

Relational Faith
Matthew 28:16–20; Acts 2:37–47
Saturday, June 4, 2023 (Trinity)

Let us pray: Show us who you are, Lord, and who you are calling *us* to be, in Christ. Amen.

Today is a very special day in the life of the church. It is a day that only comes once a year, and we have been building up to it for the past two weeks (actually *longer* than that). It's not a holy day that you find mentioned anywhere in scripture, but it is significant for us nonetheless. It is a day on which we give thanks to God for the ways in which God has sustained us and given us the strength to endure great trial and tribulation. Today is the end of Horse Show parking.

I give Horse Show parking a hard time because I never have a parking spot when I come to work, and the building is just in disarray for ten days, and it's hard to get anything done because there is just so much going on here. But in reality, there is a lot that I really love about it. I love coming to work in the morning, and there are people sitting outside, and we just stop and talk and catch up for an hour before I even go inside. I love seeing our youth and our adult members out there together, getting to know each other better. When our family volunteered, we would order food and eat dinner with the people working with us; sit outside on these beautiful evenings, talking and laughing.

Meeting the people who *come* to the Horse Show. There was one family that came by and said, "Could we take a look at the sanctuary?" So I brought them inside, and this man starts telling me how he had been *baptized* here by Rev. McMillan, and he and his wife had been *married* here. There was a woman who asked to use the restroom, so as I was showing her where it was, we were talking, and she had driven down from New York State, because she *rode* in the show 40

years ago, but hadn't been back since, and this was a *bucket list* item for her. She was *giddy* with excitement to be there. Things like *that* are just *so cool* and fun to be a part of.

It is easy to focus on the *functional* aspects of the Horse Show – how much money we make, which days are busy and which days are slow, not being able to get any work done, the building being a mess, people parking in the wrong spots so the Mercedes people don't have anywhere to park and so we have to figure out what to do about that. That's all the *functional* stuff. But what makes Horse Show parking so great – the reason we all *really* go out there day after day, year after year – is the *relational* aspect of it. Being together. Catching up with old friends or making new ones. Sitting with people for three hours, and you have nowhere else you have to be, so you get to hear their stories. *That* is what makes this *worth it* each year; not the *functional* but the *relational*.

In the same way, it is easy to focus on the functional aspects of *God* and *faith*. The things that we have to *do*, and what it can do for *us*. Think about it – so often we pray because we *need* something (healing or guidance or peace). That's *functional*. Even earlier in worship, when we talked about God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, those are *functional* aspects of God. We're focusing on what God *does*. But why do you love your family and your friends? Is it because of what they *do*? Or is it because of *who they are*? Why does God love *us*? Because of what we *do*? Or because of *who we are*?

One of the reasons that we celebrate Trinity Sunday is because it reminds us that God is not merely *functional*. God is *relational*. God's very *nature* is one of relationship – three persons (Father, Son, and Spirit) existing together eternally as one. We cannot fully comprehend the mystery of how the Trinity *works*, the *functional* aspects of it. But we can understand *that*. God

is relational. God *exists* in relationship. God wants to be in relationship with *us*. And God wants us to be in relationship with *each other*.

Earlier we heard Jesus' Great Commission to his disciples at the end of Matthew's gospel: "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 everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." And I think that we usually hear that from a *functional* perspective rather than a *relational* perspective. We hear it as a list of things to *do* rather than how we are to *be* with one another. So I want to walk through this real quick and look at how it speaks to us *relationally*.

Make Disciples

Jesus starts by saying, "Go therefore and make disciples." A lot of Christians interpret that as *converting people*. "We are going to find people who are *not* Christians, and we are going to *make* them Christians." (Not *force* them, but lead them to faith in Christ.) And in one sense, that is what Christ calls us to – to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to people who do not know Jesus, so that they *can* know him. We know Jesus, and we should want more and more people to know him, so that *they* can experience the goodness and blessing and love and forgiveness and *new life* that we do.

But it's not just about *converting people*; getting people who are *not* Christians to "make a decision for Christ." Jesus calls us to *make disciples*. The word *disciple* means, "student." The Greek word that Matthew uses here is *matheteusate*, and it means, "to teach." We are called to teach people the way of Jesus Christ; what it means to live our lives in relationship with him.

Not just *make them* Christians – because anyone can *call themselves* a Christian – but *teach them how* to follow Jesus. To *convert* someone is *short term*, and you can do it without really *knowing* them. To *disciple* someone is *long term*. It is *relational*. It is about walking with them over the course of months and years and a lifetime.

It took Jesus three years to make disciples. There was the moment where they decided to *follow* him, but then it took *years* to teach them what that actually looked like, and they *still* didn't fully get it. When Paul first became a Christian, there was the moment where he was blinded on the road to Damascus and came to faith in Jesus Christ. But then he was *taught* over the course of the next three years what it means to follow Christ. He was *discipled*. And that is what Christ calls *us* to do – to *disciple* people; to be in relationship with people and teach them what it means to follow Jesus.

Of All Nations

Jesus goes on to say *of all nations*. “Go therefore and make disciples *of all nations*.” That has been taken throughout history to mean, “convert the whole world to Christianity.” Make everyone in the world a Christian. We've tried that before, with some pretty disastrous results. But Jesus is not talking about *how many* people. He is talking about *which* people. When scripture (Old *and* New Testament) talks about “the nations,” it is talking about *Gentiles*; people who are not Jewish.

Earlier in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is talking to a non-Jewish woman, and he says to her, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And that's how Matthew's gospel *understood* Jesus at first – as the Jewish savior of Israel. The people of *Israel* were God's people, and

everyone else was not. What Jesus says *here* is to go and make disciples *of all nations*. Not just the people of Israel, but Gentiles, too.

What he is saying here is that God's love and blessing is not just reserved for a certain group of people. It is for *everyone*. Whereas earlier Jesus told his disciples to "go nowhere among the Gentiles, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," now he is telling them to go to *all nations*, to Gentiles. God's grace has been extended to *everyone*. Who are we called to be in relationship *with*, to walk the way of Jesus *with*? Not just the people who are like us – whether that refers to where they are *from*, the color of their skin, the language they speak, their gender, their sexuality, their political beliefs, their socio-economic status. We are called to walk the way of Jesus with *all people*. So it's not about "making the whole world Christian." It is about not placing any limits on who God can love and who can follow Jesus.

Baptizing Them and Teaching Them

Jesus says we are to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing them*." Around the year 1800, about 3,000 people who had been taken from West Africa were brought to Jackson Square in New Orleans. There is a port right there, where they were taken off of a ship and led into St. Louis Cathedral, where they were baptized, led out the other door, and then sold into slavery. Is *that* what it means to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them?" Is it just about baptizing people and making them Christians?

The Greek word for baptize here is the word *baptizo*, not to be confused with the word *bapto*, which can also be used. Here's the difference. Around the year 200 B.C., a Greek poet and physician named Nicander wrote a recipe for making pickles. He wrote that, in order to make a pickle, the vegetable should first be dipped (*bapto*) into boiling water and then dipped (*baptizo*)

in vinegar. Both words concern the immersing of vegetables into a liquid. But the first (*bapto*) is momentary, temporary. The second (*baptizo*) takes longer. It's about *soaking* the vegetable in the vinegar, dipping it *repeatedly* or for a longer period of time, so that it produces a permanent change. When you dip it into boiling water (*bapto*), only *part* of it is changed – the outside. But when you dip it in vinegar (*baptizo*), it absorbs it so that the *inside* is changed, too.

Jesus is not just talking about baptism as an external act. He is talking about something that touches every part of our lives and transforms us to the very core. Baptism is not some magical act that changes our very nature as soon as the water hits our head. It is an external sign of an internal transformation. It is about showing the world on the *outside* what God *has done* and *is doing* inside of us. It's not just about saying, "I believe intellectually in Jesus Christ." It is about becoming *one* with Christ. Not just having our *minds* changed, but having our *lives* changed.

It goes back to the notion of *making disciples, teaching*. It's not a *momentary* act. It is a *long term, relational* act. In fact, right after Jesus talks about *baptizing*, he goes back to talking about *teaching*. "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." Not just, "teaching them to *believe* everything that I have commanded you," but, "teaching them to *obey* everything that I have commanded you." And what has Jesus commanded us? To love *God* and to love our *neighbor*. It's not just about *understanding* that or *believing* it. It's about *doing* it.

We are called to teach people how to love God and love our neighbor, and the way that we *teach* that is by *doing it*. And that is *hard*. That takes the rest of our lives to figure out how to do.

And we can't do it by ourselves. We can only love God when we are in *relationship* with God, and we can only love our neighbor when we are in *relationship* with them.

We see what that looks like in the story we read from Acts. This is right after Pentecost. 3,000 people have been baptized, and then it says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (they were disciples) and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (and the parking of cars for the Horse Show)...All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people."

Their baptism effected a serious, concrete change in their lives that took place over a long period of time. It's not just that they were baptized to make more Christians and grow the church. None of this was merely *functional*. It was *relational*. They were baptized, and then they lived their lives together.

The *church* is not merely functional (What do *I* get out of it? What can it do for *me*?). The church is called to be *relational* (How can we love and support each other and live our lives together? How can we walk the way of Jesus *together*? Because none of us can do it alone.) *Why* do we want the church to grow? *Why* do we want to make more Christians? Is it *functional*, so the church can pay our bills and keep going? Or is it because we want to *know* these other people and be in *relationship* with them, and we want *them* to know Jesus and be in relationship with *him*?

God is relational. God wants to be in relationship with *us*, and God wants us to be in relationship with *each other*. *That* is our Great Commission. *That* is what it looks like to live in Christ and in the Spirit. And that's always been our strength here at St. John's, hasn't it? In this area of big churches, we can *know* each other and be in *relationship* with each other. We can share our lives with each other and live life together. We can support and encourage one another, praying *with* and *for* each other, as we strive to follow the way of Jesus together. Don't we want to invite more people to share in this good thing that God has given us? Because in this age when loneliness is an epidemic, what we are all longing for is relationship. Not just knowing people, but *knowing* them and being known *by* them, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.