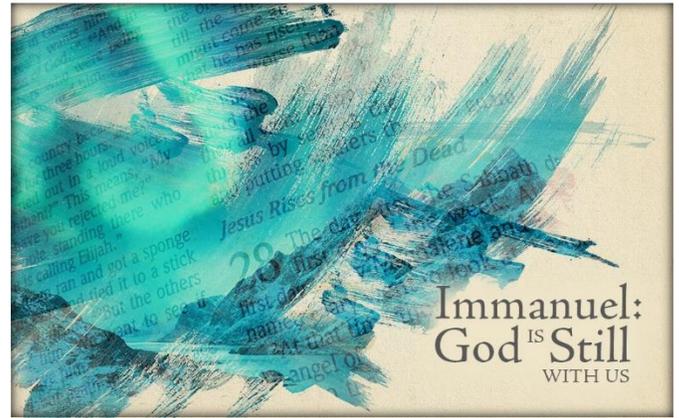


“Immanuel: God is Still with Us”

Matthew 28:16–20; Mark 9:14–24

We’ve read the Gospel of Matthew; are we ready to live it?

And so we come to the end of this ten-week series drawn from the Gospel of Matthew. I think Wright and Bird are spot on in seeing that “Matthew is quite clearly offering a manual for discipleship, for a church living as a minority group in a hostile majority culture.¹ Thus, the question for us is what sort of disciples will we be. Jesus has summoned us to make disciples ourselves, baptizing them and teaching them.



Summons?

Summons is a bit of a harsh word. It seems rather demanding. The Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary says “*summon* implies the exercise of authority.” I guess that is the rub. But it is also the point. Jesus does summon us, his disciples, with all the authority of a Lord and Master. Take a close look at the well-known passage from Matthew 28.

It is a summons, not a request. Jesus is not asking nicely; he is not asking at all. Further, this is not a summons of a few or only of the ordained or only of those who work for a church . . . it is a summons of all those who claim to be followers of Jesus. Plainly put, we cannot claim to be disciples of the Christ and ignore the summons.

To what are we summoned? The heart of this summons can be found right here, in what we call the Great Commission from Matthew 28. Jesus summons us to be his helpers. We, his disciples, are to go out into the world and make more disciples, baptizing and teaching. Sometimes “mission statements” can get pretty long and abstract. Ours is neither. We are to make disciples. Indeed, the stated mission of the UMC is exactly that: “to make disciples for Jesus Christ.” In the New Testament, “disciple” translates the Greek word, *mathete*, which connotes a master and pupil relationship. A disciple, a *mathete*, is an apprentice or student, more than merely a follower or fan. The *mathete* seeks to learn from and emulate the Master. In the Great Commission, the Master summons his disciples to help in the Master’s work.

It isn’t hard to understand why we might think that Jesus is speaking to someone other than to us. He says we are to make disciples by *baptizing* and *teaching* (v. 19 & 20). In all likelihood, you have never baptized someone. But it would be a profound mistake to think that Jesus is speaking only to me or any other ordained clergy.

Baptism signifies our entrance into the body of Christ. I may be the one who lays on hands, but all of us are summoned by Jesus to do all we can to build up the community of God’s people. It is we who invite. It is we who welcome. It is we who promote harmony and unity in the body. We are not spectators at baptisms, we are participants. This is the whole point of the baptismal response: “Now it is our joy to welcome.” When Jesus tells his disciples to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” it is a summons meant for us all.

Teaching

Jesus’ summons to teach may seem more straightforward than his summons to baptize, but even here we can get off track. We can fail to grasp that we teach others in everything we say and do. The teaching Jesus speaks of is far more than the teaching that goes on in a classroom, as important as that is. If others are going to learn

¹ N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*, (London; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic; SPCK, 2019), 589.

the faith-obedience of a disciple, it is going to be through us, through Jesus' helpers . . . through you and me, just as we learn from each other.

Imagine a person who enters our faith community with no prior understanding of Jesus or of our faith, or worse, someone who thinks they understand, but do not. If they are to begin learning what it truly means to be a disciple, they are going to learn it through us . . . and we will learn through them. Yes, thankfully, God's Holy Spirit leads and guides us all in this. But still, God wants to work with us, not in spite of us nor without us. We are so used to needing Jesus that we can fail to see Jesus' own "Help Wanted" sign.

Reaching Out

To reiterate, a command both simple and direct: Jesus tells his disciples to go to "all nations," – yes, everyone, everywhere – making disciples of Jesus, baptizing them, and teaching them the path to obedience. The Christian church has always understood this commission to be our own; and it is not limited to the New Testament. Israel understood that they were the people of God, chosen by God to be his agents, to be the light to the world, to be the ones through whom the whole world would be blessed. (See Genesis 12:1-3, Isaiah 2:2-4, and Isaiah 42:6 for example).

We know we are to be the light to the world but we are often unsure as to how to go about it. Sometimes we think it means we have to pull people out of their homes or stand on street corners passing out tracts. Sure, we ought to invite our neighbors to church with us and share the Good News with strangers, but the biblical understanding of reaching out, of being the light to the world, extends to every part of our lives. We reach when we worship, when we learn, when we love, when we care, when we serve, when we work, when we play – every part of our life is to be a reaching out and a witness to others.

Let me give you one example. We often don't think of our own worship as an act of evangelism or reaching out. But, when a person who is not a churchgoer visits our worship service, they are looking for three things. They want to feel the presence of God. They want to see the Christian church living out its faith – kindness, love, patience, service to others, and so on. Finally, they want to see the relevance of the faith for their lives.² Every Sunday, each of us, as a member of the First UMC community, is an important witness to the reality of Christ's love and invitation to all persons. Just as sports heroes are unavoidably role models for our youth, we are always, at all times and in all places, witnesses to the living reality and glory of Christ's sacrificial love.

Peter understood this when he wrote to Christians suffering for their faith, "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles³ to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge" (1 Peter 2:11-12). Paul understood this when he wrote to the troubled church in Corinth, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1). Paul calls us to imitate Christ in all we do so that the glory of God will be visible to all and that all will be saved.

Again . . . what does it mean to be the light to the world? It means that we are to lift Jesus up for all the world to see, so that all the world might be drawn to him, enabling all the world to see his saving love. Because Jesus announced and inaugurated the arrival of God's kingdom, we live in the "bright interval"⁴ between Easter and the final, great consummation of the story, the renewal of all creation and the "new heaven and new earth" (Rev 21:1) The early Christians found great joy because they understood that they lived not in the last days but

² This is from the survey and focus group research of George Barna

³ For more on the "alien" status of Christians, see *Resident Aliens*, by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, 1989, Abingdon Press. They offer a challenging vision of what it means to be a Christian community

⁴ from N. T. Wright. *The Challenge of Jesus*. 1999. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press

in the first days of a new age. We live in such days as well and we should find such joy, a joy that will shine for all to see, drawing them into the community of God's servant people!!

A final word

You may not feel up to the task that Jesus has given you, but God has not left you alone in this. The Holy Spirit -- the empowering presence of God -- dwells in us all. Trust the Spirit of Christ to guide you and strengthen you, to help you discern when you have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone whom God has prepared. For Jesus' last words in Matthew are "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Leon Morris elaborates on this:

[T]he disciple is not going to be left to serve God as well as he can in the light of what he has learned from the things Jesus has commanded. The disciple will find that he has a great companion as he goes on his way through life. This tells us something about Jesus. The Jesus of whom Matthew writes is no small Palestinian figure, but a mighty Person who is with his followers wherever they may be. And this, he says, will last through time. He is not speaking of a temporary residence with first-century disciples, but of a presence among his followers to the very end of time. This Gospel opened with the assurance that in the coming of Jesus God was with his people (1:23), and it closes with the promise that the very presence of Jesus Christ will never be lacking to his faithful follower. This does not, of course, mean that Jesus has not been with his people hitherto; he has made it clear that where two or three are met in his name he is there, right in the middle of them (18:20). But when Matthew draws his Gospel to its close, he has nothing in the way of an ascension account. He emphasizes the importance of his continuing presence and concludes his Gospel with the magnificent assurance to the followers of Jesus that that presence will never be withdrawn; he will be with them always, to the end of the world and to the end of time.⁵

And if all this seems like a bit much to actually, truly believe, remember the man with the convulsing son (the passage from Mark 9). When Jesus challenged him to believe, the man replied for many of us -- "I believe; help my unbelief!" And Jesus did. The boy was healed. So, yes, pray to God for the an abiding faith and the vigor to respond to Jesus' summons with all the gifts that God has given you.

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 749–750.