

## **Missions Today** **(Matthew 28:16-20 and Acts 10:34-43)**

### ***Our two biblical texts***

The gospel writer Matthew decides to conclude his gospel with a charge, a commissioning, to his disciples, and by extension, to all of us.

We might pull out a few tidbits from these last and familiar verses in Matthew's gospel, which we popularly know as "the great commission."

There's a touch of the ominous when Matthew points out that eleven disciples were present, there on the mountain in Galilee. Judas had chosen a different path. And also, Matthew reports that among the remaining eleven not everyone was convinced.

Given what he has gone through in that rough, final week, Jesus makes the big claim that to him belongs "all authority in heaven."

The critical verb in the passage, the "this-is-what-you-ought-to-be-about" action verb, is *matheteuo*, "make disciples." It's something that ought to happen all over the place, make disciples in "all nations," Jesus says. "Baptize" and "teach," Jesus says, and never forget that I am always with you.

Then in the Acts 10 passage we see the disciple Peter, living early in this post-Jesus time, coming to grips, thanks to his encounter with the centurion Cornelius, with the reality behind this "all nations" claim. Peter's lived his whole life with his mind and spirit shaped and controlled by people like himself but he's coming to the grand realization--he's shaking off the heavy cobwebs--that this Jesus thing can find shape and form in people and places far different from my own. He's discovering that there is power in this Jesus message, that positive, incredible change happens when people embrace the life and teachings, the death and resurrection....with all the implications thereof....of Jesus.

So, to sum up a few thousand years in a few sentences. Jesus commissions. Peter, Paul, and others get up and go. Constantine has his revelation. The Crusades happen. The Reformation, the Anabaptists appear, there are martyrs. A missionary movement is galvanized. And bingo, we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A movement begins in the Middle East, moves predominantly northward, and now trends southward.

I want to view the Christian story through a missions lens, a story that gets reshaped, reworked, and revised along the way. The missions story has its monastics and its martyrs, its saints and its sinners, its adventure seekers and its wonderers, its professionals and its pious, its opinionated and its shy and withdrawn...in other words the missions movement is populated by people who look and act a whole lot like any random group of people, folks just like us. And together this motley group of folks is just trying to figure out how to make sense, today, of those old commissioning words of Jesus, this counsel to "make disciples," this challenge to go everywhere, even way beyond your comfort zone.

### ***Thinking about missions today***

I think of missions as a natural, organic phenomenon. You are part of something, you think it's better than just alright, and you want more people to participate, to be part of something that's important to you. It's no different from the Reedley High School marching band wanting to grow in size, or any club or organization in town wanting to put its best foot forward and getting pretty

excited if more people show up at the next gathering. Or me, wanting more people to be fans of the Pittsburgh Pirates. “There’s room on the bandwagon for you,” I’ve said that to others dozens of times.

But clearly religious convictions, matters of belief and faith, take us into an entirely different universe. Matters of belief and faith take us to deep matters of conviction, core commitments that inspire us and console us...we build our lives around these things. Our Christian convictions ought to impact every aspect of our lives from our living rooms to our offices to our classrooms to the streets where we live to our neighborhoods to how we look out at the world. Naturally and organically, we want this Jesus centered faith of ours to rub off, to be noticeable, to be in a winsome and hospitable way attractive to others.

And of course, it should be abundantly obvious that whereas it may be okay to be loud-mouthed and arrogant about which band you think is the best or your favorite baseball team, our faith convictions are spoken about in reverent ways, in respectful ways. We ought to avoid all hints of alignment with crusading, colonial impulses.

The church, our church, is called to be in missions. The missionary task is not the task of the few who have the money or the time or the calling to be like Mary Raber with MMN in the Ukraine, or like some MCC or MVS worker...no we all are called to reach beyond ourselves with our own unique gifts.

At the recent SENT Mennonite Church USA church planting conference in New Orleans, Leslie Francisco, a Mennonite pastor in Virginia, said that “no one can do what you do, like you.” We each have our unique, God-given ability to move beyond our own sphere to connect the dots between our ability to organize, or play an instrument, or understand economics and politics, to love unconditionally, to pray, our passion for peace, for older people, for kids...and the world we inhabit, both close at hand and far away. As we push out from our core “I am a child of God, loved by God, my instincts rooted in the ways of Jesus” to all that is beyond we find ourselves in mission.

### ***Tongue-tied?***

Jesus said to go out and “make disciples” and “teach.” Peter found words to converse with Cornelius and then, later, could articulate what he learned. So why do we find ourselves tongue-tied?

Perhaps in part it’s a result of the lingering impact of Christendom. The countercultural church of the first three centuries post-Jesus gave way to Christendom in the fourth century when Constantine declared, basically that “you’re all Christians.”

Anabaptist Mennonites were born in 16<sup>th</sup> century Christendom and did challenge the notion that all Christians were actually Christians, that only the professional clergy had a legitimate word to contribute, and that Christians should just passively do the empire’s bidding. They could be vocal, bearing witness, sometimes quite enthusiastically, and even at great risk. The tales of martyrdom are legion and are chronicled. One such martyr, a woman, Maeyken Wens by name, was so chatty about her faith, even at her execution, that before she was burned at the stake a tongue-screw was put into her mouth so that her voice could not be heard through the flames. These Anabaptists, are spiritual mothers and fathers, did not clothe themselves in political or military power, they endured the scorn, as their testimony of faith gradually spread.

But this intense time, with martyrdom the ultimate end for some (certainly not the great majority), gradually gave way to a desire to just be left alone. Rather than being known as troublemakers, Mennonites gradually became known as “the quiet in the land.” Missionary fervor was replaced with the (legitimate) desire for preservation and peace. Now we can just practice our beliefs and deepen our cultural ways. Discrimination and marginalization might still exist from time to time, both in Europe and in places where Mennonites migrated, but overall there’s a détente...we aren’t so loud anymore, we will be quiet, and in exchange a “peace” is observed. And our quiet even became a virtue, for it illustrates a key value, our humility.

We are timid too because we live today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as descendants of the enlightenment and we live in post-modern times. We are not backwards, completely unaware people. We live in a time of reason and technology, and we accept that science can inform our lives. Post-modernity helps us out. It ushers us away from dogmatic certainty and towards a more relaxed outlook on the world and other people. There are many paths, after all, and who am I to be too presumptive, or too critical, about the path you, my friend, have chosen?

We want to be good Anabaptist Christians, who can assert that, yes, “Jesus is the center of my faith,” but it’s a little awkward to find a way to say that in a way that doesn’t feel linked to Christendom, or some kind of bigoted, so-called “Christian” voice we hear out there, competing for the same air-space. So I, we, withdraw, covering ourselves in the noble cloak of humility, not wanting to offend. It’s the plight of many of us modern, Anabaptist, largely Anglo, Christians of the Western world. It’s a feeling not so shared by Anabaptist brothers and sisters of the global south. (I know I’m speaking in broad strokes)

How do we testify to the particular of our faith....Jesus of Nazareth....while at the same time being open-minded, hospitable, alert and hospitable to the creative and energetic and awe-inspiring and working outside the boundary lines Spirit of God teaching us that all things are becoming new?! This is the tension we live within.

### ***What to do?***

I’ve been helped by some things Alan Kreider, now retired Mennonite missiologist, theologian, practitioner, seminary professor, has written. He argues for incarnational living which is characterized by, among other things, odd and interesting living, a curious desire to link up with others of all stripes who in their own ways seek God’s kingdom and justice. He thinks there ought to be places in our lives that are on the wild side, somewhat out of control. Somehow, our life is edgy enough that we are taking the old existential leap of faith, saying “God, it’s up to you now.” And then, our lives are somehow not focused on the dour and dreary, but our lives are characterized by joy and hope.

It makes me think of how many times I’ve heard someone speak and then, right at the end, she says “I don’t want to leave you with all this bad stuff, here’s a word of hope.”

We believe in hope because it’s rooted in a reality we’ve seen, if only in part. Kreider calls hope a “counter-cultural commodity.” We live that hope when, even though we are getting older and older, we keep on volunteering and volunteering. We live into that hope as we say no to walls and yes to bridges. We affirm hope as we welcome those who before were left to fend for themselves on the streets and in the alleys. We speak hope when we hold a hand and recall that there is one who never leaves or forsakes. We live hope as we venture into uncharted new vistas.

This God-given hope is the treasure we have to offer and share wherever we go. Amen.

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--Sources. Alan Kreider's *Tongue Screws and Testimony* and Stanley Green's *From Engagement and Preservation and Back Again*, both in Fully Engaged.