

Disciples of a Trinitarian God

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Matthew 28: 16-20

We're suspicious of authority. That's just part of how we think about the world. It's understandable. Our whole history as a nation was born out of suspicion of authority. You know...taxation without representation... the Boston Tea Party, and the American Revolution. We built suspicion of authority into our Constitution, with the separation of powers. So, it's true, we're suspicious of authority. On the other hand, truth be told, sometimes things feel so out of control in the world that we long for authority. We want someone who knows what needs to be done and who has both the authority and the courage to do it! And so we vacillate back and forth between the two poles.

The thing is, those are really just two sides of the same coin. And that coin is, according to the Gospel of Matthew, a wrong definition of authority. Because the scripture from Matthew for today proclaims that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus! It says that the real power at work in the world is what we see in Jesus. And that's a completely different notion of power, isn't it? Since today is Trinity Sunday, one way of saying this would be to say that the authority of Jesus is the power to produce disciples of a trinitarian God. And that's a very different authority than any other way of thinking about it because it's a very different way of thinking about God.

The disciples knew it. They'd been there when he'd taught them very explicitly about that. It happened, you remember, right after the mother of James and John had come to Jesus and asked that he declare that her two sons would sit at Jesus' right and left hands when he became king. You remember that when the other ten disciples got wind of the request they were angry. "But," says Matthew, "Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers (those with authority over)... the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your *slave*; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'"

And of course, they'd seen him refuse to fight when the authorities came for him. They were there when one of their own had drawn his sword and cut off the high priest's slave's ear and Jesus had said, "Put your sword back in its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." They were there when he was crucified. And now, the resurrection had vindicated *him*. It's a turning on it's head of the meaning of authority and power! Jesus' only agenda was to serve the servants, to be a slave to slaves! The one with all authority and power is using *all* of that power to empower the powerless.

It's no wonder that Matthew is so frank about the eleven disciples there on that mountain in Galilee, saying "they worshiped him; but some doubted." That is, even while they were worshipping, some were doubting. See, they weren't doubting that he was resurrected. We mustn't read it that way, that's our modern scientific worldview question. These were Jews who been taught that God had raised Israel from Egypt. They would have no problem believing that God could raise Jesus from the dead. Their problem would be why God would. Jesus had been executed in shame. He'd lost.

Or, perhaps their doubt is better stated as doubt in their own ability or even commitment to following such a one. Their doubt is much more akin to our own, even as we worship him. It's true, isn't it? We worship him, but we have our doubts about it really. We have our doubts that *his* power is really the power at work in the world. And given that, we have our doubts, therefore, about our ability or commitment to following his way in the world. The authority of Jesus, in that sense is problematic for us. In the face of our individualistic suspicions of

authority, the authority of this Jesus indeed does make huge demands on us. It does indeed demand that we be re-formed and trans-formed after his likeness, that our lives with others take on the outlines of his life.

And at the same time, when we most want an authority that is good and right that just takes over because things seem so out of control, we are disappointed by him. In fact, we are thwarted by his demand that we give up just those fearful selfish needs for our own security and start giving our lives away for others instead. Being a disciple of this One is not something that comes easily! Too often in the church we've turned the Great Commission into a kind of Organizational or Institutional thing. You know, how do you make a disciple? Well, you bring in a new church member. You baptize them, you teach them and you're finished. Voila, a new disciple of Christ! Mission accomplished.

So, we've all been baptized, so we're all disciples of Christ, right? Wrong! We know better. First of all, the word used by Matthew in this scripture involving this command doesn't use disciple as a noun. It's a verb. It's more like, "go and disciplize." It's a lot easier to "make disciples," isn't it? Disciplizing, on the other hand, is a lifelong process. It doesn't end with baptism or confirmation. It involves our remembering the meaning of our baptism our whole lives long. It involves teaching folks continuously to understand anew what being in a relationship with Jesus, following him today, involves. It means the church's mission is not about making people into members of an organization, or making people who add church-going to their list of activities of a good citizen.

Rather, the church's mission is about the on-going task of equipping people for discipleship as participants in new community with a new way of living in and *for* the world. So, it's not easy. How can we really become disciples? We have our doubts even as we worship. We have our doubts about our *commitment* to truly living Jesus' way in and for the world, much less our *ability* to do so. Friends, the only way to do it is just to do it. Christ shows the way to being and to making of each other disciples of a trinitarian God. That may sound like a mouthful. Anytime you start throwing around abstract doctrines like the Trinity, our eyes start to glaze over. But, don't think of the Trinity as an abstract doctrine.

As Will Willimon once said, think of it as our earnest attempt, somehow to put into words what we have experienced of the overflowing love of God. The great 20th and 21st century theologian Jurgen Moltmann has said, "It is only from the perspective of the trinitarian God that we can claim that "God is Love," because love is never alone. Instead, it brings together those who are separate while maintaining their distinct characters." See, without the Christian understanding that God is Love, that is, without Jesus Christ being the beginning and the end of who God is and how we even begin to talk about God, we end up right back with a God who is the single Lord of Heaven who rules everything with absolute sway, just like a temporal ruler would. Just like Jesus characterized the rulers of the Gentiles!

That is not the Christian understanding of God. In fact, Moltmann has called that understanding the Islamization of Christianity. We believe that God is Love, that God is affected by us, that God is in a relationship of mutuality with us, not a ruling relationship. The Gospel of John has it that we are in Jesus, and relate to Jesus in the *same* way that Jesus is in God and relates to the Father. It's mutuality, friendship, love. And so, the way of discipleship, though not easy, is clear. In our baptism, and in the on-going disciplizing, the remembering of the meaning of our baptism that the church does, we are to die to all other allegiances.

We are to be made citizens of the kingdom God is bringing on earth. It's the one Jesus outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. Against all other versions of the good life, whether that's "a chicken in every pot" or gasoline for under \$3.00 a gallon, we are those who, because we know God is everywhere and that God is love, find blessing everywhere, even in being poor of spirit.

We find blessing in our grief and mourning. We find blessing in being meek, in being well-grounded and of the earth. We find blessing even as we long for things to be right in the world, when they aren't. We find blessing in showing mercy to those the world says don't deserve it. We find blessing in having a single eye for God's presence and desires. We find blessing in struggling for peace. We are those who find blessing even when we are being persecuted for all of that.

And because of all that plentitude of blessing, everywhere in our lives, we are free to find ways to resist evil and oppression non-violently like our Lord. We find ways to *love* our enemy, because we know that God does. It's all there. The disciples had heard that sermon just as we have. So, now, all that remains in becoming a disciple of this great trinitarian God is just to do it. That's how we learn...from Christ and from that of him we see in each other, from that of him we experience in our prayer together, our worship and our service. Remember, he's with you always, to the end of the age. With his help, we can do this.

Amen.