

**The Feast of the Holy Trinity**  
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**Trinity Episcopal Church • New Orleans, LA**

**The Rev. E. Gary Taylor**

I am a proud alumnus of Virginia Theological Seminary, just outside Washington, D.C. When I arrived in 2008, that seminary had a very old and remarkably poorly functional chapel in which it worshipped daily. As it turned out, that chapel burned to the ground when I was a student there, apparently because of improperly extinguished incense, but I was away in Connecticut at the time, I have witnesses, and was replaced after my years there with an absolutely beautiful new church on campus.

As I say, the old church was pretty ugly, but it had one marvelous feature, inscribed on the arch above the altar in letters a foot high, were the words we hear in our gospel reading today, the closing lines of the gospel of Matthew, go and make disciples of all nations.

Pretty great words for a seminary. But let's take ourselves back to the situation into which Matthew is writing his gospel. As the commentator Thomas Long points out, Matthew's challenge was how to get the provincial and timid followers of Jesus of Nazareth to venture out into the frightening world with the gospel.

And so the scene which is depicted in our gospel today is one of near comic irony. Jesus says, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, but nothing in the surroundings seems to support such a claim. If Jesus had been speaking to vast multitudes, rank upon rank, stretching toward the horizon as far as the eye could see, with the Mormon tabernacle choir quietly humming the hallelujah chorus in the background, perhaps it would seem believable.

But here Jesus is on an unnamed mountain in a backwater of Galilee with a congregation of 11 down from 12 the week before. And even some of them are

doubtful and not so sure why they've come to worship this day. What Jesus tells them presses credulity even further, go therefore and make disciples of all nations.

Nations, by the way, does not mean nations in the modern sense of nation states, but something more like foreigners, tribes of people who are not at all like you, or to put it succinctly, Gentiles. Jesus is saying, go to everybody, exclude no one.

Telling this little band of confused and disoriented disciples that they were to herd all the peoples of the earth toward Mount Zion in the name of Jesus would be like a preacher standing in front of a congregation today and telling them, go into all the world and establish world peace.

That's the point, or close to it. The very fact that the task is utterly impossible throws the disciples completely onto the mercy and strength of God and makes Jesus's command such an audacious responsibility that one could devote one's entire life to it. Biblical scholars call Jesus's parting message the Great Commission, and it captures a fundamental difference between Christianity and, say, Judaism.

Judaism is a truly wonderful, rich, and powerful tradition that has bound people to God for thousands of years, but it does not share the goal of Christianity to introduce new people to the faith. Sure, some Jews are eager to help people who are born Jewish to better embrace their traditions and beliefs, but Judaism is not really set up to bring more people into the fold. In Christianity, on the other hand, there are those who have devoted their whole lives and traveled enormous distances, sometimes at great personal peril, to take the gospel where it has not yet been heard.

Evangelism is from the Greek, to bring the good news, and we know there are people who spend their Sundays knocking on doors or asking passersby at the airport, do you know Jesus? My guess is that most of you would find such conversations uncomfortable and cannot really imagine yourself evangelizing someone you hardly know. Episcopalians tend to think of religion as a very personal thing that polite people don't really bring up in conversation, except maybe if we know the other person really well to invite them to come with us to church

sometime, with the bribe of a nice lunch afterwards. At some level, we know about this call to evangelize, but we rest safely in the conviction that such work is for priests and other people with that unusual calling, not for those of us who really don't know what to say.

The Bible depicts people who can evangelize like, you know, picking up snakes and drinking deadly things without being harmed. That's not who we are, really. Well, this morning I want to give you a few new things to think about when it comes to evangelizing, because I really do think that's part of the deal if we want to call ourselves disciples of Christ.

It starts with identifying what that good news really is that we ought to be spreading as boldly as possible. To reveal a bit of my own theology here, I am not of the opinion that the good news of the gospel of Jesus is that we can get to heaven and be saved as long as we intellectually agree that Jesus is the Son of God, or believe that Jesus died for our sins, or accept as true some other doctrine of Christianity. I simply can't get to the position that what somebody thinks determines whether God is going to embrace them in the fullness of time.

God is not limited by us. Our God is bigger than that, more loving and wonderful than that, more full of grace than that. So what is evangelizing if it is not only about getting people to intellectually assent to an idea? A great place to start getting at that question is talking about today as Trinity Sunday.

Today we celebrate the mysterious nature of God as three in one. Each of our readings, if you notice, refers to this triune God. Matthew quotes Jesus empowering his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Paul, in our reading from Corinthians, ends his epistle with that lovely blessing, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. Even the creation story in Genesis shows God the Father creating by means of the power of the Holy Spirit, ruach, great wind or breath, and through the Word, which is light. Remember John's spin on creation? In the

beginning was the Word, the light shining in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

But it is in pointing to the Trinity that Scripture is also pointing at this great commission. The meaning of the Trinity is that our God is a God of relationship, of interconnectedness, of what the Greeks call perichoresis, that great dance of mutual self-giving love that finds its ultimate expression on the cross. Genesis reminds us that God is the Father of all creation.

Paul reminds us that we are to live in peace even with the others in our diverse city that drive us crazy. And Matthew challenges us to make disciples of all nations, relating to, connecting with, giving of ourselves to everyone we encounter. With his parting words, Jesus invites us into the mutuality and power of divine life and sends us to invite others from all nations.

I'm sure you know the song, and they'll know we are Christians by our love. I believe that when we love people, all people like God does, unconditionally, unjudgmentally, indiscriminately, we are performing the best kind of evangelizing. We are proclaiming the good news and fulfilling the great commission by welcoming others into the kind of love that can quite literally change their lives.

And we don't even have to be conscious we're doing it. All we need to give is people a genuine experience of the love of God and the Holy Spirit will do the rest. When Jesus is commanding us to make disciples of all nations, he's really saying, go make students of Christ, for disciples are students.

They are like interns. Interns are watching, practicing under supervision, asking questions, making mistakes and learning from them. Put people in Jesus internships, says our Lord.

Love like I have loved. Such a life learning process is what immersion into the fullness of God really looks like. In a lovely book called *The Scent of Love*, author Keith Miller described the spreading of Jesus's message this way.

The early Christians were such phenomenally successful evangelists because through Jesus, they had discovered the secret of community. Someone would be walking down a back alley, let's say in Corinth or Ephesus and see a group of gathered around talking excitedly about the strangest things that didn't make any sense at all. A simple loving man who talked mysteriously in parables about mustard seeds and buried pearls, about loving one's enemies and giving away one's coat.

But there was a special quality about the way these people talked to each other, laughed together, cried together, touched each other, the way they interacted with each other, so oddly compelling that strangers would be drawn to them. It was as if the scent of love had drifted down the alley and could draw people like bees to a flower. And people started to say to themselves, I don't understand this yet, but there's something special going on here and I want in.

The love of God is so wonderful that just brushing against it, just getting a whiff of that scent of love for a person who's anxious, doubtful, or alone, that is for anyone, it's a gift of incalculable value.

Go ye into the world, my friends, and evangelize by spreading God's love copiously, indiscriminately, joyously. Being ourselves the recipients of such love from the God who is three in one, how could we do anything else?