

Evangelism from the Margins

Last week we started a series on evangelism by asking the question, “What is the gospel?” And what we determined as we looked at 2 Corinthians 5:11-20, is that the gospel is the message that God, through Jesus Christ invites us into relationship with him. It means we can have confidence of life after this life, but it also means we can know God right now. And knowing God gives us a new perspective on how to look at life and how we view people as creatures made in the image of God and of incalculable worth. It also means we don’t have to wander through life wondering what our purpose is. Our purpose is to live for him who died for us.

That’s the message I hope all of us here can internalize, and that each of us can take on that new perspective of what it means to live for Christ as our first priority. Today we’re going to talk about one important aspect of living for Christ—we’re talking about evangelism. So, turn with me to Matthew 28:16-20. This passage comes after Jesus was already crucified and rose again. He was resurrected for 40 days and now he’s getting ready to leave and these are his famous last words.

“Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. The Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Jesus had spent the last 3 years with his disciples, but was now getting ready to go away and leaving his followers with these last words. Matthew says that Jesus told his disciples to meet him at that particular place. So, this was their last staff meeting—essentially. His goal was to give them their mission statement. We call it the Great Commission because he was commissioning them to go and do what trained them to do.

Verse 16 tells us that there were eleven disciples there. Now, you might remember that Jesus originally called 12 disciples. And why did he do that? It's not because 12 is the optimal number of people in a small group, like I've heard before. No, when Jesus chose 12 disciples, he was forming the church as the new Israel. Israel had 12 tribes, so when Jesus opened up the possibility of non-Jews becoming God's people, he did so by selecting 12 disciples. But there were only 11 here.

That's because one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, betrayed Jesus and ended up hanging himself. So, Jesus is giving instructions to a wounded and imperfect Church. In fact, we can see from the letters in the New Testament that the Church continued to be

an imperfect community. And yet this doesn't deter Jesus from giving the Church *the responsibility to continue the work he had been doing.*

Matthew tells us that when they arrived and saw Jesus, the first thing they did was worship him, but he adds this last note, **“but some doubted.”** So, mostly they worshipped, but some doubted. Of course, the first question that pops into my head is, how could any of them doubt after they saw him crucified, die and be buried, then saw the empty tomb, saw him resurrected and are now looking at his resurrected body? This is where I love the honesty of the Gospels.

What I've found is that there are few people who never have any doubts. There are people who have the gift of faith and never seriously entertain doubts about Jesus. But I also know people who have had profound experiences with God—have heard God speak to them; who pray in tongues, virtually all the things you say, “If I had that happen, I would never doubt!” And yet they still sometimes doubt.

The fact is that almost all of us are a bit bi-polar when it comes to faith. We have days where our faith is solid and our relationship with Christ is vibrant. But we have other days or seasons where we wonder. We're not feeling motivated and we don't sense the presence of God. These can be hard times, but they are a part of life.

Our natural tendency in times of doubt is usually to pull back from community because we feel fake and unworthy of being a part of the community. But it's important

to stay in connection with community and don't be afraid to share that you're going through a season where God seems to be absent. You don't have to focus on your doubt or obsess about why it's happening, but you can borrow faith from the people you trust until a new season comes along—and it will. Belief isn't a just feeling, it's an act of the will to trust that the way of Jesus is right even when you can't see it at the moment. Your faith will come and God can still use you. //

Verse 18. Jesus says, **“All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me...”**

Now, we should view this as the culmination of Jesus' preaching in the book of Matthew. In Matthew, Jesus' primary message is “repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” And Jesus is the king of that new Kingdom.

His Kingdom isn't one that advances through violence or government, it advances through the power of the Holy Spirit and through the lives of faithful believers who “no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them” as we read last week. It's a Kingdom you have to commit to because it's principles run so counter to the principles of the world. It's the Kingdom where the first are last and the last are first and the ones who are considered the greatest are the ones most willing to serve.

He said this to reassure the disciples that what they were about to do was authorized by God himself. The Kingdom he was telling them to proclaim wasn't just for a

few—it wasn't just for the Jews, but it was for everyone. And when they went out, they went with his power and authority.

He continues, **“Therefore, go and get people saved...”** Is that what your translation says? Mine doesn't. Mine says, **“Go and make disciples...”** Being a disciple includes the offer of salvation, but any church that offers salvation, but stops there isn't fulfilling Jesus' command. The command is to make disciples—to complete the process.

And to do that, he specifies two things. The **first** is to *baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit*. Baptism is the sign of entry into new life. The Wesleyan church is not particular about how we baptize, but we do prefer to take people to body or pool of water and dunk them. The reason is that the image is so rich.

Last week we read in 2 Corinthians 5:17, **“Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone and the new has come.”** When someone goes under the water, they are being buried with Christ and raised again to new life. When someone decides to take this step, you're saying in front of the Church that you intend to live the new life Jesus gives and become a disciple of Jesus. It doesn't mean you're perfect, but with God's help and power you intend to live a new life.

We do hope to do a baptism sometime in August, so if God has been tugging at your heart and that's a step you want to take, I'd love to have to come talk to me afterward or contact me during the week and we can talk about it.

So, baptism is the first part of fulfilling the great commission. The second part of making disciples is in verse 20, **“teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”** Notice this isn’t separate from getting someone saved. Both are parts of discipleship. In fact, I would go so far as to say that I question whether someone who says a prayer to receive Jesus, but doesn’t want to be a disciple of Jesus is really saved.

Remember last week we said that God’s gift of grace is *unmerited*, but it’s not *unconditional*. We don’t earn God’s forgiveness and favor, but God doesn’t offer grace with no strings attached. God offers grace in order to invite us into relationship, or as Jean White corrected me last week, he invites us into fellowship. So, when we say to God, “I’ll take your gift, but I don’t really want you,” it doesn’t complete the gift.

If you read Jesus’ teachings, you’ll see that you can’t separate *relationship with Jesus* and *obedience to Jesus*. For instance, in John 15, Jesus says to his disciples, **“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you.”** This isn’t trying to earn God’s grace and forgiveness, but the way we accept it is that we enter into a discipleship relationship with Jesus.

The point is this—when we share the gospel, we’re not just calling people to pray a prayer. We’re calling them into an ongoing relationship with Jesus that will result in transformation in this life and eternal life in the next. Discipleship completes salvation.

Then at the end, Jesus assures us of his ongoing presence. The second part of verse 20, **“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”** In other words, you don’t have to do this alone.

Now, the strange thing to many people is that right after Jesus said this, he left. It’s not recorded in Matthew, but it is in Acts 1. So, how can Jesus say this?

Well, it’s because when Jesus left, he sent the Holy Spirit to empower the church. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of Christ. It’s like Jesus is saying, “I’ll be with you in Spirit,” only in this case, it’s not just a pep talk, his Spirit is real and tangible. Acts, chapter 2, tells us that when his followers went back to Jerusalem, they were sitting in a room waiting for something to happen when a wind came whipping through the room and tongues of fire rested on their heads and began to speak in other languages.

Even Peter, who denied Jesus three times during his arrest got up and spoke with power to thousands of people. Throughout the book of Acts, we see the Holy Spirit working through the disciples. And that’s the encouragement we can take from this is that when you share your faith, you don’t have to create a new work, God is already with you. God is already working in the heart of the person you’re sharing with. Your job is to join him in what he’s already doing and you can leave the results up to him.

Now, the task of the church today is the same as it was in the days of the disciples. That’s because there are many similarities between our society and the Roman

Empire where the church started. Both societies are diverse cultures with many different beliefs. Much like today, the Roman Empire didn't much care which God you worshipped, just don't tell anyone else their religion is wrong. The Emperor wanted to keep the peace.

Both societies were incredibly prosperous and were the height of technology and progress for their day. And in both societies, Christianity was on the margins of society.

In the Roman Empire, there just weren't many Christians around and those who were around were persecuted by the Empire. Today, while there are more Christians, and I would not yet say that Christians are persecuted, I would say that Christianity has been pushed to the margins by movements like secularism and the sexual revolution.

While we are similar, we are also different in one important sense. The early Church existed in a pre-Christian culture, but today we live in a post-Christian culture. Here's what I mean. The Christian church has gone through three eras.

The first is the pre-Christian era. This was the world of the early Church where people around them had never heard of Christ because it was all new. And while to many it seemed like a strange way to look at the world, there was a curiosity about it.

Well, after the first four centuries or so, what we now call Christendom emerged. In time, Christianity had grown so strong, it overwhelmed the Roman Empire and in the mid-300's, it even became the official state religion. As the power of the Roman Empire began to wane, the Holy Roman Empire, led by the pope, became more powerful and it

spread all throughout Europe and eventually into the new world. From that time until just the last few decades, the west has been dominated by a loosely Christian worldview we call Christendom, where religion and the state were melded together.

But Christianity in the west in the 20th century, in the face of the sexual revolution, expressive individualism and the self-esteem movement, rather than being a life-giving, suddenly seemed oppressive and out of touch and people started moving beyond it.

We now live in what many call a post-Christian culture. What's interesting about post-Christian culture is that it largely wants many of the things Jesus preached about the Kingdom of God. It wants justice and shalom. Pastor Mark Sayers writes, *"Post-Christian culture attempts to retain the solace of faith, whilst gutting it of the costs, commitments, and restraints that the gospel places upon the individual will. Post-Christianity intuitively yearns for the justice and shalom of the Kingdom, while defending the reign of the individual will."* It wants the Kingdom without the King.

Now, this post-Christian culture has given us some remarkable things in terms of material prosperity. We live comfortable lives in clean cities with great food and drink and entertainment. People all around the world are educated and living longer. Abject poverty continues to decrease. So, when it comes to evangelism, we might think how in the world can we compete with all this peace and prosperity?

Here's the problem. What it gives us in *freedom*, it lacks in true *community*. What the culture can offer us in terms of *comfort*, it lacks in *meaning*. And you can see it because even in the middle of comfort and prosperity, we see a hostile political climate, rise in depression, anxiety and suicide. Prosperity isn't filling the void. That's why even in our secular, post-Christian culture, people can't let go of spirituality. But I believe that even this won't be enough. God-in-general doesn't satisfy and he doesn't save. I believe people need the God who revealed himself and showed us a better way.

So, in the last few minutes we have here today, I want you to see how even an imperfect Church can offer life to that world. How can we be effective in making disciples in our post-Christian world that has pushed the church to the margins? So, I want to end today with some application.

Before I get into specifics, let me first say that most of us have been taught that evangelism is an individual sport. Experts would teach you how to go knock on doors and share the Four Spiritual Laws or Romans Road or ask leading questions and then seal the deal. But evangelism is the responsibility of the Church. That doesn't mean ME! It means us. That means you as individuals being willing to share the gospel, but please don't think you have to do this alone. In fact, today I'm going to talk more about what the church needs to do and ask you to work within that. And what I'm going to talk about not so much of a how-to do evangelism as much as it is to lay some foundations.

First, I believe the church has to *reclaim what it means to be the church*. Every Sunday at the end of service, I stand up here and say, “The worship service is over, let’s go be the Church.” The reason I say that is to remind you that this is not “church.” This is the time the whole church body at Waite Park Church gathers together to worship, fellowship, and hopefully learn to follow Christ together. This is one of the things we do, but it’s not the Church.

One of the issues that I think has plagued the church recently is that we’ve tried so hard to be relevant, we’ve forgotten that we’re actually called to be different. There’s a fine line there, of course. We’re all a part of this culture and not everything about our culture is bad. We’re influenced by our culture’s fashion, music styles, hair styles, language, etc. I don’t think we need to invent distinct Christian haircuts.

But what I’ve found is that too often, we as Christians are biblically illiterate. We are just as individualistic as our culture so deep down we believe happiness is more important than goodness. We are just as consumeristic, even when it comes to church we want to be entertained and when we’re no longer feeling it, we choose something else. There are many of us who have core beliefs that aren’t in any significant way, Christian.

Here’s how one author puts it, *“What the gospel needs most is not intellectual brokers or cultural diplomats but rather saints who have taken up the way of the cross and in whose lives the gospel is visible, palpable, and true. It needs disciples who follow*

Jesus with or without the support of their culture and for whom the power of the gospel is demonstrated not through winning but through obedience.” Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*

If we want to have anything worthwhile to say to the world about Christ, then we have re-learn what it means to be distinctively Christian. If you are distinctly Christian, then you’re going to be weird. And we all have to be OK with that. That doesn’t mean offensive or off-putting, but you’ll be different because you’ll look more like Christ.

One of the ways this plays itself out is worth mentioning on its own. *I believe the Church needs to be the community the world cannot offer.* One of the big reasons for some of the problems we’re seeing in our society today is that I think people have largely forgotten how to be community. Now, it’s not the people are mean. Chances are, your neighbors are friendly people who are helpful. But we have a real problem forming deep relationships today.

And I think much of the issue is that we’re so influenced by individualism’s mantra that we should pursue our own personal happiness that we don’t realize what we really long for is connection. We need the stability of a community that will love us and sacrifice for us. This is what the church is supposed to be. Unfortunately, we’ve absorbed our culture’s individualism.

But because of the disconnection in our society, I believe the church has a real opportunity to be an oasis for people left behind in our culture. But the only way that can happen is if each of us individually commits to living that kind of life. That means minimizing our agenda to make space to be interrupted by people. It means learning again to pass the time by being with people rather than sitting at home staring at screens. It means having the attitude of uncommon (strange) hospitality and generosity and invites our neighbors and even our enemies into our lives and drops everything to care for people in need, first inside the church, then outside.

This is the greatest need in our society. And I can see no greater opportunity for the church to model and share God's message of reconciliation through Jesus Christ. What are you willing to change in order to invite people into relationship?

Finally, *we need to renew our dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit.* The truth is, this is something we should never have lost. Right in the Great Commission, Jesus promises his presence. Over and over in the book of Acts, it's the Holy Spirit who goes before the disciples. So why would we think that we would need the Holy Spirit any less today?

We've focused so much on technique and methods that I think we sometimes forget that Jesus was serious when he said, **"I will be with you always, even to the end of the age."** The Holy Spirit is alive and active today. Maybe I'm crazy, but I believe that in

the future, we will begin to see the Spirit move in ways we have not yet before in our society in our lifetimes. I believe that even as our society has moved past Christianity that the Holy Spirit will respond to people's spiritual homelessness and hunger through supernatural acts. And as the Church, we have to be ready to respond by explaining the gospel and helping to break down the barriers people have to Christianity.

But it starts with prayer. I know it's typical for us to pray for our job search or that we would get healthy and there's nothing wrong with that. But how often do we pray that the Holy Spirit would draw people trapped by the meaninglessness of life without God? How often do we pray that we would be more sensitive to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit guides us? How often do we pray for God to move our neighborhood and that God would give us boldness to share Jesus? Do we even have that desire?

Well, in the coming weeks we'll talk more about these things—being the Church, being the community the world can't provide, and relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. But today, I want to take a few minutes of silent prayer for you to ask, "What is it that needs to change for you?"