



Revival: Living the Methodist Way **“OFFER THEM CHRIST”**

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Scripture: 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 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.”

One day a nun went out to Arizona to do some mission work. Lo and behold, right out there in the middle of nowhere, her car ran out of gas. At first, she didn't know what to do. Then she realized that she had passed a service station a few miles back. She took a deep breath and headed for the gas station. When she got there, the attendant said he'd be happy to get her some gas, but he didn't know what he'd put it in. He didn't have a gas can there because someone had taken his last one and hadn't returned it. So he went out back, scrounged around a bit and finally found something that would at least work. It was a bedpan!

He filled the bedpan with gasoline and handed it to the nun. She carried it back to her car ever so carefully, some two miles or so. But when she got there, a funny thing happened. She was pouring the gas into the fuel tank from the bedpan, when a big semi came rumbling down the road at precisely that moment. When the trucker saw the nun and what was happening, he slammed on his brakes, put his rig into reverse and backed up. He rolled down his window and said, “Sister, I must say, in all my years, I've never seen such faith as that!”¹ It rivals turning water into wine, doesn't it?

Some would say that faith means to believe the impossible; to believe that something that cannot be done can indeed be done after all. Those are the folks who say, “A man rose from the dead? Jesus laid in the tomb three days, then just got up and started walking again? You've got to have faith to believe in that stuff!” But there's another way to look at faith that goes right to the core of Christianity. Faith is the belief that through the resurrection of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, God takes away our fears, grants us new life and empowers us to offer Christ to the world.

The scripture that we are using today is a familiar one, Matthew 28. We call it the Great Commission. These are the last verses in the entire gospel of Matthew. The disciples have already come to faith in the risen Jesus on the basis of what Mary Magdalene and the other Mary told them on the day Jesus rose from the dead. However, this is the first and only scene in Matthew in which the disciples actually appear with the resurrected Jesus after they fled at the time of Jesus' arrest.

Matthew says that when the disciples see Jesus, they worship him, but some doubt. This reflects Matthew's understanding of discipleship, where faith, by its very nature, incorporates doubt. Whatever happened at the resurrection, it did not generate perfect faith in the disciples. It was to wavering, unsure, uncertain people like you and me that Jesus entrusted the world mission.

As Jesus prepares to ascend into heaven and leave the disciples forever, he commissions them by saying, "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."

Jesus says, "Go," when I'm sure the disciples want to stay. "Wait a minute. We're your disciples. What do you mean go and make disciples in the whole world?" You see, previously in his gospel, Matthew refers to disciples exclusively as the inner group of twelve men who left everything to follow Jesus. "Okay, maybe other Jews can be disciples besides us, but that's it. You came to earth for us, your people, the Jews. What do you mean, go out there?" "Make disciples of all nations," Jesus said. The invitation to make and be disciples is now open to everyone. Can you imagine how much this Great Commission stretches the disciples? It forces them to reconsider their fundamental idea of who God is and step outside of their comfort zone.

Notice another thing. Jesus doesn't say, "Go and make clones, make robots, make tyrants, make kings, or even make Christians." He says, "Go and make disciples." So, who or what is a disciple? I attended a workshop several years ago where the presenter gave us an interesting definition. He said that a disciple is "a lifelong learner and an intentional imitator of the whole life of Jesus Christ."²

A disciple is not a super-Christian or a mega-Christian. The New Testament never tells us that. Who is qualified to be a disciple? Anyone. Anyone. Children, youth or adult. What qualifies you to be a disciple is your desire, it's your enrollment, it's your intention to be a lifelong learner and an imitator of the whole life of Jesus Christ.

Don Mackenzie, a Congregational pastor in Seattle, has been participating in an interfaith dialogue with Rabbi Ted Falcon and Sufi Muslim teacher Jamal Rahman for a number of years. They call themselves The Interfaith Amigos. When asked how he, as a Christian, can reconcile the command to make disciples with the desire to respect other religions, Mackenzie responded, "I think Christians have misunderstood the Great Commission. When Jesus says, 'Go and make disciples,' we think he means go and make Christians of all nations. But he doesn't say that. To be a disciple of God means to be a disciple of love. Maybe he means that we are called to help people find the way of love."³

Could it be that you and I are called to be life-long learners and intentional imitators of the whole life of Jesus Christ by helping people find the way of love? Whether these folks end up calling themselves Christians may not be as important as helping them become disciples of love based on the teachings of Jesus. Isn't that what mission is all about? When we help people find the way of love by imitating the whole life of Jesus Christ, we are in mission.

We United Methodists have a wonderful heritage of offering Christ to the world. Toward the end of his life, John Wesley commissioned Thomas Coke to go to America and ordain Francis Asbury and others into the ministry. Wesley stood at the pier and, as the boat departed, it is reported that he said to Coke, "Offer them Christ, Thomas." Three simple words, "Offer them Christ." Wesley also told his preachers, "You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work."

Friends, you and I have nothing to do but save souls. We have nothing to do but offer new life by helping our children, youth and adults find the way of love by imitating the whole life of Jesus Christ. That's our calling, whoever we are.

Unfortunately, membership and attendance in The United Methodist Church has been declining for the past fifty years. A few weeks ago the Pew Research Center released its 2014 religious landscape survey, showing that the share of our U.S. adult population that is mainline Protestant had dropped from 18.1 to 14.7 percent in the previous seven years. It's a significant decline. The survey counted United Methodists among the mainline Protestants.

Dr. Donald House, a lifelong United Methodist and economist who chairs our denomination's Economic Advisory Committee, analyzed the Pew report and warned that The United Methodist Church has only fifteen years to reverse its decline in the United States if it is to have a sustainable future. In other words, if there is not a turn-around soon, we won't have enough U.S. churches in future decades to support our connectional structures, which include conferences, bishops, agencies, missions and international disaster response.

How, then, do we here at First UMC offer Christ to a world that is often cynical, hurting and skeptical? I'd like to suggest two things. **First, we offer Christ with compassion and love.** Have you seen the Peanuts comic strip where Lucy is talking to Linus about evangelism? She says, "You know, Linus, I would have made a good evangelist." "What makes you think that?" responds Linus. "Well," Lucy says, "do you know that kid who sits behind me at school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion." "How did you do that?" Linus asks. "I hit him with my lunch box!" Lucy replies.

I heard recently that only 4% of young adults in our country today between 18 and 35 years old are active in a church. Four percent. Why is it that our young people are so disconnected from church? It's because, for many, church is irrelevant to their lives. They see Christians as judgmental, hypocritical, stuck in the past, unwilling to change and try new ways of reaching new people and, most damaging of all, hitting each other with our lunch boxes.

But that is not the spirit of Christ. Jesus chose the way of sacrificial love that went right up on the cross. By freely giving away his life, Jesus made the message plain. Just as Jesus loves you and me into faith, so there is no greater method of evangelism than offering Christ with love.

Who's going to teach the children of this world about the love of Jesus? Who's going to nurture our youth into faith? Who's going to make a place for our young adults to be a part of leadership in our church? Who's going to welcome into our faith community those who desperately need a place to belong, who have never experienced unconditional love in their life or have been rejected elsewhere because they don't measure up? Who is going to offer the love of Christ, if not us?

John Wesley understood this kind of welcome, for he once advised his preachers, "Abhor every approach, in any kind or degree, to the spirit of persecution. If you cannot reason or persuade a man (person) into the truth, never attempt to force him (them) into it. If love will not compel him (them) to come in, leave him (them) to God, the Judge of all." (*Works*, Vol. 12, p. 201.)

Second, we offer Christ with power. The very same power that raised Jesus from the dead enables you and me to offer Christ to others with humility and conviction. How often have we done or said something that helps another person draw close to God, and we wonder later, "Now where did that come from?" Or we see someone share their faith with an eloquence that they never display otherwise, and we wonder, "How could he do that?" Or we see a child witness to her faith with a maturity far beyond her years, and we just shake our heads at God's amazing grace.

I've seen that power at work and so have you. Some years ago in the church Gary and I were serving, an eleven-year-old boy, Sam, who was in a wheelchair, became critically ill and was in pediatric intensive care for several days. He was unresponsive in a coma, and it was very serious. Someone from the church found out about Sam and began praying for healing. At 6 a.m. one morning, this person called Sam's mother at the hospital and said, "I'm sorry to call you so early, but I just woke up from a vivid dream where Sam was healed. I wanted you to know that." Funny thing was, Sam had just woken up ten minutes before she called and said his first words in three days. Coincidence? No.

Every week I witness people here at First Church caring for others, praying for others, sharing God's love with others and doing heroic things for others, things they could never do on their own. With the power of the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit in your hearts, you, too, can do anything! Remember, friends, you are all ministers. Gary, Chad, Lindsey and Suzanne and I may be the clergy, but you are the ministers. Are you a child? You're a minister. Are you a teenager? You're a minister. Are you a schoolteacher, a clerk, an engineer, a bus driver? You're a minister. Each one of you has the power of the risen Christ within you. Claim your power and offer Christ to our world!

You see, we just don't measure this church by how many people are inside the building. We measure our church by how we connect with the many people outside the building who are just waiting to be invited into a life-changing relationship with Christ. It's not who comes to this

church that matters. It's where this church goes that matters. And until we have offered Christ to every last person inside and outside this building, our job is not done.

For some reason, God has placed you and me living in and around Birmingham, Michigan in the year 2015. We are in this church for a purpose. God has chosen us for this time in this place to be lifelong learners and intentional imitators of the whole life of Jesus Christ by helping other people find the way of love. God says to us today that the hope of Birmingham and the hope of the world lies in the power of the Holy Spirit which we, the church, proclaim to all whose lives are broken, who live in constant fear, and who can't even begin to think about spiritual matters until their stomachs are full and they have shelter over their heads.

Have you ever offered even half of what you know about the goodness of God to another person? Have you ever told a child about what Jesus Christ has done in your life? Have you ever told a youth but a fraction of how God's amazing grace has changed you? Have you told someone who has been turned off by church what it is that brings you back to this holy place week after week after week? Have you ever told your neighbor how God gives you the strength to live each day? Have you ever told your work colleagues how God empowers you to offer Christ not only by your words but by the way you live each day?

How do we offer Christ? Engage your imagination. Use a bed pan. Be a life-long learner. Share your lunch box. Be compassionate. Pray for someone in need. Claim your power. Set an example. Be a sermon. The possibilities are limitless, for you have nothing to do but save souls. You have **nothing** to do but offer Christ.

¹ "It's O.K. to Die," Dr. Norman Neaves, Church of the Servant, April 16, 1995

² Rev. Glenn McDonald, Zionsville Presbyterian Church

³ "Three Faiths, Three Friends," Amy Frykholm, *Christian Century*, August 26, 2008, p. 23.