

Matthew 28:16-20
June 11, 2017

“Great Commission”

Rev. William G. Utke
Emanuel UCC, HC

This week I came across a children’s version of Psalm 8, it goes like this, “God, you are wonderful. When I think of your love, I feel strong.

Last week as part of Christine Wilke’s Pentecost Sermon on how God creates us to be “Similar, but not the Same,” she described God’s Spirit as a wind blowing so mightily it ushered the disciples out of the house where they were sitting.

That day, the disciples were gathered in that house mourning how Jesus had left them again. He left them when he was crucified, and now he left them again when he ascended. As Christ ascended, he left behind a promise: God’s Spirit is coming! God’s caring, advocating, comforting, renewing Spirit would come to be God with us. But, as the disciples sat there they had no idea when or how it would come. There was no Amazon 2-day delivery for God’s Spirit.

God’s Spirit did arrive to renew and refresh Jesus’ disciples for service in the world. Send love that would strengthen them to offer forgiveness and love to all. Build peace and justice wherever they went. Comfort and befriend. And seek unity which celebrates diversity.

This week entertainer Justin Bieber spoke about faith in God. The 23-year-old "Love Yourself" pop star, came together with others for a benefit concert organized by singer Ariana Grande. On May 22, a suicide bombing took place at Grande's concert in the Manchester Arena. It resulted in 23 deaths including children, and over 100 people injured.

Justin used this opportunity at the "One Love Manchester" concert to encourage people about God's goodness. "God is good in the midst of the darkness. God is good in the midst of evil," the singer told the crowd. "God is in the midst no matter what's happening in the world, God is in the midst, and (God) loves you and (God's) here for you."

Today in Matthew’s Gospel we hear Jesus’ Great Commission. It begins to sound like all that love talk is just buttering us up to ask us to add to our already busy schedules.

When we come to church, we often seek solace and rest, escape from the work a day world...and at times it can feel as if all the church wants is for us to give more. Give time, give money, give our talents, give our skills, give our self. The dizzying daily list of chores can sound like... get the kids up and get them to school, make lunch, get to work by 7, pick the kids up, make dinner, get project done, pay bills, go through the mail, check emails and texts, go to dance or music lessons or soccer practice, call the doctor, shop for groceries; and now Jesus is adding preach, teach, baptize, make disciples and so on... where does it end? We begin to feel like an ATM machine, push the right buttons and if there is anything left inside, here you go.

But I don't think the Great Commission is trying to drown us in an ever-expanding list of "things to do." In a countercultural way, I think the Great Commission is trying to save us from that pressure filled lifestyle.

In a book called "Urban Shaman: A Handbook for Personal and Planetary Transformation Based on the Hawaiian Way of the Adventurer," author Serge Kahilil King writes, "Energy Flows Where Attention Goes." His point is, in our overstuffed days we can lose focus, and when we lose focus, our energy tries to flow in all directions. When we regain focus, well, energy flows where attention goes.

He continues with a demonstration exercise, "To Demonstrate how energy flows where attention goes... pick up a chair by its seat and feel the weight of it. Then put it back down. Now focus your attention on the very top of the chair's back and pick it up by the seat again. If your focus is good the chair will feel lighter." He concludes, "Regardless of how you want to explain it, the practical fact is that if you have to lift anything you will find it easier to do if your attention is focused on the very top of the object or even in the space a foot above it."

Let me offer one more example, consider the effects of drugs used to treat Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Conventional wisdom would suggest that drugs, like Ritalin, would chemically slow the body down. In fact, the opposite happens. ADHD is caused by a lack of activity in the part of the brain that controls focus, attention and purposeful action. So the prescription is not to slow the system but to stimulate, or speed up the part of the body that controls attention. This is sort of what I think Jesus is getting at in his Great Commission.

In the havoc of our overfilled schedules, Jesus is stimulating our attention on what is really important, helping us become people of faith, love and forgiveness, the kind of people the world needs us to be. The world doesn't need stressed out, screaming drivers, blowing horns, yelling at referees, scolding the checkout clerk, cutting in line people.

Jesus is calling on us to serve and love ourselves, and others, because it gives everything else we do in life, meaning and purpose. It focuses everything else in our life. This focus will take our worn and tattered souls and make them strong... Like the Psalm, "when I think of your love, I feel strong."

Jesus does not want dried up disciples, ATM machines who have given all they have until they are spent inside. Our Savior seeks dynamic followers focused on the source in every moment, renewed by the fountain of God's Spirit through all that they do, allowing God's goodness and beauty to shine out as we go through the daily routine.

The human spirit, when it is rooted and grounded in love, nourished by an ever-flowing source of peace, beauty and hope; is given all it needs to accomplish more than we can ever imagine. This powerful love is both a personal gift and one we experience in community. We are given power to face the challenges in our individual lives, to activate our own God-given gifts AND we are given power to do things together that we would never be able to do alone.

In this Season of Pentecost, this summer time, Come Holy Spirit, fill my heart, my mind, my soul, because when I am focused on God's love, I feel strong.

Amen