

Our Mission
Matthew 28:16-20
John Breon

What do you think of when you hear the word “mission”? If you’re in, or were in, the military, you have a definite understanding of mission. Businesses often have mission statements to guide how they operate. You might think about missionaries. Maybe you think of the *Mission Impossible* movies. Or, if you’re as old as I am, you think of the old *Mission Impossible* TV series. At the beginning of an episode, Mr. Phelps would get a tape-recorded message that said, “Your mission, should you decide to accept it....” Then it would tell him what he and his team were to do.

The church has a mission. Jesus left his disciples with a mission. We call it the Great Commission. And we believe it wasn’t just for the earliest disciples, but for all of us who follow Jesus. Our denomination, the United Methodist Church, developed a mission statement based on what Jesus told his earliest followers. This church, First UMC-Durant, uses the denomination’s mission statement as our own. It’s posted in big letters in the main hallway: “Our Mission: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

That hasn’t always been the denomination’s mission statement. It’s fairly recent. In 1996, Scott Jones, who’s now a bishop, and some others formed a group hoping to influence General Conference that year. General Conference is the gathering every four years of United Methodist delegates from around the world. Scott Jones wrote the first draft of a mission statement for the UMC. He wanted to use the words of the early American Methodists (borrowed from John Wesley): “to reform the continent and to spread scriptural holiness across these lands.” But Jones’ friends said people wouldn’t understand that and it’d be better to use biblical language. So they offered the statement: “The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ” (Scott Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* 271-72, note 43).

The phrase “for the transformation of the world” was added in 2008. The idea was to clarify why we make disciples and what the result of

disciples making is (www.umnews.org/en/news/united-methodist-mission-statement-revised).

So this is how the statement reads in the current *United Methodist Book of Discipline*:

The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches and extension ministries of the Church provide the most significant arenas through which disciple-making occurs. (*The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* 2016, paragraph 120)

Local ministries are where the action is. This is where we make disciples. *The Book of Discipline* goes on to describe how we carry out the mission. We proclaim the gospel. We seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ. We lead people to commit their lives to God through faith in Jesus signified by baptism. We nurture people in Christian living. We send people into the world to live in love and justice (paragraph 122).

There's a lot more that could be said about that. But we probably need to back up and look at what Jesus said and what that means for us. What is a disciple? What does it mean to be a disciple as well as make disciples?

A disciple is a believer, a follower, a learner, an apprentice. A person may become a disciple in a moment. You put your faith and trust in Jesus and begin to follow him. But being a disciple is a life-long adventure. Making disciples means not just bringing people to that moment of initial decision, important as that is, but also continuing to teach and shape and provide for experiences of life in Christ for a person's entire life. Disciples are life-long, committed followers of Jesus.

I'm sure I've shared this with you before, but I really like this statement from A. W. Tozer, a preacher and author from the mid-twentieth century:

Believing for salvation these days has been reduced to a once done act that requires no further attention. The new believer is made aware

of an act to be performed rather than a living Savior to be followed and adored. (A. W. Tozer, *Renewed Day by Day*, Aug 16)

Christian life, discipleship, is more than just praying a prayer and then going on with your life as usual. It's living in relationship with the living Lord. Jesus calls us to be with him and we seek to be with him, to learn from him, to become like him and do what he wants us to do (see Mark 3:14). This means following him as our example and being made more and more like him as we're filled with his life and light and love.

When we become disciples we give up our life as we understood it up to that point. Without that giving up, we can't be disciples of Jesus. Until we give up we'll think we're in charge, we're in control, and we just need a little help from Jesus to have a successful life. But too often we have the wrong idea of what a successful life is (Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* 243).

God's Spirit is transforming our inner life to be like the inner life of Jesus. We're talking about our heart. Our heart is the control center of our lives. It's where mind, emotion, and will are exercised. In the process of discipleship, our hearts take on the character of Jesus. The result of all this is that we're learning to do what we do *in the way* Jesus did what he did (See Willard, *Divine Conspiracy* 283; *Renovation* 22).

How do we get into this life of discipleship? How do we help others enter it? If our purpose as a church is to make disciples, how do we do that? Jesus says here to make disciples of all peoples—that is, all groups of people, every culture. We're called to go to all kinds of people with the purpose of helping them become disciples/apprentices of Jesus. Jesus assumes that we'll go. And as we go, wherever we go, we make disciples.

I went to college at Oral Roberts University. Then I stayed there for a year of seminary before I transferred. Whatever you think of ORU, it was a good education. And I grew spiritually there. Part of the vision for that university comes from the Great Commission. Oral Roberts said God told him, "Raise up your students to hear my voice, to go where my voice is heard small and my light is seen dim. Their work will exceed yours and in that I am well pleased." Based on that, there's an emphasis there on training and sending people "Into Every Man's World." That's how they used to say

it. I think they say “every person’s world” now. The idea is to train and send Christians into the worlds of business, sports, medicine, education, church, home, etc. to be missionaries wherever we are.

What if everyone in the church was a follower of Jesus who goes into our world as a minister or missionary? Part of that means living life faithfully, doing our jobs well, being a blessing to our family and friends. Wherever you are, whatever you do, wherever you go, your primary identity is disciple of Jesus, follower of Jesus. Your primary purpose is being a witness and helping others know Jesus.

The two means that Jesus gives the church for making disciples are baptizing and teaching people.

Baptism is an initiation into Christian faith, into the kingdom of God. The background for Christian baptism was one of the ritual washings that Jews used to receive Gentiles who were converting to Judaism. Because it was an act of conversion, of turning from one life to another, it means initiating people into the faith. We take the step into this new life consciously, intentionally.

A swimmer’s not a true swimmer until she plunges into the water. A baker’s not a true baker until he gets out his pans and starts kneading dough. Students aren’t fully students until they open books and experience the thrill and excitement of new discovery. A hunting dog’s not a true hunting dog until he bounds out into an open field and works with his master.

It seems like too many of us too often “are like swimmers who only look at the water, bakers who are content to memorize recipes, students who merely sharpen pencils, hunting dogs who bark but do not run” (Kenneth Kinghorn, *Dynamic Discipleship* 125).

Dallas Willard points out that when Jesus says to “baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” he’s talking about more than just getting people wet. In the biblical world a name is never just words. A name represents the character and nature of what’s named. So this part of Christ’s commission calls us to be immersed and to immerse others in the reality of the Trinity. The most important feature of the church’s life is the healing and teaching God in our midst (*Renovation* 240).

God comes to save us in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the "Son" in the phrase Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He's the ruler, the Savior, the one who's been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus is already Lord. He rules. We go to make disciples with his authority, not our own. Our going and making disciples is part of his plan to implement his rule and finally bring it to fulfillment.

Jesus rules with love and mercy and humility. We extend the influence of his kingdom as we act like him. I was reminded recently that in the first centuries of Christianity, when plague hit Roman cities, Christians, unlike others, stayed and cared for their own as well as others who were struck with the plague. Once plague had swept through a city it belonged to the Christian population, not through conquest but through self-sacrifice and service (Rick Richardson, *You Found Me* 13). That's an example for us of reaching people through service and care as we live through these days, or any time. That's a start in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The next step in making disciples, Jesus says, is, "Teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you." Remember, a disciple is a learner. A disciple is like an apprentice who learns to do by watching and working alongside the experienced worker. A disciple is a student who learns by listening to the teacher. We seek to make people into disciples of Jesus, not of ourselves. So we follow the example of Jesus and teach what he says.

One way to know what Jesus means by "all that I have commanded you" is to go back through the Gospel of Matthew and see what Jesus commands. That's a good exercise that'll give you a good profile of discipleship and show you some of what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus. And, it helps us know what to tell others as we're part of the process of making disciples.

One command you'll find is in Mt 22:34-40. A Pharisee, an expert in the Law, tested Jesus with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest

commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

The Great Commandment is the motivation behind the Great Commission. We go and make disciples as a response to God's love and as an expression of loving God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves.

Doing all that Jesus commands is tough enough, much less teaching all kinds of people to obey Jesus. So Jesus concludes with this great promise, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." The first disciples weren't alone in carrying out the mission Jesus gave them. "Emmanuel/God with us" was with them and would continue to be with them in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is with us in the presence of the Holy Spirit. His commands are promises of help to obey. He guides, strengthens, empowers, and enables us to do all that he tells us to do.

We make disciples for Jesus, not for ourselves. We do this in the name of the Triune God, not in our own name. We do it in the power and authority of Jesus, not our power and authority.

Making and keeping our commitment to Jesus means getting off the edge and plunging into the pool. It means getting off the sidelines or out of the stands and into the game. It means getting involved. Getting our hands dirty. Opening "the Book" and learning what God has for us and what God expects from us. It means not just talking about what we believe, but living it.

I just came across a new way of looking at evangelism, that is, sharing the good news, reaching and initiating new people. This is the beginning of making disciples. This approach is called "BLESS." It's based on God's call and promise to Abraham, "I will bless you...and you will be a blessing...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3). There are five practices at the core of BLESS outreach:

Begin with prayer. Jesus and others have blessed you through prayer. Bless others who don't know Jesus yet by praying for them. Do you have a list of people you pray for and does it include people who haven't yet professed faith in Jesus?

Listen with care. Jesus and others have listened to you and heard you. Bless others who are far from God by listening to them and hearing them.

Eat. Eat together. Jesus and others have accepted you and “invited you to their table.” Accept and invite others who don’t know Jesus yet to your table (or fast-food restaurant or coffee shop or some other place).

Serve. Serve in love. Jesus and others have served you in ways that changed you. Serve others who are far from God in ways that can change them. Receive their serving of you too! Nothing you do gives dignity to others or creates openness to your sharing like receiving their help.

Years ago, I walked to the grocery store (a block or two from our house) in a snowstorm. It was kind of slick for driving, but we needed something from the store so I walked there. As I was leaving, a man who was married to a church member but never attended said hi to me and asked if I wanted a ride. I turned down his offer. Later, I wished I would have let him give me a ride. It could have made him feel better about helping. It might have led to a conversation that would have helped him get closer to Jesus. I seem to have a lot of stories about missed opportunities. But we can learn from those as well and trust that God will still work through us.

Story. Share your story. Jesus and others have shared their story and God’s story with you in a way that changed you. Share your story with others who are far from God to reach them.

(Richardson 180-81)

Rick Richardson, who shares this in his book *You Found Me*, says this:

As we engage these practices daily, we partner with God’s Spirit to bless those who do not know God (and those who do). We practice these five simple steps with those in our spheres of influence, like friends, relatives, acquaintances, neighbors, and colleagues—especially unchurched and irreligious people—with the hope that we

may love them well and help them travel further in their journey toward making faith commitments to Jesus and to a community that will love them well. As we seek to authentically BLESS others daily in the midst of our deepening relationships with people in our lives, we trust that God will use each of us to bless our world like Christ. God's strategy of blessing others often helps people make progress on their journey toward Jesus. (182)

Are you a disciple? Have you put your faith in Jesus and do you seek to be with him to learn from him? Are you committed to following him?

Are you willing to let the Lord use you to invite and include and help others become disciples? Are you available for the Lord to work through you to encourage others in the life-long process of following and becoming like Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God?