whether that might be graduation from preschool to kindergarten, middle school to high school, high school to college, or beyond to post-graduate or professional studies. Graduations are important because they mark a time of passage, a time to reflect upon what has been accomplished, and discern what is yet to be learned and experienced. When I look back on what motivated me to enroll in the Wisconsin Conference Lay Academy, I basically recall that I was over 30 years removed from my confirmation days, and all I really hoped to achieve at that time was to acquire a better understanding of what our faith is all about. That was my "purely selfish" reason for attending the Lay Academy. What I received was far MORE than I had ever imagined! The best way for me to describe the experience is to say that Lay Academy EMPOWERS and RENEWS the ENERGY of its' students for their FAITH. It makes them ready to undertake tasks of leadership in their churches, in their communities, and in the churches' outreach ministries. The skills that are learned in these weekend classes, the books and group reflections upon the lessons, the instruction from outstanding speakers who teach at the Lay Academy, all combine to provide students with the tools necessary to confidently go forth as Jesus commanded, and try to make a difference within and outside of the church. Had I not taken advantage of the selfish opportunity to attend Lay Academy when I did, I'm really not sure that I would have had the confidence to WORK with the original Board that gave birth to Park's Edge Preschool, or to serve a term as President of the Board of Directors of The Gathering, or to serve multiple terms as the President of our congregation, or, more recently, to accept a new leadership role in the Southeast Association.

A new class of students will be forming this fall in the Wisconsin Conference Lay Academy. This program was recognized last weekend at the Conference Annual meeting in Green Lake on its' 20 year anniversary. All around the conference hall, students who attended the Lay Academy were obvious because their name tags included a special FIRE IN THE PEWS emblem, consistent with the theme for this years' meeting. Some of those former students were inspired to continue their study by enrolling in seminary and have become new UCC clergy members. Others accepted leadership roles in their local congregations and were present at the meeting as delegates. Still others were representatives of CHHSM organizations, or have gone on to become moderators of one of the four Associations of our Conference. I am only privileged to stand in this pulpit once every few years, so, I will take this opportunity to STRONGLY URGE anyone who may be even slightly interested in attending the Lay Academy, for whatever reason you may have, to give serious consideration to the opportunity. Our Southeast Association has scholarship funds available to help reduce the cost for those who may need that assistance. I can PROMISE you that the experience will not disappoint! For personal growth, for FAITH building or renewal, for empowerment to speak and share the WORD, there is no finer program within our conference than the Lay Academy. For a lawyer, trembling inside, but seemingly confident enough to stand before you today and share my thoughts on today's gospel; believe me, it was worth every minute of study, reflection and encouragement I received as a student of the Lay Academy.

In conclusion, Jesus is still at work in this church, teaching the disciples of today and transforming them into the Apostles of tomorrow. Jesus instructs on the ETHICS of Life as a Christian. Christ empowers His disciples, with the FAITH they need to answer His call. Then, He sends them out to confidently go forth into the communities and demonstrate through love, compassion, and integrity that God's world is a work in progress. Through the Holy Spirit, God is still speaking to us, with us, through us, and among us. The Great Commission continues in Hales Corners, in Franklin, in Muskego and Milwaukee today, tomorrow and beyond. NOW, you and I are entrusted with the work of the church, and God has empowered us to take the ministry of Love to the Streets. Finally, to borrow part of a verse from John and Paul---no, not that John or that Paul, [hold up Bible] but John Lennon and Paul McCartney, a duo whose music still influences my life today; GOD IS STILL....."SPEAKING WORDS OF WISDOM--- LET IT BE"! (The Beatles; 1970)