

With You Always *Matthew 28:16-20*

Agnes W. Norfleet

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

Of the four gospels, only Matthew has what we might call a proper, definitive ending. The endings of both Mark and John are disputed by biblical scholars as having later editorial additions, and Luke's gospel doesn't end exactly, but continues with his sequel, the Acts of the Apostles. Only Matthew comes to a real moment of closure, and it is a scene abundantly filled with significance.

The gathering itself is significant. The last time we saw Jesus together with the disciples was when they had "deserted him and fled" back in chapter 26 on the night of Jesus' arrest before the crucifixion. So here we see them not only in full daytime, but also in light of the resurrection. The passage notes that eleven disciples are there, so that we can presume the memory of Judas' betrayal still lingers. The location is significant. This unnamed mountaintop on which the Risen Lord greets them recalls so many other mountains, from Sinai where the Law was given to Moses to the Sermon on the Mount, ever a high vista of divine revelation. Finally, what Jesus tells them is hugely significant. "The Great Commission" we call it, complete with its Trinitarian baptismal sending: "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."

The gospel ends, you see, where the work of the church begins, to spread the love of God in Christ by obeying his teachings. This is no easy task according to Matthew, but as ethically demanding as loving our enemies, turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile, forgiving seventy times seven, and giving our worldly possessions away! These are not easy lessons to take to the ends of the earth. But my guess is, few passages of scripture fueled the fires of previous missionary movements as much as this one with its active, imperative verbs of "Go, Make, Baptize, Teach, and Obey." And we all know that while some of that missionary movement spread the grace of the gospel, centuries ago that zeal also went with systematic cultural and religious oppression. Christianizing Native Americans meant they were forced to burn ceremonial robes and destroy artifacts representing their cultural heritage. Taking the gospel to Africa meant asking people to give up their profoundly meaningful African names for their new so-called "Christian names," which of course were merely Western, European names. Mayans in Central and South America were asked to leave behind their reverence for nature as they assumed this new cloak of Christianity.

Given the not so distant history, then, of the ways this Great Commission was taken to heart and put into practice, and with a broader, twenty-first century sensitivity and acceptance of religious pluralism, we have to listen, I believe, to how these closing words of Matthew's gospel send us forth anew. The good news is the text itself drops a big clue as to how contemporary Christians can reinterpret and respond to Jesus' parting words. It comes when Matthew describes the posture of the disciples. "When the disciples saw Jesus, they worshipped him; but some doubted." At first hearing, it sounds like most of them recognized Jesus and worshipped him, while only a few of

them had doubt. If we were to put ourselves in that scene, we might wonder which one we would be, a worshipper or a doubter. But to read it that way as an either/or misses something in the translation. The original words are actually better translated "They worshipped and they doubted!"

Biblical scholar Mark Allen Powell notes that Jesus neither rebukes the doubt nor divides the disciples into two camps, sending the worshippers in one direction to spread the gospel and the doubters back to discipleship school. Rather, Jesus receives both their worship and their wavering, their awe-struck reverence before the Risen Lord and their uncertainty about what it means. Powell notes, "The church in Matthew is a community of worshipping doubters, and they always make the best evangelists. We can only testify to Jesus as people who do not have it all together, as people whose lives are still a bit of a mess."¹

I think this is very good news for us because we know we do not have perfect faith. We don't understand a lot of what the Bible says, we are curious about the theology behind our longstanding and treasured affirmations of faith, and we know the mission of the church in this new era of being Christian is changing, even as the world is changing. An increasing number of Americans, when surveyed about their religious belief, check "no faith whatsoever." And when polled as to their negative connotations of the word *Christian*, young adults from age 16 to 29 rank high on their list of negatives "judgmental," "hypocritical," "out of touch with reality." I cannot help but wonder if those of us who heed these words of Jesus were a little bit more honest about our doubts and what we do not know for sure, the gospel might be more easily received.

We can take this Great Commission every bit as seriously as previous generations have, but maybe now we can hear it filtered through some humility, knowing that Jesus himself doesn't let our doubts stand in the way. He sends us, nonetheless, with a job to do: Go, Make disciples, Baptize, Teach, and Obey, because he knew that in the activity of spreading the gospel, something besides pure, unquestioning faith would help us along the way.

Tom Long notes that this is no hit-and-run evangelism. What the disciples are sent to do is not hurl gospel leaflets into the wind or hold a rally in a stadium. They are called to the harder, less glamorous, more patient task of making disciples, of building Christian communities.... Only one word could have strengthened their resolve and sent them out to the vast and forbidding world carrying the gospel, and that was the word Jesus spoke: 'And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'... This parting, but enduring word from the risen Christ is the heart of Matthew's whole gospel. As the church goes out with...faith and doubt...to do the work of Christ, it is not promised success at every turn, a glad welcome in every heart, or even freedom from persecution and suffering. What the church is promised is that God in Christ will not abandon us but is present in our midst....²

We are assured that it is not our faith alone that sends us into the world to do the work of the gospel; rather it is Jesus himself at our side, whether we believe it fully or not. A new translation of the last sentence of Matthew from the Common English Bible puts it this way: "Look, Jesus says, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age." Always...every day... here on earth...while we try to obey Jesus and support the Christian nurture of others for the sake of the world. "Emmanuel. God-with-us turns into Jesus-with-us. There is no greater personal promise

than that.”³

I have been reading Barbara Bradley Hagerty’s bestseller *Fingerprints of God: What Science is Learning about the Brain and Spiritual Experience*. She is a journalist, and from a reporter’s perspective took a decade to investigate new scientific research probing how faith and spirituality might affect us physically, emotionally, and psychologically. She traveled all over the place and interviewed all kinds of scientists who are studying things like what happens to the brain in people who meditate, if prayer affects the body, can spirituality be measured, is there a gene in our DNA that underlies some propensity to faith. Her research is compelling, and while admitting that what she discovers and what she discerns cannot yet be proven, her insights are fascinating. She begins and ends her book with personal reflection on her own growth in faith.

Before she launched into this journalistic investigation she writes, “The faith I had acquired and polished over the previous decade was a lovely thing. At its center shined a personal God, one who would sit down with me at a wedding reception and share a glass of wine.” Then toward the end of her book, she admits two things: she feared that this investigation into the science of spirituality might take some of her faith away, and she discovered a God who was more present than a date at a wedding reception. “As I delved into the science,” she writes, “I realized I need not discard my faith. Rather, I must distinguish it from spiritual experience. Unlike spiritual experience, religious belief can never be tested by a brain scanner or even by historical record. No one can prove Jesus is the Son of God. What religious belief does is attempt to explain in a compelling narrative the unseen reality that lies at the heart of the spiritual experience.” She goes on, “I remember once pondering, if God wanted to speak to us, what would He say? The answer is simple: God tells stories. “When Jesus says that the way to eternal life is to follow Him, that means trying to live the story he lived feeding the poor, helping those who cannot benefit you, loving your enemies, sacrificing rather than promoting yourself, living as if every moment on earth counts for eternity.”⁴

I think Hagerty’s concluding insight about her faith is not unlike the conclusion of Matthew’s gospel. The gospel ends only insofar as the story of Jesus becomes the story of our lives. With faith and with doubt, with the humility of not fully understanding, we are nonetheless sent to do what Jesus did. And the only thing we need to do the work of Jesus, we already have. He is with us...always...every day.

Notes

1 Mark Allen Powell, *Loving Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

2 Thomas G. Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 326-328.

3 Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 209.

4 Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God: What Science is Learning about the Brain and Spiritual Experience* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009) 10; 281-283.