

Matthew 28:18-20
(Genesis 12:1-9; 1 Peter 2:9-10)
“A Call to Mission: Go!”

Introduction

These four weeks leading up to our annual global mission conference, we are looking at the four challenges, the four commitments we ask you to make, in response to the great mission that not only defines the church, but that defines human history: the mission of God to reclaim his rebellious children from every ethnic group on earth. Those commitments are to pray, to go, to serve and to give. Last week we listened to Jesus' words to his disciples: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:37f). Jesus taught that the opportunity for mission, "the harvest," is plentiful, but that the laborers willing to go out and gather the harvest are far too few. The solution, he said, is earnest prayer to the Lord of the harvest to thrust out the needed laborers.

As we looked at global statistics, we saw that everything Jesus said of the situation then is still true today: vast potential harvest, but few laborers. And we saw that there are so few laborers because of our relative prayerlessness with regard to global mission. We will, in the weeks ahead, return to the theme of prayer with an invitation to deeper engagement as individuals and as a congregation. But this morning, we are pressing ahead to the second call that must be heeded for our prayers to be answered: we must, each one of us, hear Christ calling us to go.

We usually don't apply this particular call, the call to go, to all of us, but rather focus the call to go only to those who are experiencing a tug toward cross-cultural mission. But this morning, I want to suggest that, until we find ourselves engaged on mission every day, unless we see our lives in terms of God's mission, we will very likely not even hear the call of God to make a geographic, linguistic or cultural move, and if we do hear the call, we will not have learned in our own culture and language what it means to be on mission with the Lord.

I have said to you over the years, in referring to this text, that there is only one imperative in the Great Commission: namely, "Make disciples!" The word translated "Go!" is actually a participle, one of three in the Great Commission that define *how* we are to make disciples of all nations: Going, baptizing and teaching. However, the force is clearly to get going and take the gospel to the nations, not just preaching the gospel, but making disciples, which invariably involves planting churches among every ethnic group. That is why every major English translation translates this as a command: Go! Or, as F.D. Bruner translates it in his fine two-volume commentary on Matthew's gospel, "Move out!" If Christians do not go, do not move out to the nations, the nations will never hear the life-giving good news.

Body

1. Go!

The great commission begins at every Christian's front door. In fact, it begins first within one's home. Our first mission field is our family. It is there that we learn to show and tell the gospel of Jesus Christ. The pattern in the book of Acts was that people usually came to faith within the context of their household – all members of the household hearing and believing the message, and receiving baptism together, and the household then became a mission church from which the gospel flowed out to the surrounding community. That was how the church spread like wildfire.

In our day, we simply have to look at the unparalleled growth of the church in China to see that this is still the most effective method of local mission. So to those who live quietly within a home where not all yet know Christ, I encourage you to learn to pray and love and live the radical grace of the gospel, and take every authentic opportunity to tell what the Lord has done for you.

If you are a student, if you have a job, wherever you spend your day is the place that God has entrusted to you for the sake of the gospel. It does no good and may well do much harm if you are known as a Christian but do not seek to live and love as Jesus lived and loved. The barrage of public criticism and failures of Christian leaders have caused people to expect Christians to be fakes. You and I have the opportunity to live before them – not perfectly – but authentically, and so to give them reason to believe that maybe the gospel is true. If they see us choose integrity and compassion over dishonesty and selfishness, if they know that we can be trusted to act in kindness and to show grace in hard situations, and if we are unafraid to tell them, when appropriate, what the Lord has done for us, then we are on the way to pursuing the mission entrusted to us, and preparing for wherever else we may be called to serve.

But we are focusing especially on the vast harvest that we spoke of last week: 1.5 billion people presently beyond the reach of the gospel, with only ten percent of the mission laborers focused on the unevangelized, and only three percent focused on the completely unreached. Sixty percent of all unreached people groups live in countries closed to American missionaries. Two things to note: first, this means that forty percent live in countries not closed to American missionaries. And many of the other sixty percent may live in areas open to American Christians who have legitimate business or professional reasons to be there and live as witnesses to the truth of the gospel.

But secondly, and most germane for all of us: 22 million internationals visit America annually. Of these, 630,000 are university students from 220 countries, 25% of which prohibit American missionaries. Of these students, 80 percent will return to their country never having been invited into an American home, and 90 percent will never be reached by any ministry while in the United States.

For those of us who know that we are called to serve Christ in Knoxville, the world of unreached and unevangelized people is not closed to us. We know and support international ministries right here at the University of Tennessee. Simply contact the church to find out how to link with those ministries and establish a relationship with a student or family who have come, perhaps, from a country that you will never visit, but which you, by God's grace, may powerfully impact through your love of a potential national leader. Remember that 40% of the world's heads of state once studied in the United States, and were probably never invited to a meal, or into a caring relationship, with a Christian family.

2. Disciple the nations!

But make no mistake: the aim is not just friendship. It must be discipleship, and unless *you* are a disciple of Jesus you will not be able to *make* disciples. This is the imperative that stands out in the Great Commission, and that cautions us not to mistake hit-or-miss evangelism with what Jesus has entrusted to us. Jesus did not do evangelism and then discipleship. He called people to follow him, and disciplined them life-on-life. It has ever been so. But how are disciples made?

3. Baptize in the triune name!

The right of initiation into the new redeemed humanity is baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." People are baptized into something visible and real, a new community, a new family. The Bible does not conceive of unattached, lone ranger Christians. Christians belonged from the start to house churches, and were warned of those who wandered from church to church without being in accountable relationships. Elders and deacons served particular people for whom they would one day give account. So a disciple is part of a local church. Therefore, the aim is that every people group might have a healthy, self-replicating church where disciples are being formed to reach their people.

4. Teach the obedience of faith!

And disciples must be taught what Jesus taught his disciples and what they taught their disciples. The first Christians devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42), and it must ever be the core curriculum of the church.

Note, further, that it is not enough simply to teach academically. Jesus said, “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” We learn in order to do. The Christian life, new life in Christ, is just that: new life! It is not enough merely to know. We are called to follow Jesus on the path of life.

So to *make* disciples, we must *be* disciples, part of a local church where we are growing in the knowledge of Christ’s Word and living in grateful obedience to it as the way that leads to life and joy and peace. For this, we go forth each day to serve our families, or fellow students or fellow workers, or friends and neighbors. And as we increasingly know the one whom we call Lord, the one who at great cost redeemed us and then entrusted us – each one of us – with the mission, we will increasingly care about the things most on his heart. Surely the unreached 1.5 billion are much on his heart. Surely the 7,000 unreached people groups are much on his heart.

Jesus said, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations [*ethne*, “people groups”], and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). There is but one way for the groaning of this poor world to cease – abandoned children, people living under violence and oppression, the hungry, the sick, the mourners – only one thing will bring all this to a glorious end: the consummation of human history in the coming again of Jesus Christ to wipe away our tears, bring justice at last to the violent, the wicked, the oppressors, the scorers of all that is holy, and vindication to his own. And this will not happen until the mission is accomplished, and the Song of the Lamb is sung as an accomplished fact:

Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth (Revelation 5:9-10).

Conclusion

To those who answer Jesus’ call to go, to get going, to move out and make disciples, he gives this promise: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20). We go because all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, and he has told us clearly to go, and because when we go we are never alone: he himself is with us always, to the end of the age.