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Matthew 28:16-20

*Risking Themselves Totally*

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 (The Message)

Meanwhile, the eleven disciples were on their way to Galilee, headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. The moment they saw him they worshiped him. Some, though, held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally. Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: “God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.”

 Today we celebrate a lot of things. Today is Father’s Day. Did you know that two United Methodist churches, oddly enough both with the same name, can lay claim to beginning Father’s Day? In 1909 in Spokane Washington, Sonora Dodd listened to a Mother's Day sermon at Central Methodist Episcopal Church. Dodd's own mother had died 11 years earlier, and her father had raised their six children alone. Dodd wanted to honor her father, and fathers everywhere, with a special day as well. She proposed her idea to local religious leaders, and gained wide acceptance. June 19, 1910, was designated as the first Father's Day, and sermons honoring fathers were presented throughout the city. When newspapers across the country carried the story about Spokane's observance, the popularity of Father's Day spread. Several presidents declared it a holiday, and in 1972, Richard Nixon established it as the third Sunday in June.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 But there was a church in West Virginia that actually celebrated Father’s Day first. In December 1907 there was a terrible mine explosion in Monongah, West Virginia that claimed the lives of more than 360 men. Most of them had families, and the tragedy left 1,000 children fatherless. Grace Clayton was distraught by the thought of all those children growing up without a father's guidance, and she wanted to do something to honor the importance of fatherhood. She asked her pastor to set aside a special day to commemorate fathers. She chose the Sunday closest to the birthday of her late father, also a Methodist preacher. On July 5, 1908, that Father's Day sermon was preached at Williams Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, South. That church is now called Central United Methodist which is the same name as the church in Spokane, Washington![[2]](#footnote-2)

 Today is also Peace with Justice Sunday that encourages us to spread the Gospel of Peace to encourage cooperation and empower those who faithfully stand for justice around the world. The General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church is doing some great work. In Columbus, Ohio, a teenager named Luke was convicted of armed robbery and he was released from juvenile detention into the custody of a volunteer with the Shalom Zone who arranged a meeting between Luke and the store’s owner. Luke apologized and agreed to pay restitution of $5 per week until the owner’s loss was made whole. A few months later, the owner decided to hire Luke. Eight United Methodist congregations unite with social service, educational and law-enforcement agencies in the Columbus Shalom Zone where trained mediators handle a variety of disputes that often involve juveniles like Luke who have had their first brush with the law.

Today is also Trinity Sunday, the one Sunday of the Christian year focused on a doctrine as we celebrate the three persons of God: the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer. I can painfully remember trying to explain the doctrine of the Trinity during children’s sermons. I would use rope with three strands or the three states of water: as a solid, ice, as liquid, water, and as gas, steam. I do not know that my children’s sermons helped anyone to have a deeper understanding of God. It seemed like I had the ability to turn something simple into something complex. But we as the Church believe that God the Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to recognize and believe the good news of God the Son who, in turn, reveals to us the loving heart and mission of God the Father.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We are called and sent by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed for the sake of the world God created and loves so much.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the Great Commission scripture that we heard from the Gospel of Matthew, I love how the Message translation puts it. The Message translation is by Eugene Peterson who has an ability to make the Bible seem so accessible to folks who are not familiar with the stories, but also makes those passages of scripture that we are so familiar with come alive in a new way. The disciples see Jesus and worshipped him, but some held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally.

Other translations translate that idea by saying that some doubted, but risking themselves totally really sticks with me. How do we do that? How does a father do that? By choosing to break through any stereotypes that they may have grown up with? By choosing to prioritize their faith and their family over their job? Risking themselves totally.

Or someone working for justice. Risking themselves totally.

Meanwhile, the eleven disciples were on their way to Galilee, headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. The moment they saw him they worshiped him. Some, though, held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally. Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: “God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.”

First, congregations in mission are buoyed by worship, faith, and doubt. The first two – worship and faith – go together nicely. We come together each week because, quite frankly, it’s hard to believe the nearly too-good-to-be-true news of the Gospel for more than about seven days in a row. Think about it: the confession that God not only created us and all that exists, but also knows about us, cares for us, and wants to use us to care for the world is a pretty bold affirmation. Such news needs to be repeated and shared in order for us to believe and live it. And so worship and faith clearly mark congregations in mission.

But don’t forget about doubt! I find it striking that in each gospel account, Jesus’ own disciples – that is, those who had followed him from the start and knew him best – do not at first believe the story of the resurrection…even when they see Jesus! Matthew reports that even now, at the close of his story, and just as the disciples are about to be commissioned as Jesus’ witnesses, they still have a hard time believing in Jesus even as they worship him. That’s who we are – people made up of a mixture of faith and doubt, hope and fear, successes and failures. And remembering that doubt is part and parcel of our life as a faith community is helpful to welcome people wherever they are on their faith journey. Moreover, if it feels daunting at times to believe the gospel, we can recall that we are not alone in feeling this way and that, ultimately, God will take responsibility for keeping God’s promises.

Second, congregations in mission do not live on the mountain but pursue their calling primarily down in the valley. Some of us – myself included – hope for worship to be a “mountain top” experience through which we feel more connected to God and each other and inspired to believe afresh and anew. But church, at its best, prepares us for our life in the world. Matthew sets his account of Jesus’ gathering with his disciples on a mountaintop to testify – as he has at other points in his gospel – that their encounter with Jesus is a theophany as significant as any in Israel’s history, including Moses’ meetings with God at Sinai. But notice that the disciples do not stay up there any more than Moses did. Jesus sends them out into the world. So also, we come to church to be inspired to carry out God’s work to love and bless the world in our daily routines, relationships, and activities. Sometimes this involves sharing our faith with others, but it always involves *living* our faith by being good neighbors, classmates, friends, employees, and more. We are called to be faithful in the variety of roles we play so that we can carry on Jesus’ mission to respond to those in need.

Third, congregations in mission find their authority, hope, and consolation in both Jesus’ commission and the promise of his presence. We share what we have seen and heard because Jesus’ wants *all* people to know the mercy of God and so commissions us to be witnesses. The goal isn’t growing the church for the church’s sake or filling pew seats or offering plates for growth’s sake. The goal is that as many of God’s children as possible people hear just how much God loves and values them. But this by no means easy. So much of life conspires to make us doubt that we deserve love or respect and we often feel like we face innumerable obstacles, both cultural and personal, in sharing our faith. Which is why Jesus promises to be with us, to hold onto us, and to continue to use us as we strive to bear witness to the God of love. We are commissioned by Jesus, and we take courage from that. But we are also promised Jesus’ presence and ongoing love and support no matter what may come, and we find our hope and consolation in that.

If you invited people to share their dreams for your congregation last week, this would be a wonderful time to reference some of what you heard as you try to share your vision for your faith community. And if not, you might invite people this week to begin dreaming what new ventures God is calling you to. Small or large, thriving or struggling, all of our congregations are called to bear witness to the love and mercy of the God we know and name as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As you prepare your sermons this week, please know how much I admire your courage to commission us once again into that calling. Blessings on your proclamation.

The original ending of Mark's gospel leaves us with this uplifting image of the disciples: "Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." (CEB) Not exactly the ending we were counting on as we construct that Easter sermon! Luke and John also convey unflattering reports about the post-resurrection disciples and their confusion or doubts about the resurrected Jesus.

I wonder if it's possible that Matthew knew exactly what he was doing when he preceded the Great Commission with the observation that at least some of the early disciples struggled with their response to the open tomb. Is it possible that he was reminding us that, in the task of spreading the gospel and baptizing followers, we should always be mindful and respectful of those in the crowd who are struggling with doubt? What if faithful proclamation of the Good News demands the courage to acknowledge that faith isn't easy? Perhaps Matthew was counting on the fact that both preacher and hearer can, in fact, handle the inconvenient truth that faith and doubt are part of the same conversation.

In the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, there is an icon of the Holy Trinity painted by Andrei Rublev sometime around 1400. For those of you who are unfamiliar with icons, they are pictures that are used in prayer. Believers are to gaze at them prayerfully until they become like a window into the heart of God.

This particular icon portrays the three persons of the Holy Trinity as three angels sitting together at a table. The head of each angel is inclined toward one of the others, so that there seems to be a circular movement around the table, connecting the three to one another. On the table is a chalice. What this image reveals to me is that in God there is a living, loving community. From the beginning of time until the end of the age, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have existed as a holy community of love and grace. To put it another way, God is community.

What’s more, let God be revealed in our community. The Trinity teaches us that no one ever stands alone. As soon as we accept God’s love and redemption, we are members of a community. We cannot be Christians without being connected to one another. Sorry. If we’re going to embrace God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, then we’re going to have to embrace each other. Not just the folks who are inside the church’s four walls this morning, but everyone who calls upon the Triune God.

If that weren’t hard enough, God calls us to do more. Not only do we have to love other believers, but we have to go out and share God’s love with the world. Jesus commanded his followers: “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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). The love we find in the Trinity, the communion we find with one another, is not just for our own sakes. It’s for the sake of the world. It’s meant to be shared.

The world needs love. The world needs grace. The world needs community. May the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—help us to share the message of the Trinity with all of creation.

**Gospel: Matthew 28:16-20.** In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus sends his disciples into the world in God's three-part name. They are to do the work of God, who created and cares for the world; of Jesus, who loved and forgave us; and of the Holy Spirit, who is working to make the world the wonderful place God intended that it be. Children often learn about God by identifying what God does and what God calls us to do.

Benediction: Go now to join God the Creator in caring for the earth and all the plants and animals that live here. Tell people about Jesus. Take up Jesus' work of loving the people no one else loves. Pay attention to places where God's Spirit is at work building peace, and do what you can to help. And as you go, remember that the God who created you watches over you; that Jesus loves you and forgives you; and that God's Spirit will be with you, to comfort you and give you more power than you ever imagined you could have. Amen.

**II. Before We Share God's Love, We Must Experience Loving God** What was it Jesus sent them out to do? What was the reason for their going out into the world? To teach "them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (v. 20). What was that everything? Jesus said it was all summed up in two commandments: "'You shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt. 22:37-39; see Deut. 6:5) . How much time have you spent loving God? Do you think you know how to love God? What does it mean to love God? If your answers to these questions seem a bit hazy, it could mean you've missed something, which happens to be the most important thing.

In fact, we pretty much assumed we had that first commandment covered and/or we decided we couldn't really do that right anyway until perhaps when we're dead. So we got on with number two.

The command to love God wholly, with everything in us, and to do that first and always, is the big one we may have missed. Jesus commanded his disciples to do this, while saying it summarized all the Law and the Prophets (which must be fulfilled). All this makes the first commandment awesome, fearsome, and very important. It means that we must take this very seriously. We must do this. It takes priority over everything else.

It also means that we can do this. Out of the glory of following this first commandment, comes the self, wholly in love with God—that self then whose being is to interact with others to bring them into a baptism of that presence. That self pulls other lives into direct contact with the whole Godhead (Father, Son, and Spirit) because it is in contact with the Godhead.

**III. We Can Begin Right Now to Love God** If we don't know how to love God with the whole mind, body, and soul, then we can contemplate the vision of what it might mean for us to love God, and that completely. We can be quiet, pray, and seek.

No one else can tell you what it means for you to love God because when you're doing it, it's new. You are at the heart of creation then, with the ever new, living God. Don't worry. You won't drift into nirvana or disappear into the ether. But you might begin to discover why the biblical record is filled with words of joy, celebration, thanksgiving, and ecstasy from those who have immersed themselves in what it means to love God with the whole being. We are to bring to all the rest of our mission the self that has loved God. In our eagerness for the signs of good discipleship, have we tried to force the fruit of a vine not even planted in our hearts yet? If we miss step one—the one that summarizes what everything else is just a natural outgrowth of—to try to go anywhere and do anything without that would be crazy. Loving God comes first—after that, we can't help sharing that love with others. (Kathleen Peterson

Except that we’re talking about the heart of Christian faith. We’re talking about the God who empties the divine self, takes on the form of a servant, and is crucified *for us*. In short, when we’re talking about the Trinity, we’re talking about Jesus.

To understand this, you have to start with the Old Testament (not the place you expected to go looking for help on preaching the Trinity, is it? Stick with me). What’s the one sin that comes up again and again in the Old Testament, that keeps getting the Israelites in trouble? Idolatry. As any Old Testament prophet can tell you, we always want a God who acts and thinks like, well, us. The temptation to remake God in our own image is as seductive as it is universal.

And what kind of God do we make for ourselves? A God of *power*, the Big Dog on the porch. Why do we want this kind of God? Because we wouldn’t mind having that kind of power ourselves, and since getting it hasn’t always worked out for us, we’d at least like to know that the Big Dog has our back.

The problem with this particular form of idolatry–the idolatry of power–is the same for all idolatries: sooner or later we’re going to turn them on their heads. To speak of God mostly in terms of God’s power is to imply that human power is a form of godliness, and that those with the most power are the most like God. And think about it; isn’t this what kings and despots throughout the centuries have said? “You have to listen to me because God wants order around here, and God has empowered me to make sure you stay in line.”

And this is where Jesus comes in. Because we can’t help but define the word “God” in terms of power, God decides to come show us what and who God really is, what God’s power is really about. God becomes incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, and on the Cross paints us a picture of the very heart of God. Jesus shows us that for God, power means the power of self-sacrificial love. And because Jesus *is* God; the story of Jesus’s sacrifice on the Cross becomes for us the final, truest definition of the word, “God.”

This is why the early church insisted that God is Trinity. Yes, God the Father is the creator and sustainer of the universe, but to say that is not to say what is most important, most essential about God. If you ask who God really is, the answer is that God is eternally the Father of the Crucified One. If you want to know about God’s ongoing presence among us, the first thing to say is that it is the Spirit *of the Risen Christ*. Most important, if you want to know what all the fuss is about Jesus, it’s that in him and him alone we see and know God.

Franciscan Prayer of Blessing:

North side:

May God bless you with discomfort ...
at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

South side:

May God bless you with anger ...
at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

North side:

May God bless you with tears ...
to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
and to turn their pain into joy.

Both sides:

And may God bless you with enough Holy foolishness ...
to believe that you can make a difference in this world,
so that you can do what others claim cannot be done! Amen!

1. http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/fathers-day-has-methodist-ties [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/fathers-day-has-methodist-ties [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3254 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3254 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)