

## **“Compass”**

Matthew 28:16-20

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Trinity Sunday

This is a compass. It's a fancy little compass, with a dial that always points in the direction of magnetic north, another dial over the first one that you can turn to set your bearing, and sights to help you make sure that you are headed in the direction you want to go. Compasses somewhat like these were first created centuries ago by people who knew that it was important to have good directional tools to make sure that you were headed in the proper direction. If you were traveling on a long journey and there were not clear markers along the way, a compass could help you make sure that you didn't get lost, that you didn't wander from the path you wanted to be traveling on, that you didn't go astray. You want to reach your destination? A compass can help.

So could the stars. Ancient mariners knew the positions of the stars in the sky, and how they would rotate around the earth, or, rather, how it looked *to them* like the stars rotated around the earth. One star didn't rotate - the North Star; you could use the North Star and the positions of the other stars to make your way from one point to another around the Mediterranean Sea, or even across whole oceans. A century ago, the poet John Masefield wrote, "All I need is a tall ship, and a star to steer her by." Now, during the day, you couldn't see the stars; and if it was cloudy or stormy at night, you might lose your way, at least temporarily. But, in general, if you were traveling on a long journey by boat, the stars could help you make sure that you didn't get lost, that you didn't wander from the course you wanted to be traveling on, that you didn't go astray. You want to reach your destination? The stars can help.

Of course, these days, we rely on Rand McNally, or Mapquest, or GPS. Don't you love the ones that talk to you? "In 500 feet, exit right." "Exit right now." And if you miss your exit, it will say something like, "Just a moment, please," and then recalculate for you what you need to do *now*, so that you can reach your intended destination.

These days, it's pretty easy to know how to get from one place to another, physically. When you know what your destination is, of course. Don't ask my wife what happened to her Thursday night when she was trying to take our son to his baseball game. My directions worked perfectly well. The only trouble was, the directions I gave her were to the wrong field!

These days, it's pretty easy to know how to get from one place to another, physically, at least *most* of the time.

But what about spiritually?

The mission statement of this church says that we are "a warm and caring Christ-centered community of faith, actively serving and nurturing one another and our neighbors, embracing diversity, and fostering spiritual growth." I spent a while yesterday and the night before talking with the members of the Session about what that means. That last phrase, in particular, is relevant this morning. "Fostering spiritual growth" – what does that *mean*? What does it mean to *grow spiritually*? If the Christian life is a *journey*, how do we head towards the *destination*?

You know, in the book of Acts, in the New Testament, we learn that Christianity, in its very earliest days, wasn't called Christianity. It was called "the Way." People belonged to "the Way." Christianity was a movement of people who were on a journey, a spiritual journey, towards their home in God.

In the third century, there was a Christian writer by the name of Origen. He lived in the city of Alexandria, in the northern part of Egypt, where one of the many branches of the Nile River flowed out into the Mediterranean Sea. He wrote a lot of essays and sermons about the Christian spiritual life. There's one sermon he gave in which he compared the Christian spiritual life to the journey the ancient Israelites took on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. In his mind, there were certain stages of the spiritual life, different phases people would go through as they drew closer and closer towards God, and they corresponded with all the places the Israelites stopped on their forty-year journey through the wilderness. Origen, and so many other Christians before and after him, understood that Christianity is about a journey. The Christian journey is about growth - spiritual growth - as we grow more and more in the ways of God, as we seek to follow Christ more and more closely, as we allow the Holy Spirit to live and breathe in our lives.

But how do we do it? How do we get from *here* to *there*, in a spiritual sense? How do we get from this material world we live in, to a spiritual home in God?

I hate to break the news to you, but GPS isn't going to get you there. Nor Mapquest. Not even good old Rand McNally. You need a star. Or maybe some kind of compass.

Matthew's gospel, as you know, tells the story of the birth, and the ministry, and the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is filled with lots and lots of teaching. There are a good number of times throughout that gospel in which Jesus stands up and he just starts talking to the people who have gathered around him. Teaching them. Showing them . . . the way. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, shows up in Matthew's gospel. Three whole chapters in which Jesus just teaches, and teaches, and teaches some more. Later on, he talks at length to the disciples about how to go out and do ministry in his name. Later still, he talks about how to treat other members of the church. He tells story after story about what the kingdom of God is really like. And then, finally, after the big drama of the passion and the death and the resurrection, he gathers with his disciples one final time, on a mountain

in Galilee, where he offers some final instructions. Some last parting words. Compared to everything else he has said in this whole gospel, what he says here is incredibly brief. The instructions amount to just two sentences. They are what is known as the “Great Commission” – the most important, single, final, definitive statement that Jesus offers to his disciples when he will no longer be with them in body. This is the last thing he says to them in this gospel – and it may well be the most important. “Go,” he says. “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” That’s it – the absolute, final, last thing he says to his followers in this gospel – “Go. Make disciples. Baptize. Teach. Remember.” “Go. Make disciples. Baptize. Teach. Remember.” The Great Commission.

I don’t know how you all feel about this whole notion of making disciples. You know, we Presbyterians, sometimes we like to leave the task of making disciples to our more evangelical brothers and sisters. I, for one, have come to believe that this is really important. I used to be uncomfortable with that word – “disciples”. It just sounded too, I don’t know, too fundamentalist for my taste. I had to learn that there was something deeper there. I had to learn that we, too, are called to be disciples. Not just church members, *disciples*. People who are sincerely seeking to follow this guy we call Jesus. People who are willing to call this Jesus our “Lord.” Thinking that the things he said, and the kind of life he lived, are *important*. Thinking that he’s worth following, the way those first disciples did, leaving behind their fishing nets, leaving behind their tax collection booths, leaving behind that which was familiar, choosing to follow in the footsteps of this master, and stretching *way* beyond their comfort zones. If the world is looking for a hero – someone to look up to – someone to emulate – someone to model our behavior after – can you find me anyone better?

“Go. Make disciples. Baptize. Teach. Remember.”

Are you looking for a compass? I think I’ve found one for you.

The fundamental mission of the church, according to the gospel of Matthew, is to go, make disciples, baptize, teach, and remember. When we do that . . . we are true to our calling.

But what does it mean . . . to *make disciples*? What does it mean to *be* a disciple?

I could give you a multitude of examples. Here is just one.

In January of 1933, Adolf Hitler was named Chancellor of Germany. In the midst of massive economic depression and fear of communism, Hitler was able to persuade the German Parliament to allow him to rule by edict. He began to systematically abolish all political rights and democratic processes: police could detain persons in prison without a trial, search private dwellings without a warrant, seize property, censor publications, tap telephones, and forbid meetings. He soon outlawed all political parties except his own, smashed labor unions, purged universities, replaced the judicial system with his own “People’s Courts,” initiated a systematic terrorizing of Jews, and obtained the support of many church leaders.<sup>1</sup> Most Christians in Germany did not object. Many of them believed that Hitler’s goal of a racially pure nation was really and truly the will of God.

But there were some who disagreed. There were some who had strong Christian convictions that what was happening was *not* God's will. There were some who bravely began to hide Jews and sought to smuggle them out of the country. There were others who gathered together to write a declaration, affirming that "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death,"<sup>2</sup> and that therefore, they would not and could not abide by Hitler's programs and policies, which they found to be antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. To make that statement, they risked imprisonment and even death.

Now *that's* an example of what it means to be a disciple. Those people had a compass . . . and they followed it.

You know, there are all sorts of stories of people in the history of the church who did horrible things in the name of Jesus Christ. The Crusades . . . the Inquisition . . . the list goes on. Too often, those are the stories we hear about. But there are also other stories. Stories that, for some reason, we don't seem to hear about as often. Stories of people, like those brave Christians in Germany seventy-five years ago, who knew that what was happening was wrong, that it was contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and who were courageous enough to actually do something about it. Not to just sit idly by and watch it all happen, thinking, "There's nothing we can do," but rather, to stand up and say, "Yes, there's something we *can* do, and our conscience compels us to do it, because we're trying to follow Jesus Christ."

That's an example of what it means to be a disciple. An example of what can happen when people choose to follow the compass.

It's easy for us to get lost. It's easy for us to wander from the path we wanted to travel. It's easy for us to go astray . . . especially when we are living in the midst of turbulent times.

But there is a compass that can help us find our way.

"Go. Make disciples. Baptize. Teach. Remember."

May you be guided by that compass as you make decisions about what to do and about what to say, every day of your life.

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<sup>1</sup> This brief summary of Hitler's consolidation of power is borrowed from the introduction to the Theological Declaration of Barmen in the *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, Part I: The Book of Confessions*.

<sup>2</sup> From the Theological Declaration of Barmen, section 8.11 in the *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, Part I: The Book of Confessions*.