

Doing Great Things in Faith

[Matthew 22:34-40](#)

Rev. Douglas A. Learned

Sunday, June 11, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Good morning. Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's so good to be with you this morning. I think at this point, probably, you know a lot more about me than I know about you. My family and I are looking forward to getting to know you all in the coming weeks and months.

Perhaps if you received the biographical information in the mail this week about me, or perhaps as you picked it up on your way into the sanctuary this morning, you know that my wife and I have two children – Clara, age 6, and Peter, age 4. One of the things that I've learned as a father and as a pastor is that children are very concrete in the way they think about their faith. Am I right? They see things as they are. They ask direct questions. And they give clear, direct answers.

This being Trinity Sunday, I'm reminded of the time that our son, Peter, came up to me one Sunday afternoon and asked me whose Daddy I was talking about in church. My wife explained to me that he had watched me perform a baptism for a child of the congregation in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And he wanted to know that father's identity. So I told him that Jesus called God in heaven "Abba – Father." He really liked the sound of that name, "Abba," and he kept saying it all afternoon: "Abba. Abba. Abba."

Sometimes I like to ask them some questions about the faith, and they come up with some pretty amazing answers. One Sunday dinner at the table I asked our children, "What's the church?" See, I knew that they had talked about what the church was in Sunday school that morning, so I wanted to find out if they knew the right answer. Upon me asking that question, our daughter, Clara, looked at me with wide eyes and absolute sincerity in her voice and said, "Daddy, you know what church is. Church is where we sit, and you talk."

Let us pray. Lord, you have called us together this morning to experience the rich blessing of the fellowship of believers, to grow closer to you through the act of worship. I pray that you will give me not only words to speak this morning, but your word of life to share. I pray that all who are gathered here might feel quickened by your Spirit to follow Jesus Christ. And I ask especially that if there is anyone here this morning that has come to this place out of desperation, or hurt, or sorrow, or longing, hungry for life and life everlasting—that that person might know that you are present in his or her life today, and ready to fill what is empty. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Well, it is an absolute joy for me to be with you this morning. I want to start this morning by giving thanks to the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee, so ably led by Janice Feather, who has nominated me to serve as your Executive Pastor. They have done an amazing job and have given so much of their time, energy, imagination, and love, to this process. I also want to thank Dr. Icenogle for inviting me to share God's word with you this morning. Over these past few weeks I have been listening to his sermons over the internet back in Chicago. And particularly those sermons in which he has talked about Christian discipleship have been an inspiration to me, and an encouragement to me that this is indeed a call from God to come and serve along his side, and in support of his ministry. I am looking forward as well to serving alongside all the members of staff here at National, and with all of you—the ministers of the congregation.

I asked that our liturgist read two passages for us this morning from the gospel of Matthew, and I did so because, if someone were to ask me: What passages out of the Bible speak to you most thoroughly and encourage you most in your Christian walk and in your pastoral ministry, what would they be? And I would answer that question with these two passages. The first half of National's vision statement, which you see on the front of your bulletin—"A ministry of grace"—reminds me of Jesus' greatest commandment in Matthew 22: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and your soul, and your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." And the second half of National's vision statement—"passionate about Christ's mission in the world"—reminds me of Jesus' Great Commission, at the end of the gospel of Matthew, chapter 28: "Go therefore to all the world, making 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."

The greatest commandment and the Great Commission—together we are called to do great things in faith. When the Pharisees asked Jesus that question, "Which is the greatest of all the commandments?," he knew full well that whatever he answered, they would find fault with his answer, accusing him of emphasizing one commandment over another. And so he does so brilliantly what so many people in the public eye learn to do, in time: he answers not the question they asked—right?—but the question he would have liked them to ask, or that they should have asked. His answer is about loving God and neighbor, and that is a hard answer to pick apart. Who is, after all, against loving God and neighbor? But Jesus knows he'll have to show them how to live that commandment out, because it means much more; it means much more than niceties and tolerance for other peoples' faults. It means dedicating your life to a cause which is greater than yourself—God's cause—God's kingdom, which is begun today in this world.

And so Jesus spends the last three years of his life on earth teaching his disciples to do that: showing them how by inviting them to his ministry, giving them examples to live by, provoking them with stories, sending them out on short missions, and then calling them back to talk about how those missions went—what went well; what didn't go so well; how can we do it better next time. Then eventually, after the cross and the resurrection, he hands his ministry over to them completely. And that's when the second passage, from Matthew 28, comes: the Great Commission. It's at this point when he says, 'I've given you everything you need. Go, therefore, and make disciples, just as I have made disciples of you.'

In his book, *Finding God in Unexpected Places*, Philip Yancey writes about a trip that he once took with his family to Yellowstone National Park. While he was there, he dined at a restaurant at the inn that he was staying at near Old Faithful—that big geyser of water that shoots up out of the earth every 91 minutes. Along one wall of this restaurant there were many large windows so that tourists could see the geyser when it shot up out of the earth. There was even a clock on the wall of the restaurant that timed exactly when the geyser would go off, so that it could chime when the time was coming. And when that time did come, all of the people in the restaurant, along with Yancey, got up and went to the window. When the geyser shot off, they began clicking pictures and taking video, and there were 'oohs' and 'aahs' in amazement of what was happening before their very eyes. But while everyone had their eyes on that incredible spectacle, Yancey took a moment and looked back behind him. And in that moment, he saw all the waiters and the bussers clearing plates off the tables, filling water glasses, brushing up crumbs under the table. You see, they had heard it all before; they had seen it all before. And they were no longer astonished to see what all of these people had come from around the world to witness firsthand.

Vision statements: a ministry of grace, passionate about Christ's mission in the world. Commandments of grace: love the Lord your God, love your neighbor as yourself. Bold commissions: go therefore, and make disciples of all nations. If we are not careful, these words can become routine for us in time. And what used to inspire us—jaws dropping to the floor in awe of the power of God to transform human lives, and our desire to be a part of it all—can begin to fall by the wayside as we attend to the more practical matters of the day.

My mentor in seminary, Robert Jacks, had, as one of his mentors, Olaf Hartman, a Swedish playwright and clergyman who admonished church leaders with the comment that much of what is said in Christian worship has become "words... about words... about words." The preacher is talking, right? And all of us are sitting. And everyone goes home, thumbs up or thumbs down—"I liked the sermon," "I didn't like the sermon." Or, like so many people are saying today: "Who needs all of those words? I'm going to the beach; I can worship God there, after all."

I suspect that part of the challenge the mainline church has faced in recent years is not only that our society is changing its priorities. You see, I think the Gospel has always had competition for peoples' attention; that's not new. It also has something to do with us allowing Jesus' word to become 'words... about words... about words.' Forgetting Jesus' commission for us to make disciples, we are not making disciples. We are not being the church we're called to be. When we are making disciples, we are fulfilling the church's mission.

When someone first encouraged me to consider this position at National, I read more about it, and in time, I felt God nudging me to think that this may indeed be a call. So I submitted something called a P.I.F.—a Personal Information Form. It's kind of a dossier for pastors that the Nominating Committee can read over. The first narrative question in that form asks: "Please describe the characteristics of that church that you would like to serve." And the first sentence of my response was, "I would like to serve a congregation that values its members as disciples of Jesus Christ."

The reason I wrote that is because I know, when we think of ourselves as disciples, we understand that we have a commission in this life to foster discipleship in others. We have, as Greg Ogden says in his book *Transforming Discipleship*, a responsibility to keep the process going—to make more followers of Jesus—each follower with his or her own gifts for loving God and neighbor, and for reaching others with the Good News that the kingdom of heaven has arrived today. It begins today!

As we mature as disciples, we understand that, while good preaching nourishes us in the faith, good programs serve as a platform for nurturing us in our practice, and pastoral care comforts and nourishes us in times of joy and trouble, it also comes down to each of us, as a member of the church, as a minister of the Gospel, developing a willingness and an ability to invite others into a relationship with us. Note what I said there: inviting people into relationship with us, so that they might then grow in a relationship with God—because God so often chooses to mediate his message through us, the members of his Body—in those relationships.

Not too long ago, I stopped in at a little coffee shop not far from my home called Caribou Coffee. I don't know if you have those here in Washington; it's kind of a Starbucks. I'm seeing some people shake their heads. Interestingly, this particular shop has become a gathering place for small groups in the past few years. I don't think the owners of the shop necessarily promote these groups; it just happens to be in the right location and it's become a place where these groups gather. Every time I go there, I feel so encouraged by the work of the Holy Spirit.

On this particular evening, like so many others, I was sipping a cup of coffee, waiting for my friend to arrive. And I looked around and saw a number of groups meeting, each with three or four people, talking or praying together. One was a group of retirement-age women talking about Philip Yancey's book *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Another was a group of, what looked to me like 16-year-olds, meeting with their youth leader, talking about an upcoming mission trip to Mexico. At one point, one of their schoolmates came in; you could tell he wasn't part of that group. And they said, "Hey! You have to come to Mexico with us!" So he sat down, and you could tell that they were really working on him. I listened in, and I think by the end of that conversation, they had lassoed him in to their group. Another was a group of college students with New Testaments open, in Greek, studying a letter from Paul. Another group was composed of two middle-aged couples working through a Christian formation book.

As I looked around that room, and listened-in on their conversations—yes, I was listening in—I realized I was witnessing the ministers of the church at work: inviting, supporting, encouraging, admonishing, instructing, and praying for each other. These groups were from all different congregations, but they were all part of the body of Christ. As they were building up their relationships with each other, they were building up their relationship with God.

One of my favorite moments in church life is when groups in the church that travel to far-off places, do something for people in need—say, build a Habitat house, or dig a ditch in a village that has no sewer system. And they come back and report on what they've done for the people there. There's often a moment when one person from the group, who is giving testimony of his or her experience,

will talk about a friendship that they struck up with one of the people in that place—that place where they were serving. And then they report on how that friendship changed the way they understand the mission of the church, and how the physical work that they were doing became a manifestation—an expression—a of the work of the Spirit. They thought they went to accomplish a project for someone else, but it turns out, in addition, God made a project out of them, the missionary, transforming their heart more fully into the heart of a Jesus-follower.

Discipleship is born and nurtured in human relationships, and in friendships struck up in surprising places. A big theme in Matthew's gospel is about not only hearing the teachings of Jesus, but acting on them. Earlier on in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "Whoever hears these words of mine and acts on them is like the wise man who built his house upon the rock. The rains fell, the floods rose up, the winds came and beat against that house. But it did not fall, because it was founded on the rock."

The church is built on the foundation of people who hear the word of Jesus Christ and act on that word—loving God, and loving each other in Christian community. We are so much more than 'words... about words... about words.' We are ministers of the Gospel, and we have been given a Commission: a commission to be disciples, and to make disciples in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray. Lord, as we hear your words of command and commission this morning—to love you and neighbor, and to make disciples as your Son made disciples of his first followers, we pray that you may open our hearts and minds to the ways in which you have called us to grow to follow Jesus, and invite others to follow him as well. Do not allow us, we pray, to be people of words without meaning, but rather people of your word, in Jesus Christ, who gives meaning to all. We ask this in his name. Amen.