

*Vision: Spiritual Impact*

**Matthew 28:16-20**

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Here we are in the year 2020! When I was growing up, we could hardly imagine this time. I remember a group of my friends trying to figure out how old we would be in the year 2000. Thirty-eight sounded so old to us. Now, here we are twenty years after that!

As we enter this new year and new decade, we think about the future. We're praying for God to lead us into the future God intends for us. Getting a glimpse of that future God intends gives us vision. We want to receive and claim God's vision for each of us, for our families, and for us together as a church.

There's a lot of uncertainty in our society and in the wider church. That can be a reason for fear. But if we're confident that God has a vision and a purpose for us, we can be less anxious and more hopeful. We can trust that God will lead us and will help us be all that God wants us to be. If we're committed to God's call and purpose, we can stay focused and centered no matter what happens around us.

Trying to clarify our church's vision, last year this church partnered with the Unstuck Group—a church consulting and coaching firm. The church staff and some other members met with the consultant to look at where First UMC is and where God's calling us to go. During that initial consultation, we began developing a vision, a five-year plan for First UMC. Then we started working on strategy and plans to fulfill the vision. This month, I'm going to highlight the four areas of our vision. My hope is that you'll be encouraged as you see how God is calling us to serve in this time and place.

The four components of First UMC's vision are:

- Spiritual Impact
- Next Generations
- Serve Neighbors
- Grow Disciples

Today, we're looking at Spiritual Impact.

Working on this vision, we used a chart that asks and answers some key questions.

*What is the problem we're trying to solve?* In the area around this church—a fifteen minute drive—there are nearly 15,000 people who are “unclaimed.” That's people who aren't committed to Christ and the church in a significant way. They lack spiritual direction in their lives. If you want to see the demographic info that this is based on, let me know and I'll share it with you.

*Why do we have to solve this problem and why now?* Every person needs a relationship with Jesus Christ. People need what the church can offer. We have a responsibility in the mission that Jesus has given us. That's our Scripture for today. We'll look more closely at it in a bit.

*What's the solution?* Make a significant spiritual impact in our community. Over the next five years we will become a community/ congregation of more than three hundred people who gather weekly to share the love of Christ with others. We'll see one hundred people choose to follow Christ for the very first time. And many of those will come from our mission field—the area right around us.

Doubling our worship attendance and reaching one hundred new people sounds huge. But that's still less than one percent of the people around us who aren't connected to Christ and a church.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, he gave a mission to his earliest disciples. Through them he gives us this mission.

Some time after Jesus' resurrection, the eleven disciples (and possibly others were with them) went to a place in Galilee where Jesus had told them to go. They saw the risen Lord and they worshiped him. But some doubted. Don't you love how honest the Bible is about God's people? Worship and doubt can live together for a time. Your doubts and questions don't disqualify you. If you're honestly seeking answers, doubt can even help you grow.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Now, because Jesus rules, his people receive a commission and are called to go on a mission.

He tells us to go. Someone recently said that God's favorite word is "Go!" As followers of Jesus, we go into our families, into our jobs, into our schools, into our community, we go wherever he sends us.

Then he gives three actions that characterize our going: making disciples, baptizing, and teaching. As you go, make disciples by baptizing and teaching people.

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 bringing people to that moment of initial decision. It also means 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.

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. That 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've understood it up to that point. Without that giving up, we can't be disciples of Jesus. I was reading the other day about two kinds of faith. There's "help me" faith. That's what most of us are used to. We reach out to the Lord, we depend on God to get us through, to help us with our problems. And that's great. But there's also, "Have me" faith. We surrender to the Lord. We want to be his, to belong to God, to be available for him to work with and through us (<https://www.seedbed.com/the-two-kinds-of-faith/>). Until we give up we will think we're in charge, we're in control, and we just need a little help from Jesus to have a successful life. But we often have the wrong idea of what a successful life is (Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* 243).

In the Gospels, a disciple is with Jesus, learning from him how to live in the kingdom of God. We're learning from Jesus how to live our lives as he'd live if he were in our place.

God's Spirit is transforming our inner life to be like the inner life of Jesus. 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.

So we're learning to do everything we do in the way Jesus did all that he did. We don't do everything Jesus did in his earthly life—like cursing fig trees and such. But we do what we do the way he 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. Jesus says we do this by baptizing and teaching.

Baptism is 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.

A swimmer is never a true swimmer until she plunges into the water. A baker is not a true baker until he gets out his pans and begins to knead the dough with his hands. Students are not fully students until they open books and experience the thrill and excitement of new discovery. A hunting dog isn't a true hunting dog until he bounds out into an open field and works with his master.

Are we "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 don't run"? (Kenneth Kinghorn, *Dynamic Discipleship* 125)

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 component of the church's life is the healing and teaching God in the our midst (*Renovation*, 240).

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's like an apprentice who learns to do by watching the experienced worker. A disciple is a student who learns by listening to the teacher. We seek to make disciples *for Jesus*, not for 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.

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 were not alone in carrying out the mission Jesus gave them. "Immanuel/God with us" was with them and would continue to be with them in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Matthew's Gospel starts by identifying Jesus as Immanuel/God with us, and it ends with Jesus' promise to be with us always. 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 that great commitment 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 barking but getting out in the field, not just talking about what we believe, but living it.

When we take the plunge into being and making disciples, we're beginning to fulfill God's purpose for us. We're on our way to being the church God calls us to be. We're part of the exciting adventure of life in Christ.

Are you a disciple? If you're not, will you take the plunge today? As a disciple of Jesus, are you willing to go and help other people become disciples and grow in their relationship with the Lord?

This message is intended to be more motivational than instructive. We need to be committed to the vision of making disciples. Then we can figure out how to do it where we are. What's it's going to take to reach the people around us who don't know Jesus, who aren't part of a church, who maybe were in a church but got burned, or who haven't heard how God loves them and wants them? Let's pray and learn and help each other be a church committed to reaching the people God calls us to reach.