

A Visual Discipleship
Matthew 28:16-20
Sermon by Dan Schrock
January 28, 2018

*¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember [this should be translated *and behold*], I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (NRSV)*

I

On September 19, 2016, our former pastor, Marilyn Rudy-Froese, began a three-and-a-half month sabbatical. None of us knew it at the time, but that day marked the beginning of seven pastoral transitions in our congregation. The first pastoral transition was receiving Ron Guengerich, who worked as a substitute pastor while Marilyn was on sabbatical. When Marilyn returned from that sabbatical and Ron left, we all thought she would continue to be one of our pastors for years to come. It was not to be, because we soon realized that visa issues might force her to return to Ontario—and sure enough, within six months she was gone, marking the second pastoral transition.

In June of last year, the third pastoral transition occurred when my level of employment shifted from 85% to 50%. In August, Joanne arrived as our pastor of faith formation, marking the fourth transition; and shortly afterward Paula came as our transitional consultant, making number five. Her work here concludes on Wednesday. Meanwhile, at the beginning of this month Bob and Mag began as our interim pastors, making the sixth transition. The seventh—and hopefully last—transition will happen at some unknown point in the future when our pastoral search committee presents us with their best candidate and we vote to call her or him as a full-time pastor. All this means that so far, we’ve been in transition for a year and a third. For all any of us knows, this transitional period may end up lasting about two years.

Pastoral transitions like these can be hard on a congregation, but I think we are weathering them well. Our Spiritual Leadership Team is providing a steady hand. Our

commissions and committees are functioning well. Our giving continues to be generous. We're still able to laugh with each other.

Moreover, our core documents continue to give us a sense of direction in uncertain times. Our motto calls us to "live Christ's loving, caring, healing presence in the world." We have a Mission Statement that hangs on the wall in the Fellowship Hall. Our Vision Statement, built around the words "intimacy" and "invitation," urges us to strengthen our relationship with God and each other, and to be a hospitable congregation. Our current congregational goal is to "To help each person at Berkey engage Christ's ministry in the Goshen community, both inter-generationally and inter-culturally." We're a strong, healthy congregation, and we will be just fine as we go through our remaining transitions.

II

If you look through the core statements that our congregation has crafted over the last twenty years, you'll see that Christ is at the center of them. Again and again, we keep returning to Christ. Of course this is just what you'd expect a bunch of Anabaptist-Mennonites to do: to be endlessly fascinated with Jesus Christ. It's in our spiritual DNA to focus on discipleship.

However, there is one aspect of discipleship that we rarely pay attention to, and we can find it in our text from Matthew 28. These final five verses of Matthew are a Mennonite favorite, because they succinctly capture some of the things we hold dear: the lordship of Jesus over everything in heaven and earth, a missional call to go out into the world, an encouragement to baptize people using a Trinitarian formula, and a charge to teach in such a way that people obey Jesus. With all of these we are already familiar.

But there is another crucial part of this text that we Mennonites—and a lot of other Christians—have been more or less ignoring. To be fair, it's not entirely our fault, because our modern English translations have disguised it. I refer to the last sentence, verse 20, which in the NRSV reads, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The problem is the choice of that word *remember*. The Greek word there is *idou*,

which should be translated as *behold*. Ever since the Wycliffe Bible appeared in the late 1300s, most English translations until the late 1900s have chosen the word *behold* to translate *idou*, and it remains the best word even today. A proper translation of this final sentence would then be, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

At first, this word *behold* might not seem like a big deal, until you consider four things.

1. The Greek word *idou*, plus *hinneh*, the parallel word in Hebrew, appear in the Bible over 1,300 times. You would think that a word which appears that many times in scripture would not only be properly translated, but would also receive a significant amount of attention by biblical scholars and ordinary folks who study the Bible. Sadly, neither is the case.
2. The act or process of beholding is a central idea in numerous biblical texts. For example, in the year that King Uzziah died, the prophet Isaiah beheld the Lord sitting on a throne (Is. 61-5). In the prologue of John, which is a carefully composed theological introduction to the gospel, the author triumphantly proclaims that we have beheld the glory of the Word made flesh (Jn. 1:14). In Acts 7, a dying Stephen gazes into heaven and beholds the glory of God and Jesus (vv. 54-56). Then there’s the entire book of Revelation, which we could understand as a long, sustained, and intense experience of beholding.
3. *Behold* means something very different than *remember*, which the NRSV chooses to use. *Remember* is a word that refers to the past. You remember the day 16 years ago when your mother died. You remember what your first job was like back when you were 22, and so on. Remembering recalls something over and done with, maybe from a long time ago. By contrast, the word *behold* is about the present. It’s something you do now and continue to do in the future. It suggests an active, ongoing process of engaging something or something. That word *remember* is poor choice. It

completely misses the meaning of *idou*, which is properly translated as *behold*.

4. In this passage, Jesus gives five commands to his disciples: to go, make disciples, baptize, teach, and behold. All five of these verbs carry equal weight. The command to behold the presence of Jesus with us is just as important as the command to go, to make disciples, to baptize, and to teach. They are a package deal.

III

Perhaps you are thinking to yourself that this is all very well and good, but practically speaking, how do we behold Jesus? One simple way to put beholding into practice is to gaze steadily at an image of Jesus. Perhaps you have such an image already in your home. If not, you can search the internet for a high-resolution image of Jesus that appeals to you, then print it out on a piece of paper. You can sit, stand, or lie down as you do this, but choose a position you can comfortably maintain for however long you want to do this—5, 10, or 15 minutes. Release your concerns and worries to Jesus, so you are more inwardly free. Then behold, or gaze at the image of Jesus. It usually works best to choose a focal point of the image—maybe Jesus’ eyes, mouth, hand, or whatever. In love, open yourself to Jesus. Open your heart, your mind, your emotions, your body to him.

Now at some point while doing this, you will get distracted. This is normal and it happens to all of us. When you become distracted, gently refocus on the image of Jesus. You might get distracted a dozen times. That’s fine. Each time gently refocus.

Beholding is a form of prayer, a prayer without words. Obviously the image of Jesus that you use is not Jesus himself. Instead the image is just a doorway to the reality of Jesus which lies behind and beyond the image. It’s good too to keep in mind that prayer, whether this prayer or any other, is never for its own sake. The point is to develop greater intimacy with Jesus, so that you can collaborate with him in the work he wants to do in the world.

IV

The last thing Jesus says to his disciples is “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” And there the gospel of Matthew abruptly ends, with Jesus and the disciples hanging out together on a mountain in Galilee. The question we might want to ask is, what happened next? Where did Jesus go? The gospel of Luke ends with Jesus being carried up into the sky, but nothing like that happens here in Matthew. So where does Jesus go?

The implication is that he doesn’t go anywhere. He’s still here, hanging out with Christians around the world who are the spiritual descendants of those original disciples. Therefore wherever we go, we can behold Jesus. Whenever we make disciples, baptize, or teach, we can behold the risen Jesus who’s never left us. We can behold him through the faces of other Christians. We behold him in the stories of scripture. We can even behold him in the plants and animals and processes of creation, for by him and through him and in him and for him all things were made (cf. Jn 1:3; Col 3:16; Rom 11.36).

So receive Jesus’ command to behold him. It’s a kind of visual discipleship.