

Wesley United Methodist Church  
Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
June 11, 2017  
Confirmation Sunday  
Title: Five Point Plan  
Text: Matthew 28:16-20

Today as seven of our youth come to confirm and profess their faith and become full members of our congregation, it is tempting to focus on them, and I do hope that they will pay attention to what I want to share with you this morning, but that doesn't give everyone else permission to tune out. This is a day when all of us are invited to examine our faith and the way that we are living it out in our daily lives. It is a day when we are invited to celebrate our faith and at the same time to look to the challenges and the next steps in our faith journey.

Two weeks ago, I preached on the Acts passage that we call the Ascension. It is Jesus farewell to his disciples as he prepared to leave them and return to heaven. At that time, Jesus essentially gave them their marching orders for how to carry on after he had left them. Today, we have Matthew's version of this and we call this passage of Matthew's the "Great Commission."

Three very important things happened in Matthew account. First, he assured them of his power. Second, he gave them a commission – or marching orders, a plan for moving ahead. Third – and finally, he assured them of his presence with them always – even though they would no longer see him as they had in the past.

These three things are equally as important to our youth today, and also to each one of us. We need to be reminded of the power that Jesus had and how this makes a difference in our lives. We need to be reminded and challenged to continue to live out the commission that Jesus gave to

each of his followers. Finally, we need to be reminded that this is not some huge task given to us alone but that not only are we all in this together but even more importantly, Jesus is with us in the middle of this.

Before I get into that too much, I want to point out one of the things that I think is really important about this passage and about our faith journey. Matthew says, that the eleven remaining disciples went to Galilee where Jesus had told them to meet. “When they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted.” Matthew doesn’t tell us what it is that they doubted, but I think it is important that he mentioned their doubt.

These eleven men had spent about three years with Jesus, learning from him, traveling with him, seeing him killed and seeing him after the resurrection. It is easy for us to think that they should be confident in who Jesus was and what was happening. But they were normal men, people just like us, and Matthew thinks it is important for us to know that they had some doubts.

That is always comforting to me, because I think that if we are really honest with ourselves, we will have to admit that there are times when we have doubts about many things and that includes things related to God. I think that the more we grow in our faith, the more questions we may discover and while we may have more certainty and more faith, we may also have more doubts. I want our youth to hear that today and I want all of us to hear that. When they take their vows in a few minutes, they are not saying that they believe everything with absolute certainty and that there are no doubts or questions in their minds about anything. It would simply be untrue for them to say that, and I’m guessing that it would be untrue for the rest of us. I know that while my faith is strong and I trust God and seek

every day to be faithful, there are always still questions or doubts that arise in my life – and I think that is normal; it is part of being human.

Jesus didn't pick perfect people to be his disciples and he still doesn't. He invites normal people with both strengths and weaknesses, faith and doubt, answers and questions; and he invites us to be part of the great cloud of witnesses seeking to be faithful in the best ways that we know how.

The power to be faithful, to walk this path, does not come from ourselves; it comes from God. It comes from Jesus' presence. It comes from the Holy Spirit, the comforter, guiding us. It also comes from the community of faith – of being part of a larger group of people who together are seeking to be faithful one day at a time and sometimes one step at a time. Jesus assured them, and us, of his power.

Jesus then gave them and us a commission, or marching orders, directions about what we are to do and how we are to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. That commission is something that I would call the five-point plan.

The first point is simply, "Go." We are not to stay cloistered away from the world. We are not to hide out in our churches or in our homes. We live in the real world and that is where we are to go. We are to take our faith with us to school, to work, to the store, on our vacations, wherever we go. We are to be on the move and we are to Go out into the world.

Out in the world we are to do several things, and the first is to make disciples. To be a disciple simply means to be a follower, a student. Making disciples is simply about sharing what we have learned and doing so in loving ways. It doesn't mean standing on the street corner yelling at people. It doesn't mean being obnoxious and trying to convert people. It

simply means in whatever way seems natural to share what we have learned and experienced. It means to listen to others with our heart, creating a safe space for people to talk, to share what is on their mind. You may find that when you listen carefully, you will be deeply blessed by someone else.

One of the commentators I read this week, said that “Disciples are students – like interns, watching, practicing, under supervision, asking questions, making mistakes, and learning from them.”<sup>i</sup> He said that we are meant to make students of Christ, to put people into internships, into a life-long learning process.

That means that each of us, no matter how long we have considered ourselves to be a follower, or disciple of Christ is still an intern, still part of a life-long learning process. Confirmation is not graduation, it does not mean that we have learned all that we need to know.

There is a story told about three pastors; two of whom were complaining about a problem they had at their church with bats that were wreaking havoc in their buildings. They told of having tried many different ways to get rid of the bats but they had not been successful. The third pastor responded that he had solved the problem. He said, “I baptized them and confirmed them and haven’t seen them since.”

Confirmation is not graduation, it is more like enrolling in a learning program that lasts for the rest of our lives. Our youth will learn from us and we will learn from them. We are always learning from each other if we are willing to be open to that possibility.

We are to go, and make disciples – invite people to join us in being students of Christ. As we just sang, we are to “share what we have learned

and with love we are to invite them to renew the hope for which they've yearned."<sup>ii</sup>

By the way, we are to make disciples not only of the people who are already in the church, but of "all nations" – in other words we are to be willing to share our faith with people who are not like us, people who come from different perspectives, people with whom we might not normally talk. God's word isn't for a select group of insiders, a closed group, but it is for all people.

So, we are to go, and make disciples of all nations, and then when they have heard about Jesus, when they are ready to make that commitment, we are to baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In the United Methodist Church and in many other churches children are often baptized as infants or young children as each of the youth to be confirmed today were. In that case, the parents are making a commitment to teach their children about Jesus, to raise them in the faith, until the time when they are ready and able to make that commitment for themselves. That is what our seven young people will be doing today – confirming the promises made by their parents on their behalf at their baptism.

So we, along with the disciples are to Go, make disciples, and baptize. But it doesn't stop there. The fourth part of the plan is to teach them to obey all that Jesus has taught. It only makes sense, doesn't it, that if we are to be disciples – learners, students – that we not only need to be taught, but we also need to teach. It is, as I have said, a life-long process of learning, of being taught, and of teaching ourselves and others what Jesus taught us, what he has commanded us to do. It begins with that first great commandment, to Love God with all our heart, our soul, our mind, our

strength, - in other words, to love God with every ounce of our being – and then to love our neighbor as ourselves. It can be summed up quite nicely; but the actual living out of it can be difficult and takes a lifetime. We may think we are doing okay with that, then suddenly, we become aware of a way in which we have not been loving God, or loving our neighbor and we have something else that we have learned and need to practice.

All of this may seem overwhelming. I imagine that it did to the first disciples and they had the benefit of having lived with Jesus for three years. But the last part of the five-point plan is what makes it possible and is what gives us hope and strength.

The last part of that five-point plan is to remember. We are to Go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. But we are also to remember. We are to remember our sacred history. We are to remember how God has worked throughout history so that we can look and see how God is working today. We are to remember the times when God has been faithful to us, when God has helped and sustained us. We are to remember when the church – the Body of Christ – has rallied around us when life was difficult and they helped to strengthen us and help us to know we were not alone.

Most importantly, we are to remember as Jesus told his disciples, that he was given all authority in heaven and on earth and that he has promised his disciples and us, that He is with us always even to the end of the age. There is nothing in our lives that can separate us from God's presence. There is nothing that can move us outside of God's love.

We have the promise that we are never alone and that Jesus is always with us, no matter what may happen. It is this promise that gives us the hope, the strength, the courage, the enthusiasm, to take the next steps whatever they may be to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

I have had the joy of watching the children in the nursery school prepare for their end of the year program this week. Since I will be at Annual Conference and not able to attend, I've been sneaking into their rehearsals. They are singing a song, that some of us learned as children, and that I think is good for all of us to be reminded of and to remember.

The words go like this, "I am a promise. I am a possibility. I am a promise with a capital "P". I am a great big bundle of potentiality. And I am learning to hear God's voice, and I am trying to make the right choice. I am a promise to be, anything God wants me to be."

This is true for each and every one of us, regardless of whether we are three, or thirteen, 23, 73, or 103.

Each of us is a promise, a possibility, a great big bundle of potentiality. Every day, we are learning to hear God's voice. Every day we are trying to make the right choice, and every day we have the promise and potential to be anything that God wants us to be. So let us, Go and make disciples of all nations. Let us baptize them and teach them to obey all that Jesus taught us and most importantly, let us remember that Jesus is with all of us always, to the end of the age.

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<sup>i</sup> Feasting on the Word, Pastoral Perspective.

<sup>ii</sup> Garland, F. Richard "Go Now Into the World" Hymn published by The General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church.