

“The Great Omissions!”

June 4, 2023

Scripture: Matthew 28:5-10 & 16-20

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."

So, they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "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, until the end."

Sermon — “The Great Omissions!”

Last week I preached about the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost which also ends the Season of Easter. We embark now on a new Church Season that we call, well, Pentecost, a season also known as the season of the church. Just as the Spirit blew through that little rag-tag group of Jesus’ demoralized followers, the people of God once again must be revived to go beyond our fears and get over our disappointments and begin the actual doing of what it means to follow Jesus.

And while the gospel writer, Luke, makes a great deal about the arrival of the Holy Spirit in Acts, Matthew says nothing at all, as he skips on ahead to the Ascension of the risen Christ. Now the passage we just read is commonly called, “The Great Commission” but simply in order to be a bit contrary this morning I will instead entitle my message, “The Great Omissions!” I’m sure you will get the point I as we go along.

Other than perhaps the “Sermon on the Mount” which is also found in Matthew there is probably no other passage more central to the Anabaptist movement that we Mennonites belong to. Historically, for Anabaptists, it is in the “Sermon on the Mount,” that Jesus’ clearly rejected the use of violence, advocated care for the poor and called for the necessity to love everyone - even one’s enemy! The “Great Commission” then is a clear and concise and final challenge to his followers to “get busy!” doing what he both taught and did.

Unfortunately, so much of Christian church history has often failed to follow those succinct and yet crucial instructions. So allow me this morning to address some of those misunderstanding.

First, we are to help create more followers or specifically more disciples of Jesus whom we follow. Now the simplest definition of the word, Christian, that I heard long ago is, "Little Christs!" In essence we follow Jesus by becoming little Jesuses and so we are simply trying to duplicate ourselves. Simple enough, but actually quite hard and a bit scary as well.

This is very different from evangelizing and trying to convert others. It is also the opposite of trying to force others to act and believe as we do through coercion and certainly not legislated morality. Jesus does not command us to evangelize or coerce but to disciple. It is not wrong for us to evangelize, but the English word "evangelism" has as its root in the New Testament Greek word that is translated simply as, "the good news!"

Evangelism, then, is merely "telling the good news," which for poor and oppressed people in 1st century Palestine would have meant things like more food and less injustice. Most early Anabaptists would not have had a problem with that more simple understanding of evangelism. And as they shared their food and their lives with the poor, they soon found themselves at odds with state-sponsored Churches that had become corrupted by both wealth and power.

In Matthew 28 Jesus was making it clear that our job is not finished when folks simply convert or "hear the good news." That is actually when our work begins as we seek to assist others as they become true followers of Jesus!

Secondly, we start baptizing those who want to follow Jesus. Of course, for any group named Anabaptist, this would make sense. The very term, after all, means "re-baptizer" since folks back then were actually being baptized again as adults. The term originated in the courtrooms of early 16th century Europe as an accusation of those who had committed a crime against the state. Punishment for that crime included: arrest, prison, confiscation of property, slavery, exile, torture and even death.

Within Anabaptist communities, adult baptism was a means of telling the faith community both of one's intention to follow Jesus and their willingness to be disciplined by that community. Curiously omitted in Jesus' instructions was both the manner and timing of such baptisms. In the early church it could take years of instruction before a convert was baptized. We are also not told how many times one can or should be baptized nor that the only medium that can be used is water.

Early Anabaptist actually identified three forms of baptisms: by water, spirit and fire! Baptism of the spirit and fire we do not have control over and it is the Holy Spirit that chooses when and how, and our job is to remain faithful, willing and open. The Baptism of fire or sometimes called martyrdom, arose from the fact that many of the first Anabaptist were indeed arrested, tortured and burned at the stake.

Each generation cannot control if and when the governing authorities might decide to persecute us, but we can choose to remain faithful to Jesus and not be surprised if we suffer unjustly like he did!

Again, the how was not spelled out and so whether water is sprinkled or poured, or whether the follower is dunked once forward or multiple times backwards it does not really matter. Sadly, however, only the ritual of communion seems to have divided Jesus' followers more than his instruction to baptize. Seems to me as if some very important things, somehow, managed to get omitted over the years.

Third, our discipleship is mutual - we really do need each other's help in order to follow Jesus' sometimes difficult instructions. This means that Anabaptist take on what modern educational theory calls, "life-long learning."

Anabaptists would also point out that for us to truly follow Jesus, we must follow in both word and deed. This would be what modern educational theory calls "experiential learning."

Mennonites have certainly struggled over the past 400 years or so by creating unholy hierarchies and authoritarian structures. But the ideal has always remained, that we are called to mutual discipleship where all of us teach, support and hold one another accountable.

And mutual discipleship must always follow Jesus' example and can never use coercion or any kind of violence. Instruction in the way of Jesus, like his healing works, must be a gift freely shared with any who choose to listen! Participation in the community of those seeking to follow Jesus must be fully voluntary and unlike many of the baptisms throughout Christian history never forced at the tip of sword or gun barrel.

Fourth, and finally, we must teach the full Jesus! Specifically, Jesus states according to Matthew, "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you...." Perhaps this last one is implied, but I also think that this is one of the biggest omissions in Jesus' "Great Commission!"

True followers take the teachings and life of Jesus seriously. For Anabaptists, we do this through study and discernment within the larger community. Of course, like our early Anabaptist fore - parents, we too would likely agree that Jesus was pretty clear on at least on a couple of things. Oh, I don't know, maybe things like necessity of caring for the poor, wanting justice for everyone, living a simple lifestyle, the refusal to engage in violence and trying to love everyone, even those folks who are actually "out to get us."

To do any of those things well certainly requires the support and encouragement of a loving community. Other things that are perhaps less consistent or clear, we then commit ourselves to struggle within community to understand.

Which leads me to another specific bone I have to pick with many American Christians who seem to focus in on and spend a great deal of time and energy on trying to condemn certain kinds of folks and certain kinds of moral behaviors that Jesus actually said little, if anything, about.

This leads to another great omission, and that is the failure to understand that when we do teach the complete Jesus, like Jesus, we are likely to suffer because of our choices to follow him. Early Anabaptists not only believed this but they also experienced it personally and thus felt it necessary to tell others to expect the same.

This is certainly not what is considered by many church growth experts as “attractional outreach,” or more simply put, get folks in the door by any means necessary (rock bands, coffee bars, hip young preachers with “man patches” on their chin and who sit on a bar stool). Keep church an entertaining, happy, upbeat and triumphal as possible, and above all, avoid politics, especially the more revolutionary kind! Now, none of those things are necessarily wrong, but if that is all that there is, then it is incomplete!

The full Jesus must include the Jesus who suffered with the oppressed, lived in contact with the poor, who challenged unjust social structures and was willing to die for what he believed in. That full message will likely not attract huge crowds here in America.

But following and loving that Jesus is reciprocated by an eternally loving, eternally transcendent God who will never forsake us. A God who is with us through it all, even when we suffer or feel rejected or are punished by the world around us. This ain't no “high-fiving Jesus” with whom we can have a “bromance,” but a Jesus who stoops as low as he needs to, in order to scoop us out of the gutters we continually seem to get ourselves into!

And, according to Matthew, he is with us not just in our conversion, or baptism, but he is with us until the very end! “To infinity and beyond!” as the infamous Buzz Lightyear would say. And yes, I do understand and am intentionally being oxymoronical! Always and forever, and each and every moment, the very Triune God is present with us!

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