

**Sermon – 3<sup>rd</sup> Easter**  
**Luke 24:36-49 and I John 3:1-7**  
**April 15, 2018**

**“Still Great After All These Years”**

Today we begin with a test. Of the following Bible verses which is the “Great Commission?” If you wish, you can raise your hand. *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”* Well, if you thought it was the third statement, you’re correct. And you would be among only one of three churchgoers who could identify the Great Commission according to a recent study by the Barna Group, a religious survey organization.

Only one of three. If that surprises you, consider what else the Barna survey revealed – less than half of churchgoers who’d not also been given sample bible verses had ever even heard the term “Great Commission.” Astounding? Well, Martin Luther probably never heard the phrase either, and it’s certain the Apostle Paul never did. It’s only been used since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century actually – attributed to a British missionary to China Hudson Taylor – who I imagine most of you have never heard of!

Matthew 28:18-20 is the most famous version of the Great Commission, but our lesson today from Luke contains a version too. Jesus told his followers *“repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.”* But a question arises these days – who exactly was this commission given to? Does it apply to every Christian? Given that so few of us are aware of what the commission is, did it fall to Jesus’ first followers to *“get the word out or the ball rolling”* about Jesus and for succeeding generations to receive it (or not receive it) for themselves? I can hardly imagine such a reading of Jesus’ command – given all the other verses of scripture that commend or outright command us to be, as Jesus said – *“witnesses.”*

Christianity is known of around the world today – though clearly it is not accepted everywhere it has been preached – not even in Brookfield. So, does the Great Commission apply to every Christian, and if so, how? Does Jesus expect every one of you to be evangelists in some way? Clearly what Jesus told his disciples to do was not an easy thing. It may have been, at the time Jesus commanded it – impossible. Why else would Jesus tell them to more or less sit tight until *“they receive power from on high”* – the Holy Spirit that would come to them on Pentecost.

Jesus told his disciples to share the gospel although what the gospel was precisely was not precisely clear – it had not been nicely summarized in a book. Moreover they were to share it with complete strangers, publically identifying themselves with someone who had just recently been publically executed. What they were called upon to share was something that existed inside of them – to share their personal faith personally. Now do you understand how hard a task they’d received? How could they do it?

We'll, one of them, the disciple John, must have had an idea because he wrote of it in the letters we call the Epistles of John. Yes, Jesus sent his disciples away from familiar surroundings to do what we call "mission." But not everyone can be a missionary – a sent one. John seems to grasp that. In his first epistle, chapter 3 he says; "*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are!*"! OK, we know ourselves. But the "great conundrum" of the "Great Commission" follows. John says the world doesn't know us because it didn't know Jesus. Yet how will they know Jesus if not through us?

The Great Commission – the command to evangelize in Jesus name is not in dispute – at least not from this pulpit. To be Christian is to be the bearer of good news. I know of no other way to describe us than how John did – we are children of God and bear the family likeness of his Son! But that does not answer the question "*how do we share that?*" I suggest we approach the "Great Commission" by way of two other "great" commands.

The first is called the "*Great Commandment*" – I shared it with you earlier. The Great Commandment is... "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.*" Jesus says everything depends on this – love. And love is a hard thing to do, and not just to strangers. Yet how will someone know the love of God in Jesus if they do not see the love of God in us? That's what John is saying in his epistle - albeit in circular language. If someone for whatever reason doesn't know Jesus they might if they get to know us.

Now the second has been called the "*Great Criteria*" of Jesus and is also a verse I shared with you earlier. "*Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.*" Does the "Great Commission" to go and be witnesses apply to you? On the scale we've come to associate that verse of the bible with – the task of world evangelization begun on the day of Pentecost – no, because not all can go, and yes, because mission is to the church what heat is to fire – they are inseparable. It's a hard thing to do – share your faith personally, but no harder and with no less power from on high then 2000 years ago.

What of anything Jesus commanded is particularly easy for you to do? Love even your enemy, as the *Great Commandment* says, doing things like turning the other cheek and even rejoicing when people say false things about you? Being pure of heart? Is it easy to love others as you love yourself – as the *Great Criteria* suggests – your checkbook or credit card statement might give an answer to that one - and so see in the "*least of these*" the Savior who gave every last breath to save you? God sent Jesus to do precisely that – love one such as you, and he surely does. Jesus is the heart of God in human form – Jesus "did" what he was. Jesus was sent from God and so we from Jesus – commissioned to do what we are – his sons and daughters – the heart of Jesus beating in us. That's what makes it such a great commission to live under, and to live out. AMEN