

The Great Commission
Matthew 28:16-20
April 16, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church
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There's an old *New Yorker* cartoon. It's a crowded train car, not enough seats for everyone, yet this one man has a whole bench seat to himself. He's wearing a tee shirt that says, "Ask me about my religion!"

We all hate to be trapped by someone whose beliefs are different from our own, who is determined to proselytize us. Have you had that experience? Did you want to run away, perhaps faster than you have ever run before?

When I was in college, I was going through a period of spiritual searching, as most college students do. I sometimes went to the Lutheran campus ministry, sometimes to the Roman Catholic folk mass, and sometimes stayed home on Sunday morning and slept. But when I went home for a weekend visit, I went to church with my grandmother. At the end of the service there was an "altar call." The choir sang "Just as I Am" while the pastor invited sinners to come forward and be saved. I guess not enough people came forward, so the pastor said, "If you know someone here who needs to be saved, go to them now and pray with them, help them come forward."

Oh dear.

Suddenly, a young woman about my age, whom I had never met before, appeared from somewhere and physically pulled me out into the aisle. She said, "Jesus told me you need to be saved." I said, "No, I'm fine." She said, "Are you sure? Jesus wouldn't have told me if it weren't true." It took me several more rounds of this to discourage her.

And I never went back to my grandmother's church again.

We don't want to be that person, right? We don't ever want to impose our faith on someone else. And we certainly don't want to make anyone so uncomfortable that we chase them from the church forever.

Yet here we are at the very end of the Gospel of Matthew, and Jesus gives the disciples – and us – the Great Commission. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," he says. "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 lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The Great Commission. According to Matthew, these are Jesus' last words on earth. We can't ignore them. And still, we don't want to be "that person"; the one who pulls someone into the aisle and embarrasses them to get them saved. We don't want to be the one who sends them running away from the church. We don't want to be the one who sits alone on the train because people know we will talk about our faith. So how are we to understand this great commandment?

Well, the first thing to notice is that baptism comes before teaching. In some churches, including some UCC churches, baptism is sort of like graduation, coming after a lengthy course in the faith. But in this commandment, we see that Jesus says baptize everyone. Baptize the whole world. Then teach them.

And what are we to teach? Remember that this is the Gospel of Matthew, focused almost entirely on Christian ethics, not on matters of theology. This is the gospel in which Jesus says to those who want eternal life, "For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.... Whatever you do to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you do it to me." And this is the gospel in which Jesus says, "If you want eternal life, follow the commandments, the ones about how to treat one another. Don't commit murder. Don't steal. Honor your father and mother. And love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Love one another. Help those who need help. This is what we are to teach.

And how do we teach best? Well, it's not by shaking our fingers at them and giving them a pencil and paper test about what they have learned. You know that. We teach by example. We teach by loving our neighbors as ourselves, by feeding hungry people, by welcoming strangers, by loving God. We can do those things. We do them every day. And when someone asks why we do that, it's okay to say, "Oh, you are interested in feeding hungry people, too? I'm here with my church. We'd be glad for you to join us."

It is okay to say to someone who is hurting, "May I ask my church to pray for you? We are really good pray-ers." It's okay to say to a friend, "Man! That Bible Study group at my church! We had this amazing discussion last week. I'm still thinking about it." It's okay to invite people to the Holly Fair. Who knows what they will learn about us while they are buying apple pies. It is okay to ask a friend to help us put up Advent decorations, or to do the CROP Walk with you. And it is okay to say to a friend who is searching for a place to worship, "You should come to church with me sometime. It's a sweet little church, with a great choir and the best cooks in Belknap County. I know you would feel welcome there." An invitation doesn't have to be forever. We can be the nest that people land in when they are hurting and then fly away again, or we can become the nest that they call home.

We don't need to be put off by the Great Commission, by Jesus' final commandment to the disciples and to us. There is nothing scary here. We just have to be the loving, caring people God calls us to be and welcome all who come.

Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light. We can do this. We already do.

Thanks be to God!