

Sermon: Lucky for Us
Text: Matthew 28:16-20
Date: June 11, 2017
Context: WWPC
Trinity Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Last week, the story of Pentecost -- that day when the Holy Spirit blew into town and set the disciples on fire -- that story set us on a road that we're going to follow for the rest of the summer.

Drawing mainly from the book of Acts, we're going to look at how the disciples managed to be church, and build church and grow the church, how they managed to be, and build and grow communities of love of peace, of agape and shalom, in a world that did not share their values.

A world where government officials were more interested in preserving the peace of Rome than the shalom of God, where love of power and status trumped love of God and neighbor.

A world where women were treated like slaves and slaves like house pets, or beasts of burden; where taxes funded imperial expansion, and armed centurions patrolled the streets and imposed a coercive order that guaranteed ongoing devotion to Caesar from ordinary citizens.

In case you thought the Bible has nothing to say about the modern world.

So we're going to look at how facing challenges that arose from this context, challenges both external and internal to the community, asked more of the disciples, and made more of the disciples.

But before we head down that road, we have one brief stop to make. On the church calendar, today is Trinity Sunday.

Which is why our text for today comes to us not from the book of Acts but rather from the closing chapter of the Gospel of Matthew.

This is very last scene in his gospel, Matthew's version of the moment when Jesus takes his leave from the world's stage and from the disciples. And here's how it ends:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Here Matthew gives his readers, and gives history and the world, the most explicit reference to the Trinity in all of scripture:

“. . . baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

The church has taken this command literally and has used this baptismal formula in its liturgical practice for centuries. And as providence would have it, we'll use it ourselves in just a few minutes, when we baptize little Harriett Cowell.

But this is not just a poetic formula to use in sacramental liturgy. This is a theological supernova.

It's a revelation of God's very nature, from the ultimate insider source, from a member of the very Trinity he has just named.

It's so original, so beyond our categories, that theologians and preachers and scholars, seminary professors, Sunday school teachers, and regular church goers have all spent the better part of the last two thousand years pondering the implications of this extraordinary revelation, deciphering what it means, and wrestling with its implications.

So this is really big stuff. But still there's more to this brief story.

As we just noted, this scene depicts the very last moments Jesus will spend with his disciples. So it's not surprising that he gives them one last set of marching orders before he takes his leave.

And like the Trinitarian theology he has just revealed, the final command he gives his disciples is itself a very big deal:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .” This final exhortation is so famous it has a name: The Great Commission.

This final command has served to animate the church’s mission in general ever since the day these words were first uttered, or read.

Eventually this commission blossomed into the founding motto of the Evangelical movement in particular. Whether you’re a fan of this or not, this one command inspired the worldwide missionary movement of the last two hundred years. Many of us grew up in churches where we memorized these words right along with John 3:16.

So, this final scene in Matthew is brief, but these pieces taken together -- the revelation of God’s triune nature, the command to make disciples, the admonition to baptize people in the name of this triune God -- this is arguably the most consequential passage in the entire Bible.

Millions, if not billions of people (infants and adults) have been baptized using the formula Jesus gives here.

And you can literally visit almost any country on earth and find some version of a church there, because at some point one or more of Jesus’ followers took this passage to heart and went to that country to do just that, to make disciples and establish a church there.

(In fairness, it should be noted that they probably also founded some schools and some clinics and a hospital in that country.)

So, in world historic terms, Christ’s last words in Matthew are a very, very big deal. And here’s how Matthew introduces this moment that would literally serve to change the world:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

Let me repeat that last part again, just in case you missed it: *When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.*

To grasp the full effect of how remarkable it is that “some doubted”, you must remember that at this point in the story Jesus has been freshly raised from the dead.

Even so, *when they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.*

That is absolutely incredible. The resurrected Christ is standing right in front of them.

The wounds in his hands, his feet and his side probably aren't even fully scabbed over at this point. His clothes probably still smell like the inside of a tomb and he himself may still stink of death.

And yet here he is, giving them one final set of instructions. It's so extraordinary as to defy description. *But some doubted.*

Maybe this is a comment on the nature of faith: how hard it is even under the best of circumstances to practice and maintain faith in the midst of the hurly burly of the real world, the hurly burly of our complicated lives, lives filled with hard losses, unexpected setbacks and painful disappointments.

How difficult it is to believe the extraordinary claims our faith asks of us, even when those claims are validated by things we can see. Even when the resurrected Christ is speaking directly to us, in person. Even then, faith is still hard.

Or maybe it's a more straightforward comment on human nature: that as a species we can be as stubborn as two-year-olds; that when it comes to the most consequential matters in the world, literal matters of life and death, of life beyond death, we can be astonishingly indifferent to facts, like the truth is on a par with soap bubbles that have no substance, no weight, no importance.

Whatever point Matthew may be trying to make, here's the really incredible thing: the fact that some of his followers doubted him did not stop Jesus from enlisting them in his project to go out and teach his way of love and peace to a world desperate for that message.

And lucky for us, too.

Because, yes, faith may be a hard thing to practice and maintain, for all sorts of reasons that you know as well as I.

But if that's the hard news, here's the Good News: We don't need to practice it perfectly to be a starting member of this team.

If this text is any indication, the founder of our faith cares much less about what we believe and much more about what we're willing to do. The actions we're willing to take in the service of our faith.

Thinking about this -- the fact that Jesus was willing to entrust his ultimate global project not just people who doubted him, but to a whole range of flawed characters, to people who denied and failed him -- all this made me wonder if something else might be going on here.

Specifically, it made me wonder if baptism wasn't just intended for the benefit of others--a way to signify their inclusion in the family of God.

Maybe the practice was intended for the benefit, and the transformation, of the disciples, too.

I have to thank Richard Lischer to thank for prompting me to think in this direction.

Richard recently retired from the faculty at Duke Divinity School, where he was a professor of homiletics, of preaching.

But before he rose to this lofty position, he served a small, conservative congregation, located in a small, conservative, economically depressed town in rural Illinois. In fact it was his first call, his first job, after he graduated. And he wrote a memoir about it.

The book is called *Open Secrets*. It's wonderful book and I highly commend it to you. In it he tells the story of how he came to baptize Asia Theresa, which is in large part a story about how Asia Theresa baptized him and his church.

The story starts with a broken window and nighttime intruder.¹

¹ This story is told in full in chapter 11 of *Open Secrets*.

He writes: "One night my wife woke me and said, 'I think there's somebody in the church. I heard a noise.' It was one o'clock in the morning. No one could possibly be in the church, I assured her."

He took a flashlight and made his way to the door that led to the chancel. "I pushed open the sacristy door and shone my light around the altar and pulpit. To my astonishment, a pair of eyes gazed back at me from the darkness."

First eyes, then a face, then remarkably high cheekbones on the face. She was sitting in the . . . clergy chair -- my chair -- just behind the pulpit . . . By this time I was thoroughly spooked, but she seemed calm."

"I immediately recognized her as the stranger who sat in the back pew on Sundays and disappeared before I could speak with her. Now that I had my chance, I was speechless."

"You . . . you. What are you doing here? In the dark . . ."

"I'm praying," she said evenly.

"In a church? In the middle of the night? How'd you . . . ?"

"Through the window," she replied, anticipating my question. "I always come through that window right there. It's easy. After I jimmied it the first time, nobody bothered to shut it tight."

"You mean you have been breaking into the church--to pray?" Apparently Richard was aware of how weird this sounded -- a pastor questioning the motives of someone who wanted to pray, who needed to pray, so badly they were willing to break into his church to do so.

"But this is your church," he added, by way of trying to sound more loving.

"Of course it's not," she replied.

Let me, Steve, summarize the problem here. The woman's name was Teri. And Teri's problem was that she knew the truth. She was from the wrong side of the tracks and lived with the wrong kind of people, in the wrong kind of house.

Teri didn't have a college degree but she was smart enough to know that in a small, conservative church, in a small conservative town, if you live with your stepfather and two brothers in a trailer house in a sketchy neighborhood, you might as well be from Syria.

Richard tried giving her a key to the church but she wouldn't take it because, as he notes, "as far as my mystery woman was concerned, the church was not a family to be joined but a fortress to be stormed. This church was for breaking into."

But Teri did break into it because she was looking for a place to pray that didn't reek of stale beer and cigarette smoke.

And she needed a place to pray because even on a good day her life was not working. She had very little money and no easy way to make more. She was stuck in a life she didn't want with no way to get out of it. And that was before she got pregnant.

She feared her step-father was going to be enraged when he discovered that there would soon be yet another mouth to feed, with no extra money to buy the food required to feed it.

She just wanted to build up her spiritual muscles before she faced the storm of his anger, so that she could stand up to it without being broken by it.

And it turns out she needed to be strong because he was angry, and he took it out on her. So Teri kept breaking into the church, I think as much to find sanctuary as to pray.

Eventually Richard Lischer, the young pastor, felt that the elders of his church needed to know what was going on.

Telling them would be a risk, of course, because, if even one of them slipped up and mentioned this confidential matter to another member of the church, then it would naturally mean that it would only be a matter of time before everybody knew what was going on.

That's not a critique of how churches work. It's a description of how they work. But the risk paid off. Literally. Because this is the other part of how churches work.

One Sunday after the service he found a sealed envelope on his desk labeled “Terry’s college fund.” Inside he found \$750 in cash. More envelopes followed. One was marked “Terry’s baby,” another “Doctor.”

Eventually Teri gave birth to a little girl. “Up to that point,” Richard writes, “Teri’s secret had unfolded . . . beneath the surface of the community and was, therefore, subjected to ferocious gossip. Teri [herself] was the partially hidden object of the community’s speculation [on the one hand, and its] assistance [on the other].

“All that changed when we baptized Asia Theresa and welcomed her into the church . . .

“Theologians,” he concludes, “locate the miracle of baptism in the mysterious convergence of water and the word of God. But that morning the transformation occurred a bit later in the ritual. After the last blessing is given, the pastor asks the parents and child to turn and face the congregation to receive its welcome.”

“In the definitive act of church-breaking, Teri, radiant in her only dress, shyly turned and faced them all . . . Finally, Teri was embraced by the church.”

What I would say is that, finally, baptism had done its work, welcoming this young, single mother and her somewhat unwanted child into the church family, and breaking open the hearts of the members of that family, until they were wide enough to make room for her among them.

Friends, this is sacred work we’re called to. The work of welcoming the stranger, until they’re no longer strangers but members of the family of God.

The work of teaching the way of Jesus, the work of building communities of love and peace, of agape and shalom, in a world that does not share our values.

Lucky for us we don’t have to do this work perfectly, or practice our faith perfectly to do it. We don’t have to believe a long list of things in just the right way, to be called into this service.

We just have to be willing to do the things Jesus asked us to do, to say Yes, when the risen Christ calls go into the world on his behalf, and continue the work he started.