

At the very end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gathers his disciples on a mountain, and speaks some of the most significant words we will hear from him.

"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..."

Those words have inspired Christians for centuries. They have inspired schools and hospitals, ministries of compassion, movements for justice, and countless acts of generosity and service. They have encouraged ordinary people to cross boundaries, care for strangers, and share the hope they have found in Christ.

Yes, those words have inspired many Christians to do good and holy things. They have also been used to justify things Jesus never intended.

What began as an invitation to follow Jesus has sometimes been used to promote religious superiority, justify conquest, cultural domination, and the pursuit of power. Whenever that happens, the Great Commission has lost its way. Not because Jesus was unclear, but because we have often forgotten what he actually said.

Jesus never says, "Go and make people like you." He never says, "Go and make more Episcopalians." In fact, he never says, "Go and make a bunch of church members." What he says is, *"Go and make disciples."* And that distinction matters.

Because a disciple is not simply someone who agrees with a set of beliefs. A disciple is someone who learns a way of life. Someone who learns how to forgive, how to welcome strangers, how to love enemies, how to serve. A disciple is someone whose life gradually transforms and begins to reflect the life and teachings of Jesus.

When we hear the Great Commission in that way, our focus shifts. The question is no longer, "How can we raise our Average Sunday Attendance here at Atonement?" The question becomes, "How many people are learning to live the way Jesus taught us to live?" And perhaps even more importantly, "Do our lives offer others a glimpse of what the Gospel looks like when it is lived out loud here in this place and out beyond these walls?"

Episcopal teacher and evangelist Verna Dozier believed that recovering this distinction was one of the Church's most urgent tasks. She argued that Christianity often settles for making people loyal to institutions rather than helping them become followers of Jesus. As she wrote,

"I am increasingly convinced that the biblical injunction to go into all the world and preach the gospel to all nations has been narrowed from our Lord's broad vision to just a churchy activity."

Her concern was not that the Church was too committed to evangelism. Her concern was that we had forgotten what evangelism was for.

The word *evangelism* comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning "good news." To evangelize simply meant to share good news. Good news that God's love is wider than we imagine. Good news that forgiveness is possible. Good news that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace.

That kind of evangelism speaks of invitation, not conquest. It trusts that people can be drawn toward the beauty of God's love rather than pushed there through fear, pressure, or coercion.

Yet we live in a moment when Christianity is often confused with politics, ideology, nationalism, and cultural identity. For many people today, the word *evangelical* no longer evokes good news at all. Instead, it suggests a political movement or a particular vision of society.

Now, there are many faithful Christians who identify as "Evangelical" and sincerely seek to follow Jesus. This is not really about labels. It is about asking whether the Church has sometimes confused sharing the Gospel with gaining influence. Whether we have confused discipleship with recruitment. Whether we have confused the Kingdom of God with our preferred version of it.

And I think it is worth asking: When did sharing good news become recruiting for a tribe?

The temptation is not new.

The Church has wrestled with it for centuries. Whenever Christians have aligned themselves too closely with empire and power, whenever conversion became tied to cultural conformity, whenever influence became more important than service, the Church has lost its way. The Gospel was never meant to be a cudgel. It was never meant to be a tool of domination. It was never meant to exist in service to a particular nation, party, or group of people.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is God's invitation into transformation through love.

And the difference between those visions is stark.

Good news and tribal recruitment are not the same thing. His call was to make disciples, not to corner the market on God. The Gospel and a political platform are not the same thing. Following Jesus and defending a religious brand are not the same thing. One of the great temptations facing the Church today is confusing discipleship with marketing, faithfulness with winning, or the Kingdom of God with our preferred version of any nation or political movement.

Sometimes that temptation appears in subtle ways. Sometimes it becomes an entire movement. And I think we see it most clearly in what has come to be called Christian Nationalism.

Now, before anybody gets nervous, “OMG, Sandi’s ‘preaching politics’”, let me explain what I mean. Christian Nationalism is not patriotism, nor is it grounded in God. Christian Nationalism is the belief that a nation should be defined by Christianity only, and governed according to a particular interpretation of Christianity, and in that, granted a special divine status or mission. It merges Christian identity with national identity in ways that blur the distinction between loyalty to God and loyalty to a nation.

The contrast with Jesus is striking.

Christian Nationalism tells us that God belongs to *our nation*. The Gospel tells us that *all nations belong to God*.

Christian Nationalism seeks power over others. Jesus calls disciples into service for others.

Christian Nationalism asks, "How can Christianity rule?" Jesus asks, "How can we love and serve our neighbors?"

Those are very different ambitions. And frankly, whenever we allow the cross to become wrapped too tightly in the flag, we should be very careful. Our primary citizenship is not in any nation, but in the kin-dom of God – a kingdom built not on power, but on love.

When Jesus says, "Go and make disciples," he is not sending them out to spread a culture, a political program, a national identity, or to exclude others. He is sending them out to help people learn a different way of being human.

Jesus' movement is always outward. It is always widening the circle. It is always creating more room at the table. Cross boundaries. Leave your comfort zone. Meet people where they are. Trust that God is already at work before you arrive. And then join in.

Howard Thurman understood this well. He urged Christians to look beyond what Christianity became whenever it allied itself with power and to recover what he called "the religion of Jesus" rather than merely "the religion about Jesus."

Because one path leads toward the kin-dom of God and the other toward tribalism.

One leads toward humility and the other toward power.

One trusts the Spirit.

The other trusts control.

And I get it. This can all feel daunting, as though the Church and we are struggling to find our footing in this crazy, divided age. But I think this Trinity Sunday offers us a reason for hope.

Our hope does not rest in institutions, political victories, cultural influence, or Christians getting everything right. Nor does it rest in pointing fingers and yelling epithets at each other. Our hope rests in the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who creates, redeems, and sustains. Our hope rests in trusting that the Spirit is already at work in the world before we arrive—and calls us to practice forgiveness, hospitality, mercy, and love.

The Church may lose its way from time to time. History shows us that it always has. But Christ has not lost his way. And Christ is still calling disciples.

The Great Commission is not a command to build some kind of Christian empire of dominance. In many ways, it is a command to resist and disrupt one.

It is an invitation to participate in God's beloved community. It is a call to share good news, embody good news, and become good news. It is a call to create communities where people are welcomed, connected, nourished, challenged, forgiven, and loved. Communities where every person is treated as bearing the image of God.

That is what it means to make disciples, helping one another learn how to live within the life of God.

And on this Trinity Sunday, perhaps that is the deepest truth of all.

The Trinity is not just a doctrine to explain; it is the life into which we are all baptized. At God's heart is not domination, competition, or control, but relationship. Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer eternally pour love toward each other and the world.

And if we live that way, if we practice forgiveness, hospitality, mercy, and love, people may not simply hear the Gospel as good news.

They may experience it.

And so will we.

Amen.