

“Commissioned by the Triune God”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Trinity Sunday – June 7, 2020

**Matthew 28: 16-20**

Who is God to you? How do you think of God in your life? Is God a he, a she, an it? Is God old or young? Is God fat or skinny? Is God white, black, yellow, or brown? Is God any these things? Is God all of these things and more?

Each of us has our own concept or image of God, and that is how it ought to be. Why? Because there are no wrong answers to the questions I just asked. God is God; we do not need any more explanation than that. God comes into each of our lives in a unique way. I experience God in a distinct way in comparison to each of you, and you experience God in a distinct way in comparison to me.

When we talk about the nature of God in confirmation classes with our middle-school youth, one of the exercises we will do is ask everyone to draw a picture which represents who God is to them. Whenever I draw that picture, I show God as open arms that stretch wide to welcome me home. There is no face, no body, no race or gender to God in my image, only open arms and hands. For me, that is my reminder that God will always love me and welcome me, and that is the message I want to share with others. What would you draw if you were asked to draw your picture of God? Your image could be something completely different, and yet express the same feeling. That is the beauty and mystery of God: God is at once constant and at the same time always changing to meet each of us in our particular situation.

Today is the Sunday after Pentecost, which is called Trinity Sunday. This isn't any particular day taken out of the Bible, like Pentecost or Easter or Christmas. Instead, it is a Sunday in which we celebrate the three-fold nature of the one God, whom alone we trust and serve. Today we are asked to ponder the essence of God: why do we believe God to be expressed in three persons? How do we know these three persons of the one God? How are we to express our knowledge and love of this one God in three persons to others who do not know God?

And yet it can be hard to get our head around what it means to believe in the one triune God. “The great Augustine had to reduce it to a very simple illustration. He used the example of a tree. The root is wood; the trunk is wood; the branches are wood: one wood, one substance, but three different entities” (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 46*). Or, another way I have explained it to children is water, ice, and steam. Those three things originate from the same substance, but they take three, distinct final forms.

In the end, however, to believe in the one triune God is to believe in a God of relationship. And perhaps in that belief we see the connection with Jesus' Great Commission which we have heard Cindy read this morning. For just as God relates to his children in three distinct ways, so too does the church relate

to its world as Christ's Body in a multitude of ways, all of which seek to transform the world through God's boundless love.

*"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore . . ."*

Jesus gives this commission to his disciples based on the authority granted to him by God. Jesus didn't make it up himself; it was given to him by God. Through that authority, Jesus commands his disciples, and we receive that command with the knowledge of the source that it originates from.

And that command begins, "Go." It is active and forceful. He did not say, "Stay" or "Remain." He says, "Go." Inferred in that command is that we cannot fulfill his commission by standing still or remaining where we are. As his disciples, we must go from where we are comfortable, and meet God's children in the world. Jesus did not say, "Remain here and you will fulfill my commandment." He said, "Go therefore to serve in my name."

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . ."*

I have certain pet peeves - I'm not going to deny that. And many of them are centered on language - how we use words and phrases without considering their impact. For example, as Americans we have a hard time saying someone died. We use euphemisms such as, "He passed away," or "She's gone." It speaks to our uncomfortableness about facing the reality of death in our culture, and it can lead to confusion and delays the processing of very real grief.

Another pet peeve is how we talk about "members of the church." We've always used that phrase in American religion - we identify ourselves as a member of a congregation, or we compare churches' sizes by their membership numbers. Funny thing, though - Jesus didn't say, "Go therefore and make members of all nations." He said, "Go and make disciples of all nations."

When we say we are members of the church, it implies we've paid our dues and are part of an exclusive club with expected benefits. To be a disciple, though, means to be a follower of someone and to live your life according to your leader's beliefs. Jesus commands us to "make disciples of all nations." He wants people of all nations to be his followers, not members of an exclusive club of which he is the president. He yearns for a church that follows his lead with acts of love and grace, with words of compassion and challenge, with examples of grace, justice, and faithfulness. Our Lord commands us to make disciples who follow him not just one day of the week, but all the days of our lives. But how do we do that - as individuals and as the church?

*"Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . ."*

The first way we make disciples of all nations is by baptizing others in the name of the one triune God. It matters not whether someone is sprinkled, dunked, or something in-between. It matters not whether the person is a baby, a child, a teenager, or an adult. What matters is that someone wishes to become a follower and disciple of Jesus, and they confirm that decision by being baptized as Jesus was baptized.

You know, the Sunday we had to cancel in-person worship because of the pandemic we were supposed to baptize Ian Lowe as a new disciple of Christ at

John Knox. Ian – the water is still waiting for you! That will be one of the many things we will look forward to celebrating when we return to in-person worship! Whenever we baptize a child, we as the congregation promise “to guide and nurture this child, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging her or him to know and follow Christ.” We make disciples of all nations when we take that vow seriously, and not only follow Christ in our daily walk of faith, but mentor and nurture those baptized in the name of the one triune God.

*“And teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”*

On Thursday, our daughter, Heather, graduated from Pike High School. It was unlike any graduation ceremony that had taken place before, and probably will be unlike any that will happen in the future. We lined-up with hundreds of cars, snaking our way through the driveways and parking lots of the high school campus. One-by-one, students were handed their diplomas and honors, and then each student got out to have their picture taken in their cap and gown. No, it was not like what we would have hoped would happen at the start of this school year – but nothing has gone according to plan this spring, for any of our students and their families.

But what brought tears to my eyes and truly heartened my soul was to see all of the teachers and staff of Pike High School who waved and cheered and shouted congratulations to each student and family that came through the line. These were women and men who have invested their whole selves in the lives of these young people, who have walked with them through great highs and challenging lows, and who were thrilled to share this moment with them – however untraditional it may have been. As a parent, I am deeply grateful to all of the teachers who have shaped and molded by daughters in their formation for lives of service.

In a similar way, the Christian life demands that we teach others with creativity, passion, patience, and foresight. I read one commentator who compared the Christian life to being in a lifelong internship. We make disciples of all nations when we teach others about grace, justice, humility, and service. And we teach not just in the expected settings of worship and sermons and classrooms. We also teach discipleship in the less-expected ways: by inviting someone to try something new; by listening to a teenager struggling with life; by working alongside someone, despite your differences of opinion; by showing kindness and respect to someone who others dismiss. The Christian life is never perfected and ached, as a class in school. It is a lifelong internship of mutual learning, where the Spirit opens the mind and heart to forever be challenged and deepened in the knowledge of the one triune God.

The great assurance Jesus leaves his disciples and all of us are his last words: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” When we struggle to go as our Lord commands, “remember, I am with you always.” When we aren’t sure how best to make disciples in Christ’s name, “remember, I am with you always.” When we yearn for more to be baptized, “remember, I am with you always.” When we don’t know how to best teach discipleship, “remember, I am with you always.”

In closing, in the wake of all we are living through as Americans and as a human race, I was drawn back to this book. It is our church's Book of Confessions, a collection of statements of faith throughout history which seek to put into words how the church is called to go and fulfill the Great Commission. The Presbyterian Church is a confessional church, which means we are always seeking to bear witness in particular times and places what we believe the triune God is doing to bring about God's kingdom here and now.

This week, I found myself rereading the "Confession of 1967." This particular confession was written at a time of great social and racial unrest in our country. I would invite you to hear these words from this confession of our church, and consider how they speak to us once again as we are commissioned by the triune God for such a time as this.

*God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ and the mission of reconciliation to which he has called his church are the heart of the gospel in any age. Our generation stands in peculiar need of reconciliation in Christ. (Book of Confessions, PCUSA, 9.06).*

*In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. Jesus Christ is God with (humanity). He is the eternal Son of the Father, who became man and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation. He is present in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue and complete his mission. This work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, (humanity), and the world. Therefore, the church calls men (and women) to be reconciled to God and to one another (9.07).*

*God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In his reconciling love, he overcomes the barriers between brothers (and sisters) and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all (people) to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights. Therefore, the church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it. Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize their fellow (human), however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess (9.44).*

In such a time as this, may we seek to follow our Lord's Great Commission, so that the work of reconciliation he began might be fulfilled.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.