

This Little Light of Mine
1 Peter 2:4-12, Matthew 28:16-20
Sermon by Joanne Gallardo
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Summary: The church does not exist for itself. Rather, Jesus invites his disciples “to pick up their crosses” (give of themselves on behalf of others) and to follow him. In Matthew 28, Jesus sent his disciples out “to make disciples of all nations.”

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

The Great Commission is one of the most challenging direct commands from Jesus in the New Testament. If you thought loving your neighbor as yourself was difficult, if you thought loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength was difficult, if you thought not casting the first stone was difficult, Jesus’ final command here proves to be quite the loaded task.

Make disciples of all nations. This question can be a line in the sand for some. Liberal Protestants might say that to carry out this direct order from Jesus is unethical. It’s colonialism at its finest. Who are we to push our system of belief onto others? In a way, folks might view that as being ashamed of the Gospel.

For folks from an Evangelical background, this commandment surpasses all others as Jesus’ greatest. We are to go far and wide and convert people to Jesus. Missionaries used to be told that they need to present the Gospel of Jesus 8x in order for people to listen and understand. Then we wonder why the church has problems with understanding consent.

Where do Mennonites fall? Theologian Stanley Hauerwas said at one point, “Mennonites are great! I just wish they weren’t ashamed of Jesus.” In addition to that, Mennonites have a long-standing tradition of sending missionaries and service workers all around the world, doing relief work

and sharing the Gospel of Jesus. I suppose you could say that Mennonites span the spectrum of Evangelical thought.

Alan Kreider, long time AMBS professor and former missionary, once described in a class I took that a missionary is someone who visits other cultures and eats their food. I came into that class very anti-Evangelical. I grew up in a church that prided itself on “soul-winning” and “saving the lost.” Coming of age, I found that many people didn’t believe in Jesus and weren’t “lost.” Why are missionaries necessary, I thought? Then Alan said those words. A missionary is someone who visits other cultures and eats their food.

That sounds simple enough. Visit people, and eat food? I could get on board with that. I didn’t understand that something bigger was going on. Alan Kreider was “evangelizing” the concept of evangelism to me. He didn’t force the concept on to me, nor did he diminish the work missionaries did. He simply put the concept into words I hadn’t before heard.

This had me questioning my beliefs. Is that all a missionary does? As I formed a relationship with Alan in the class I came to understand that there was so much more than eating food and visiting people that comes with being a missionary. I came to understand that former missionaries started off their day by thanking God for another day, asking God what God is doing, and how we can help. Alan wasn’t pushy, didn’t force his beliefs onto me, in fact, he was open to questions, push back, and even some anger from some. He remained steadfast and resolute, but also kind. He modeled Christian behavior to us, a group that had, for the most part, already “found” Jesus because that’s what we were doing in seminary learning to be pastors. But through relationship, kindness, understanding, and truth telling, I came to the understanding that I could be an evangelist and in fact, in many ways, I was an evangelist.

I think folks at Berkey are more “evangelical” than we give ourselves credit for. I think about our efforts with raising money for MCC. We are clear that the money we raise goes to help people in need in other countries. Our work in the community has our label as a faith community written all over it. The acts of kindness we do for one another are out of Christian love, and in a way, we witness to each other.

But I still can't shake Hauerwas' words out of my head, about Mennonites being ashamed of Jesus. While I don't think that's the case, I wonder if we are maybe not very clear or sometimes secretive about who we are and whose we are. Are we avoiding saying the name of "Jesus" in our everyday lives? Do we want to share what gives us comfort, peace, encouragement, but we don't say it so we're not seen as "evangelical?"

I totally get this sentiment. The word "evangelical" has come to mean certain things that actually have little to do with Jesus. It can mean a certain political party with right wing proclivities. It can mean certain stands on social justice issues. It can mean painting a version of Jesus that we don't recognize or know.

But what I want to emphasize in this sermon is that no one group has a claim to the word "evangelical." It's not owned by a political party, it's not owned by a certain stance, or a certain type of person. Nor are people who call themselves "evangelical" are our "opposite." Nor are people who call themselves "evangelical" not in need of evangelism themselves.

That's right. Maybe some of the people who need Jesus the most are evangelicals, people both like us and not like us.. Maybe we need to do more learning about other cultures, and as Alan Kreider would say, eat their food. Maybe we need to be open to being evangelized ourselves.

I also want to draw in our scripture passage that says when Jesus appeared on the mountain, some doubted. This was a group of Jesus followers. These people were disciples, and some doubted. No matter what "label" you give your faith, regardless of whether you think in labels or not, there is doubt. There is questioning. And maybe part of this "making disciples of all nations" includes being honest about our doubt. To say that as Jesus followers we are not immune to doubt. Doubt doesn't exclude us from being a part of the mission and vision of Jesus. It also humbles us in such a way that maybe we can be more open to receiving the words of Christ, the good news of the Gospel, from others. Maybe this puts us in a place where we are open to receiving the evangelizing of our siblings in Christ.

I am coming to the understanding that we all possibly need to be a little more honest with ourselves regarding the great commission, Jesus, and what we need spiritually. We need our Christian siblings who do "soul-

winning,” who are bold, who have life changing stories of once being a lost person but finding belonging and hope in Christ. We also need folks who are attuned to the faith and needs of others, who understand that there is a need for sensitivity to where there may be hurt or disillusionment with the Church, who can model a different approach of proclaiming the good news.

And as much as the “world out there” needs the good news of Jesus, so do we. So does that person joining you on Zoom, your Christian neighbor, members of your family, you yourself. What does it mean to you to set aside some of your preconceived notions of Christ, faith, and the Gospel? What does it mean to allow yourself to be changed by others’ life example and words, and deeds? What does it mean to hear the Good News and respond?

I think our work of “making disciples of all nations” is threefold. One, there is ourselves, which I’ve already alluded to. Being open to the witnessing of others, being open to having our minds changed, being open to being evangelized. We need to be open to our siblings in Christ who call us to repentance, to transformation, to living a life of telling others the Good News.

Second, there is our church community. Even though we are a people of the Gospel, we are called, as is in our church statement, to be a loving, healing presence. That can start with ourselves and our own church. Who among us is in need of Good News? Who among us needs to feel God’s presence now more than ever? Who needs to hear the whys and hows of our faith in Jesus, the way we came to understand Christ as our hope and salvation? If we can’t openly share our faith with one another, how can we share it in the world?

Which brings us to the world. I view the world both as our neighbors across the street and around the world. Is our life a witness to them? Are we open to share our faith? Can we share how we’ve been rescued by love? I know that we as Mennonites are good at deeds, of acts of service. We are good at having our life and actions be a witness. That is great, and amazing, and we have done many good things around the world and have improved the lives of so many, folks that are children of God. But are we unashamed of what calls us to this work? Can we share, in words, in conversation, what brings us to church each Sunday, what calls us to love those with whom we

disagree, to unabashedly call on the name of Christ to find the lost and heal the sick in mind, body, and soul? Can we share, in both words and actions, that God so loved the world that God sent Jesus to transform us and care for us, take away our sins and promise us life everlasting?

This is a tall order. Taking up our cross, realizing we don't exist just for ourselves, as a church and as a people, and sharing what it is that gives us life and hope is a lifelong journey. And we won't always get it right. We'll make mistakes. We'll say the wrong thing, or do the wrong thing, or miss opportunities in regards to our faith. The one who calls us does not ask that we be perfect, only that we be faithful. And if we call on God, we will be heard. If we call on God for strength to carry out this great commission, it will be granted to us.

In our words and deeds this week, may our lives point to the One who bids us "come." May our words speak the story of Love. May our deeds show others who we call "Christ" and "Lord." Amen.