The Trinity and the Great Commission

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Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. [17]When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. [18]And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19]Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20]and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:16-20)

1. Trinity Sunday

Today is Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday is the first Sunday after Pentecost. On Trinity Sunday we honor the Holy Trinity; the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The term "trinity" is a compound word. The word "tri" means three and the word "unity" one. So the Trinity holds that God is one but there are three distinct Persons; the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Do you think the doctrine of Trinity makes sense? It is difficult to explain and understand the Trinity fully. It is a paradox and a mystery. Some people do not believe in the Trinity. They say that "the Trinity" is not based on scripture. Although the word "trinity" does not occur in the Bible, many Bible passages teach us and reveal the truth of this aspect of God. Today's scripture, Matthew 28:18-20, is one of them.

The doctrine of the Trinity emerged when the leaders of the church in 4th century were engaging in debates about the nature of Jesus. People argued about who Jesus was. Was he man? Was he God? Was Jesus created by God? Or did he exist eternally with God? In this debate, two key figures arise. One is Arius and the other Athanasius. Their debate is called the Arius controversy. Arius was a priest from Alexandria. He taught that Jesus was a special creation of God because he was the Son of God. Athanasius was a deacon from Alexandria. He opposed the teachings of Arius. Athanasius argued that the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit were one but at the same time distinct from each other.

The Roman emperor Constantine the Great was not happy with the dispute. He wanted the empire to keep unified. He recognized the value of religion to unite his empire. This was, in fact, one of his motivations in accepting the Christian religion. Constantine the Great convened the Council of Nicaea in May 325 for unity in the empire. He didn't really care about the content of the dispute. He was eager to put an end to the Arian controversy about the nature of Jesus.

The Council rejected the minority view of Arius and approved the view of Athanasius. Constantine was pleased with the agreement at the Council. However, after the council, the controversy continued for another sixty years.

Why? It was because Christians believed in one God as Deuteronomy 6:4 says, "***Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one***." So called "monotheism" which designates belief in the one supreme God is one of the most important doctrines for the Jews and Christians.

Disagreements soon centered around another issue, the nature of the Holy Spirit. Christians were confused about the Holy Spirit. Was it simply a synonym for God or was it something more? In the second half of the fourth century, an idea was proposed that God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit were coequal and together in one being, yet also distinct from one another. In 381, the Council of Constantinople was convened and the doctrine of the Trinity became the official belief and teaching concerning the nature of God. It is called the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Why is the doctrine of the Trinity so important to us? It is because the Trinity helps us to know who the Triune God is.

2. The Trinity and the Great Commission

In Matthew 28:19 & 20, Jesus says to his disciples, "***Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20]and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you***." These are Jesus' last words to his disciples. This passage is called the great commission. Jesus teaches his disciples how to live their lives after he will leave them. In this statement, there are two verbs and two participles. In the Greek text, there is only one verb and three participles. Do you know which word is the main verb? The main verb is "make disciples." If the great commission of making disciples of all nations is given not only for the disciples but also for us, we must ask us a question. Do we make disciples of all nations?

I am sure you know the mission statement of the United Methodist Church. "The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." Matthew 28:19-20 is the passage that we United Methodists must remember always. This scripture says that we need to go to make disciples of all nations. These days we do not have to go to make disciples because people from all over the world come to the U.S. and Sagamore Beach especially on holidays like Memorial weekend. What do we do to make them disciples of Jesus Christ? I think there are many things that we can do for them.

Some might think that we have a strawberry festival as a fund-raising project. Fundraising could be one of our goals, but for me, fund-raising is not the main reason. The main purpose of such an event is to invite the people in the community of faith so that they can experience the love of Christ. I wish we could have even more events to share the love of the Lord with the children, youth, and adults. As I said last Sunday, if our church offers something compelling for them to come to our community, we can be a blessing to them. The first step to make disciples is either to go or invite them to our events. What do we have to do after we go or they come to us?

3. Making Disciples

Before we discuss how to make disciples, we need to make sure what it means to be a disciple. There are 2.2 billion adherents of Christianity in the world. Do you think all of them are disciples of Jesus? Are you and I disciples? A disciple means literally a "learner." Becoming a disciple means to have a student and teacher relationship. The goal of the disciples is to learn who the teacher is and what he teaches. The disciples must decide whether to follow the teacher's lifestyle and his teachings. Then they would become like the teacher and live like him.

As it takes many years for children to finish their education, becoming like a teacher takes time. Throughout my faith journey and ministry, I learned that there are different stages of faith and discipleship. Each one is in a different stage of faith and discipleship. As time progresses, one must move up to the next stage becoming more like the teacher and impacting others.

Those who are in the first stage of faith and discipleship simply follow the teacher. Their reasons to follow the teacher is to meet their own needs. They are not concerned about what the teacher wants them to do. Many people in Jesus' time followed Jesus to be healed and fed. Unfortunately even today I saw many Christians who remian in the first stage of faith and discipleship until they die.

People in the second stage learn more about who the teacher is and his lessons. The disciples of Jesus were in this stage. Of course, they wanted their needs to be met by Jesus, but later they were willing to sacrifice for Jesus and his ministry. I hope all of us is at least in the second stage of discipleship or above.

Those who are in the third stage bear witness to Jesus. These are like apostles in the book of Acts. They go and tell others who Jesus is and help others to know more about Jesus. People in the fourth stage love people as Jesus loved us. Jesus says in John 13:34-35, "***I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you,… [35]By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another***." Jesus clearly tells us that making disciples is to love others as Jesus has loved us.

4. In the Name of God, Son, and the Holy Spirit

When people decide to follow Jesus they are baptized in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to be baptized? Baptism is a celebrating ritual of dying to old oneself and rising with Christ. "In the name of" means "by the authority of." "Authority" means "power." By being baptized we are in a relationship with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit and being empowered by the Almighty God. Being baptized is like to activate a phone line to God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit for free. When we activate our phone line we can communicate with the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer at any time. When a person is connected with the Lord, his or her impact is beyond our imagination.

5. Aldersgate Day

Last Thursday was a very special day for United Methodists. Do you know what day May 24, 2018 was? It was an Aldersgate Day. Aldersgate Day is celebrated on May 24 to commemorate the day in 1738 when John Wesley experienced assurance of his salvation. Wesley reluctantly attended a group meeting that evening on Aldersgate Street in London. As he heard a reading from Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans, he felt his "heart strangely warmed." I interpret his experience as an activation of his hotline with the Triune God. He was filled with the Holy Spirit so that when he preached transformation happened. Through the class meeting he helped new followers to grow in faith and discipleship. By helping others to move up to the next stage in their discipleship John Wesley made a big impact not only in England but also all over the world.

6. Conclusion

The Great Commission of making disciples is the last words of Jesus for his disciples and for us. Jesus says, "***Go and make disciples***." Jesus wants us to make making disciples as our top priority. Why is making disciples so important? Throughout church history there were so many Christians who attended Sunday worship services without making disciples. When they died, the church shrunk. The same thing happens today too.

Making disciples is like having grandchildren. In Genesis 1:28, God says to Adam and Eve, "***Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.***" If I have no children, my family geneology will end in my generation. But I have three children, so I can expect my grandchildren. When we make disciples, they can expect our future generations in our church and they will multiply so that the church will thrive.

7. Application

Two weeks ago at Santa Fe High School in Texas 8 students and 2 teachers were killed. Last Friday at an Indiana middle school, three people were injured. In 2018 there have been 23 school shootings. That averages out to more than 1 shooting a week. Why do such school shootings keep happening? Isn't it because the hearts of students are filled with anger, frustrations and hatred instead of love? How can we transform the hearts of these students?

St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:14, "***The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you***." If their hearts are filled with the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, there would be no more shootings. When their hearts are transformed by the power of the Triune God, they will love people instead of shooting. How will this happen to them? When they are loved by disciples of Jesus Christ, their hearts will be filled with love. Making disciples means to love others with the love of Triune God. I pray that we are empowered by the Lord so that we can love and make disciples of Jesus every day. Amen.