

TRINITY SUNDAY June 19, 2011

The National Presbyterian Church

## “Disciple” is a Verb

Matthew 28:16-20

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“Go therefore and make disciples,” Jesus tells his disciples. It is the last thing he says in the gospel of Matthew. Next week we will look at the ending of Luke, but this is the end of Matthew and Jesus’ words: “Go therefore and make disciples.”

This, we understand, is the mission of the church: to make disciples. It is such a commonplace observation that we scarcely note it. That is what we do. Toyota makes cars, Wendy’s makes hamburgers, Steven Spielberg makes movies, and the church makes disciples.

Our language, however, gives us away. Although we are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ in the native language of the church we are much more likely to speak in terms of membership: we have members of the church. Are they the same thing?

We rejoice to welcome new **members** in our worship services. On Youth Sunday we greeted the Confirmation class as **members** of the church. We have a new **members** class scheduled to begin September 24. Today we commission **members** to go out in mission. Each week e-mails fly around about **members** who are ill, **members** who have moved away, and **members** with new addresses. Each year we send to the National Capital Presbytery which sends to the Office of the General Assembly the number of **members** currently on the roll of

The National Presbyterian Church. The General Assembly reports the statistics about **members** of the church. Most mainline denominations and even Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics are losing **members** these days.

We talk a lot about **members** of the church. Is discipleship the same as membership?

It's easy to speak of membership in the Presbyterian Church because *The Book of Order* confidently explains what membership entails. Let me quote at length from *The Book of Order*:

A faithful member accepts Christ's call to be involved responsibly in the ministry of his Church. Such involvement includes

- a. proclaiming the Good News,
- b. taking part in the common life and worship of a particular church,
- c. praying and studying Scripture and the faith of the Christian Church,
- d. supporting the work of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,
- e. participating in the governing responsibilities of the church,
- f. demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church,
- g. responding to God's activity in the world through service to others,
- h. living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- i. working the world for peace, justice, freedom and human fulfillment. (*The Book of Order*, G-5.0102)

That list of nine things may be hard to remember. Here at The National Presbyterian Church we summarize: Worship, Grow, Serve. That is a faithful and effective way

of thinking about following in the way of Jesus Christ: Worship, Grow, Serve. These three key activities chart the pathway of disciples: **Worship** regularly, **Grow** intentionally, **Serve** generously. These three organize the life of The National Presbyterian Church: Worship, Grow, Serve.

That section I read from *The Book of Order* is titled “Membership as Ministry.” We may be tempted to believe that ministry is what we receive as a benefit of membership—“Membership has its privileges,” as American Express reminds us—but in the Presbyterian Church “membership” is understood “as ministry.”

Membership is something we do, not simply something we are: a member. Much to our surprise the Bible has almost nothing to say about being “members” of the church. When the word “members” is brought into play, it is almost always as a metaphor of the members of a body—fingers, toes, hands, feet—and an expression of our oneness. For example, Paul writes to the Romans:

*For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. (Romans 12:4-8).*

Paul speaks of membership only to speak of the ministry we are given to do or, as *The Book of Order* names it: “Membership as Ministry.”

Membership, theologically understood, begins to sound like discipleship. There is no being a member without adopting a discipline. This is so in the church. It is

so in athletics. To be a member of a team requires discipline: training one's mind and body to perform. This is true of field hockey and debate and volleyball, but this distinction is particularly vivid in the current culture of football.

To be a member of a football team is to play football. You may be on the field playing football; you may be on the bench waiting to play football; you may be on the sidelines injured having played football; but you have disciplined mind and body in order to play football.

That is qualitatively different from being a football fan. Football fans may arrive at the game wearing a football jersey; football fans may dress out in the team's colors; football fans may paint their chests with messages of encouragement to the team; football fans may complain Monday morning what the coach or the quarterback should have done; but football fans do not play football. They do not get sweaty and tired and hurt and broken.

I never thought I would say this, but I miss the good old days of Monday Night Football with Howard Cosell, Frank Gifford and Don Meredith. I recall one game when Howard Cosell was complaining loudly about how poorly a team was playing and how out of shape they were. Dandy Don Meredith, Hall of Fame quarterback, said, "Yeah, Howard, why don't you go down there on the field and tell them that!"

Commenting on a football game is different than being a member of a football team. Being a football fan in the stands is different from being a member of a team on the field.

Jesus does not instruct his church to "recruit some commentators," nor does he tell them "find fans who admire me." *The Washington Post* has theatre critics, art critics, music critics and book critics; the gospel of Matthew only has disciples. Disciples do the work Christ

does: they speak God’s word, teach God’s truth, show God’s mercy, share what God gives them, live the life God lives—and they show others how to live that way.

We cannot count and cannot quantify discipleship. We can count members on the roll but that is different from making disciples. Football stadiums count tickets sold and the numbers in attendance, but that is different from playing football. In our anxious faithlessness we tend to overlook anything that cannot be counted and quantified. We forget that all the really important things in human life cannot be measured by numbers.

Happy Father’s Day! Fathers: tell me on a scale of one to ten how you would rate your children. Children: what percentile of your father’s love do you calculate you receive? What nonsense!

The gospel of Matthew tells us “Go therefore and make disciples,” and shows almost no interest in counting or numbers.

I say almost no interest. Here, in the last verses of the gospel of Matthew, Matthew quickly counts noses, and his report jolts us. Matthew says, “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.”

“The eleven disciples”—there had been twelve, now there are eleven. Back in Chapter Ten Matthew wrote, “These are the names of the twelve apostles” (10:2), now he writes, “the eleven disciples went to Galilee.” One is missing. Judas is gone.

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee.” Usually when the church counts numbers it is either to brag about its success or lament its situation, but Matthew does neither.

“Now the eleven disciples,” he says, speaking of the church. Interesting: of the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—only Matthew ever mentions the word

“church.” The church for Matthew in these final verses of his gospel is a broken church: “Now the eleven disciples,” he says. The church for Matthew is a failed church. Judas betrayed Jesus, but that’s not the half of it. Here Jesus speaks to his gathered disciples but the last time we heard anything at all about the disciples was two chapters ago after Jesus’ arrest when Matthew told us: “Then all the disciples deserted him and fled” (26:56). Judas betrayed him, Peter denied him and “all the disciples deserted him.”

The church we see here is a broken church, a failed church, an incomplete church. “Now the eleven disciples,” Matthew says, and the incompleteness of that number eleven suggests an opening, an empty place. There is room for you. Whenever the gospel of Matthew is read, that numbering of eleven disciples opens the door and invites us in to become disciples.

It is the broken church, the failed, incomplete and uncertain church to which Jesus speaks when he says “Go therefore and make disciples.” This church of the eleven doesn’t look qualified for the task. But the church never does.

We tend to read these last verses of the gospel of Matthew as a glorious triumph, and the risen Lord Jesus Christ is glorious and triumphant over death, but the church is as it always has been: broken, failed, incomplete, a complicated mixture of worship and doubt, faith and betrayal.

Only because Jesus Christ is gloriously triumphant can the church imagine that it has any place in the enterprise of making disciples. The commission is always “Go therefore,” the “therefore” relating to Jesus’ words that “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Therefore we are called to make disciples. We are not qualified but that “therefore” sets us to work nonetheless.

We can be in the business of making disciples because that is what God is already doing. In the Greek of Matthew's gospel "disciple" is a verb as well as a noun. "To disciple" translates conventionally into English as "make disciples" but "discipling" is God's work among us. My spell checker refuses to recognize "discipling" as an active verb but Matthew insists "disciple" is a verb.

We recognize that action on Trinity Sunday when we celebrate the mystery of the Triune God's working among us. God disciples us.

Fasten your seat belts and return your pews to their upright position because we're going to do some theology here. We're talking about how the Triune God "disciples" us.<sup>i</sup>

God our Creator, before the LORD had so much as formed a single atom, chose us and intended us to enjoy and glorify God; that's the doctrine of election or as some would call it, predestination.

Jesus Christ calls us through the ministry of his church. The Holy Spirit alerts us to this call and summons us to respond and the Spirit engraves this call deep within us; that's the doctrine of effectual calling.

The Holy Spirit overcomes our self-serving stubbornness, repairs our brokenness, and planes down our sharp edges to place us in harmony with God; that's the doctrine of justification.

In this drama Jesus stands before the heavenly throne saying, "Father, look what followed me home," and he points to us and asks, "Can we keep them?" The Holy One's laughter overflows heaven to say "Yes! We'll keep them all." That's the doctrine of adoption.

The Holy Spirit shapes and scripts our character to fill the roles God wants us to play in the holy drama of human life; that's the doctrine of sanctification.

Because we have difficulty believing all this can actually happen and because we cannot believe God would be so gracious to do absolutely everything for us, the Holy Spirit transplants the Good News of God's generosity in our hearts; that's the doctrine of saving faith.

We may not know anyone in Senegal or Thailand or Moldova but Christ calls us over the distance and the Holy Spirit gives us the abilities and puts us to the task of doing God's work in surprising places; that's the doctrine of good works

And finally the Holy Spirit signs, seals, and delivers the guarantee that what God has made and reclaimed God will not by any means or for any reason whatsoever be persuaded to surrender; that's the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

That, named theologically, is what is going on this ordinary Sunday service in June: God, known in the work of the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, is going about the holy business of making disciples.

If that is not miracle enough to cause your mouth to drop open in wonderment, there is one more miracle: God invites us to join in this holy work of making disciples as we Worship, Grow and Serve to make visible Christ's glorious triumph among us.

So, if someone asks you what happened in church this morning, you can answer: I participated in the glorious work that God is doing in our lives to the glory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever.

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<sup>i</sup> What I am attempting to do in this section that follows is to briefly describe—without using traditional theological language—the Reformed *ordo salutis*, “the order of salvation.” One of the most rigorous examples of the Reformed *ordo* is found in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* in our *Book of Confessions*. This theology is an *ordo* or order because the Triune God proceeds in an orderly manner, **not** because it is a sequential order of “first this, then this comes second.” Election—God's choosing—precedes everything and “the perseverance of the saints” is in some sense the final word, but while the dynamic of God's work in salvation is orderly it is not predictable. *PJW*