

## A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 28:16-20

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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 (keep) everything that I have commanded you.  
And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

This story is generally called either “the great commission” or “the commissioning of the disciples.” It is the ending of Matthew’s Gospel and has the same theme as the more enigmatic ending of Mark’s Gospel. In the terms of the old popular song, Matthew accentuates the positive and Mark eliminates the negative.

First, a quibble with the NRSV translation: the translation of “obey.” That meaning is not listed in the wide range of synonyms for the Greek verb, *τηρεω*. The core and most frequent meaning of the verb is “to keep.” In the contexts of law and teaching, it has the connotations of “observe,” “fulfill” or even “pay attention to” but never “obey.” The English term “obey” has connotations of being obedient and is often associated with a life that observes the “letter of the law.” The verb in Greek has none of this association. It rather describes a “holding” close and even “living out” or “protecting.” It is more about spiritual formation than obedience to a law.

There are two major verbal threads in the story, each of which links this story with motifs in Matthew’s earlier stories: the “mountain” and “the nations.” The “mountain” (Greek *ορος*) was the site of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) and the place where he sits down to teach the crowds from the regions of the Gentiles prior to feeding the “four thousand” (15:29). The word translated as “the nations” (Greek *εθνοι*, English ethnic) is also often translated as the Gentiles, that is, non-Jews. In the traditions of Israel, this term is associated with the oppressors of Israel such as the Babylonians, the Syrians, and the Romans, that is, the enemies of Israel. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus carries out an extensive ministry to the Gentiles. Thus, the stories that immediately follow the Sermon on the Mount are the healing of the leper and the healing of the slave of a centurion, an officer in the Roman army. The centurion knows and observes the constraints of Judean law. He does not ask Jesus to come to his house because it would make Jesus unclean. But Jesus then heals his slave. Later in the Gospel, Jesus casts out demons from two

Gadarene demoniacs (8:28-34) and the daughter of a Canaanite woman (15:21-28), as well as feeding the four thousand Gentiles who come to him (15:29-39). This series of actions by Jesus are examples of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (5:43-48).

The commission to make disciples of all the nations is, therefore, a mandate to continue Jesus' ministry and teaching among the Gentiles. It is also a reversal of his earlier commission to the twelve to go nowhere among the Gentiles (10:5). The implication is that Jesus first sent them out for the relatively easier mission to Israelites and only now sends them out for the far more difficult and risky mission of making disciples of Israel's enemies.

This commissioning of the disciples is usually delivered as a pronouncement in which Jesus speaks in a very authoritative voice, like a royal figure. I would suggest that you present this more in the style of a coach who is generating energy for his team. An image here is Jesus getting the eleven disciples together in a huddle. Given that Jesus was humiliated in his crucifixion by the Romans, he is saying that the resurrection has transformed him and is a sign that he has been given all authority and power. God has vindicated Jesus' way of non-violent resistance to laws that keep people separate. The one who was humiliated is now speaking to them as a person of dignity and honor and saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Therefore, "go." So it's "All right TEAM, GO and make disciples of all our national enemies."

It is important to remember that Matthew's Gospel is written ('80's) in the immediate aftermath of the Jewish-Roman War (66-72), the greatest tragedy in the entire history of Israel, in which hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed. Josephus' estimate of those killed in the war was more than a million. Jesus is identifying a proactive strategy for Jews in the aftermath of the war. Rather than seeking to kill the Gentile Romans as was the ideology and purpose of the nation during the war or now to withdraw from all relationship with the Gentiles as was recommended by the rabbis, Jesus sends them to make the Romans his disciples and to convert them to the worship of the God of Israel. This is a radically different response to the ongoing tension that existed between Jews and the Roman Empire in 1st century Palestine. It is a way of reconciliation and over the next two hundred years, it happened. Rome was eventually converted and became the center of the Christian church as it is today.

This story has been selected as the lection for Trinity Sunday because it is the first explicit example of the Trinitarian confession: "... baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." The position of this story at Trinity Sunday is fully appropriate because the understanding of the unique character of Jesus as one who revealed the character of God drove the formation of the doctrine of the Trinity. This

truth about the character of Jesus is a central dimension of the doctrine of the Trinity. But in contrast to the often highly abstract context of the doctrine of the Trinity in “church speak,” the baptismal formula in Matthew is associated with the commission to form community with Israel’s Roman enemies. And of course, we’ve just celebrated Pentecost, which is also a story of God’s empowering the followers of Jesus with the ability to communicate in all the languages of the world.

Matthew’s story of the great commission is appropriately told to congregations now as a sending forth of disciples to reach out across the boundaries that separate them from their enemies, those who are “the others, on the other side.” Whatever the boundaries—economic class, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, political parties, national identity, and especially persons of other religions—the disciples of Jesus are commissioned to make disciples of “the others” in order to form new communities that embody reconciliation between groups that have been enemies.