

“Who do we think we are, anyway? – Movement”

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Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped 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.’

It happens without fail, every time. You board a tiny airplane, successfully wrestle your carryon into the overhead bin without hitting anyone in the head, settle into your seat and pull out a book. If you’re like me, you open that book and start to look busy. Really, really busy and really, really boring. But it seems to be a truth of the universe that just when you settle in and the cabin doors close – locking you into the metal box of a plane—at that precise moment the woman next to you turns to you and says, “so, where’ya headed?” Usually, if I’m flying solo it’s because I’m heading somewhere church related. Maybe it’s to Orlando for the General Assembly, or another city for the Bethany Fellowship. So the next question, “business or fun?” often leads to the question, “so, what do you do?”

I take a deep breath and say, “I’m a pastor....” and wait, watching their face. First, confusion, as they comprehend that young women can actually do this kind of work. Then, without fail, “what kind of church do you serve?” Answering this question is actually harder than telling people I’m a pastor. Why? Because 99% of the time when I say “the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),” there is an even longer pause and their heads tip to the side. One time, a woman’s eyes got really big and she looked a bit scared as she said, “is that the new cult I heard about last week?”

“No, we’re not a cult,” I say, “We’re actually mainline Protestant. Kind of like Presbyterians or Methodists, but not. We’re smaller, less well known. Similar to the United Church of Christ – do you know the United Church of Christ?” I search for a spark of recognition as the stranger relaxes a bit. “Oh, yeah,” she says, “I

used to know someone who was UCC.” I nod, relieved to have communicated my “normalcy” as a human being.

But what have I just done? In explaining to this stranger who I am, what I believe in and belong to, I never said a thing about who we actually were. If she drives by a church someday that says “Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)” on the sign, what will she know – not that we find our identity and meaning in the open communion table each week; not that we are a place where people can come with lots of different theologies and interpretations and political views and all have a place. She won’t know that we are an open and truly welcoming, grace-filled church. Instead of knowing who we *are*, she’ll only know who we’re *not*.

So what do YOU say when someone asks you? What do you say when you’re talking with a friend who has no idea who the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are? Who do we think we are, anyway?

That’s the title of this 4 week sermon series and the question we’ll be exploring together. Because too often we define ourselves not by who we are, but who we aren’t. Too often we avoid the question or stumble over our answer or just aren’t even sure. But we should be sure! We are part of something really important in our world today – a gathering of Christians who do our best to build bridges over the dividing lines, inviting everyone to the Lord’s Table of love.

“We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s table as Christ has welcomed us.” This is our identity statement, written in 2006 by a group called the 21st Century Vision Team, as an effort to put our actions and faith practices into words. It’s a short statement that describes us, so that when someone asks about our church, we have something substantial to say. We are a movement. We seek unity and wholeness. We share communion every week and we welcome everyone to God’s table. That’s who we are and what we love.

We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. That was the vision and dream of Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone, two pastors who brought their growing ministries together on the edge of the American frontier.

Shaped by and in a time of exploration and religious awakening, self-reliant frontier settlers sought a brand of religion that was individualistic, uncomplicated, free of dogmatic authority and unbound by tradition. The formal, institutional church of the time did not offer such characteristics. So, in the summer of 1801 at Cane Ridge in Kentucky, Barton W. Stone led a revival that sparked holy passion and purpose. While most religious traditions had particular denominational names, Stone and his followers called themselves simply “Christians.”

Word of this new movement spread like wildfire until it reached the hills of Pennsylvania where a young pastor named Alexander Campbell was leading a movement with similar passions. Tired of the fragmentation and divides of the Presbyterian church of his roots, Campbell organized one of the very first nondenominational Christian communities in the country. Calling themselves “Disciples,” Campbell’s group was committed to individual interpretation of scripture, sharing the Lord’s Supper weekly, and working toward unity of all Christians everywhere.

While the two founders had their disagreements, they soon realized that they shared a common goal: to reject creeds and division among Christ-followers so that all Christians might be united as one at the Lord’s table. In 1832 the two movements came together as one, sharing common beliefs and a common purpose – to spread the story of Jesus Christ, baptizing, changing lives, and uniting all Christians at the Lord’s Table in worship.

The founders, and the Disciples of Christ movement itself, have always valued Jesus’ words in scripture above others. “No Creed but Christ,” we have sometimes said about ourselves. I’m sure then, that Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone would have had these words of scripture etched deeply onto their hearts: “*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.*” They would have held these final words of Jesus as recorded in the book of Matthew (28:19) as sacred and sought to follow Jesus’ call as faithfully as possible.

“*Go...make disciples*” Jesus says to his followers, appearing to them on a mountain in Galilee, just days after his death and resurrection. I imagine the original disciples didn’t much like hearing this word. I imagine that they would

have rather stayed there in Jesus' presence, holding onto him for dear life for fear of what a future without him might hold. I imagine that they felt pretty powerless in the shadow of the cross, unsure how to keep Jesus' healings and teachings alive.

"Go..." Jesus says anyway. Baptize, teach, love, heal...include everyone from all around the world...Gentile and Jew, man and woman, young and old. Don't worry about those dividing lines that religions get distracted by. Make disciples of all people. Do what I did, live like I did, love like I did. But don't stay here, don't stay where you are. Go!

As Matthew tells the story of Jesus' final commission to the first disciples, he emphasizes two things: 1. That God wanted the church to be a universal, inclusive community of all nations, not just the Jews in Israel. 2. That people aren't called to become individual believers, but are to be enlisted as disciples within the Christian community, where the Christian message in faith must become actualized in their lives. This means that Jesus' message and work is for *all people* and that being a Disciple of Jesus Christ isn't a noun—not a static thing or person—but a *verb*. Being a Disciple is an active, visible, spirit-led movement in their lives.

"Go!" Jesus said to the disciples. "Go!" Jesus says to the Disciples. "Go!" Jesus says to us. Make disciples. Teach. Heal. Baptize. Love your neighbor. Love God. All of these commissions and commandments from Jesus are active and require some sort of movement – a stretching of the mind, an opening of the heart, a walk into the waters of new life, a giving of oneself to another.

To be a follower of Christ, a believer in God, means to be moving.

But as a fellow pastor points out, there is a difference between purposeful and purposeless movement. God doesn't call Moses to walk in circles around the burning bush; that's movement, but it has no purpose. Instead, God calls Moses to "Go! Tell the Pharaoh to stop enslaving my people!" God doesn't call Jonah to sit in the belly of the whale until he wastes away to nothing. Instead, God says, "Go! Take my word to the people of Ninevah. Tell them to change their ways." Likewise, when Jesus called his disciples, they had to move. Literally. Jesus said

“Come and follow me.” They didn’t have pedometers back then, but I’m pretty sure the job description came with a lot of walking...”

To be a follower of Christ, a believer in God, means to be moving. We grow, praise, serve, tell the story, heal, love and come to the Lord’s Table. But we don’t just move for the sake of moving. We do all of these things so that people might catch a glimpse of what God’s Kingdom looks like: a world not divided but united, the sharing of table fellowship and the hospitality of welcome; a world of kind and brave people loving deeply.

“We are Disciples of Christ, a **movement** for wholeness in a fragmented world.” We are people with a purpose – to unite and welcome. We are people with a vision – of one church where everyone sits down at the Lord’s Table together. Today is also All Saints Sunday, and it seems fitting that we honor and remember the saints of the church who have walked this journey before us. For God’s call to “Go!” is not new, but has propelled and compelled men and women of faith for generations before us. In the ways that they fed the hungry with homemade bread and church pot-lucks, clothed the naked and offered work and shelter for the homeless, in the ways that they welcomed the stranger and showed up week after week to prepare communion; In the ways that they moved, and loved, and kept the faith not just moving, but moving *forward*, we give thanks today.

A few weeks ago, my spiritual director shared a Lutheran prayer with me. I read it and said, “Oh, that’s nice.” Then, a week later, I walked into a different church fellowship hall where painted in huge, bold letters, were the exact same words of the prayer:

“Gracious God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending; by paths as yet untrodden; through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us. Through Jesus Christ, Amen.”

I don’t know about you, but when God has to use big, bold letters painted on a wall to get my attention, I start listening real quick! “Lord, give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us...” Yes, Lord.

Jesus calls us to “Go!” We may not always know where we’re going, or be able to see very far into the future. We may stumble over a rock in the path a few times or find ourselves wandering in circles for a bit, but we have a mission and a purpose: to welcome all people and unite all Christians at the Lord’s Table. We are called to “go” and to “serve” and to “love,” and so by the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we step out--moving forward in faith.

And as we do so, through all the ways we move and serve and love ever more deeply, we discover the reality of Jesus’ last words in the gospel of Matthew: *“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*