

# Go Make Disciples

By Keith E Gatling

Sermon for May 26, 2002

## Lessons for Holy Trinity in Year A

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Psalm 8

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

---

And Jesus said to them, "Go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them all the things I have commanded you."

It's right there in the book. Go and make disciples of all nations. That's our job. It's what we've been commanded to do.

Or is it?

If there's one thing I've noticed over the years, it's the fact that we seem to like to take a line or two out of the Bible, about a specific person or situation, and then try to apply that as a general rule for everyone and all time.

Some of us still like to use the Bible as an instruction manual, and figure that if we just follow the rules as laid out there, we'll be just fine. We don't stop to think that maybe Jesus was talking to a specific person about a specific situation, and *not* intending his words to be a new rule for everyone else to follow slavishly. We don't stop to think that maybe Jesus might have something *different* to say to us in our time and our situation.

And so we return to what Jesus said to the eleven remaining disciples: Go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them all the things I have commanded you.

Was Jesus talking to just them, or to us too? If we say that he was just talking to them, does that let us off the hook so that we don't have to do anything, or do we maybe have a different but just as important role to play now? And what about that bit about teaching them all the things that he commanded us?

I'll be honest with you, I'm very uncomfortable with the idea of me going out and trying to make disciples of all nations. And I can see members of the Evangelism Committee panicking as I say this. But there are a couple of reasons why I feel this way.

The first is that I've been preached at - badly - by a few too many people who were aggressively trying to follow this command. I know just how these earnest and good-intentioned people can turn someone off to the message they're trying to deliver. And I don't want to be one of these people. I don't want to be one of those people who does such a bad job talking about Christianity that he turns off people who might otherwise have stopped to take a closer look. I don't want to be one of those people who beats you over the head with their version of Christianity until you want to run screaming from anyone who you think is even slightly religious. As a result, I tend to keep my mouth shut unless someone specifically

asks me about my faith - and even then I often stumble.

The other reason I'm uncomfortable is because I just don't know. Really. I don't know. I'm not totally sure about what is and isn't, theologically speaking. I'm not sure where I'm right and they're wrong. I'm not sure if I've got it all right. I'm not sure that I won't mess someone up even more by opening my big mouth. And if I'm not sure for myself, then what business do I have trying to convince someone else?

I can just hear you thinking now, "Well, isn't *that* a fine thing for someone to say from the pulpit - that he's not sure." But you know, if we're honest, *none* of us is sure. One of the few things I remember from Mr Delaney's 9<sup>th</sup> grade English class, besides the morning we all sat around and sang cartoon show theme songs, was learning the actual meaning of the word *believe*. I learned from him that belief is *not* the same as knowledge, that belief implies not being sure, but having a willingness to act as if you were.

As a result, every time one of us says "I believe," we're really admitting that we don't know for sure. And maybe that's not such a terrible thing, because the minute you think you know for sure, you close yourself to learning anything new - and especially anything that might contradict what you already think you know.

Remember, the Pharisees and Saducees *knew* how God wanted things done, and that Jesus wasn't doing things that way.

But maybe, despite my hesitance to go out and be a "Big Mouth for Jesus," and despite my qualms about trying to convince people of something that I'm still not quite sure of, I

can still do my part in making disciples of all nations. And perhaps you can too. Provided we let go of the idea that there's a one-size-fits-all description of the job that we all have to follow.

While I personally found the in-your-face confrontational style of some Christians offensive and counterproductive, what I found *did* work for me was the quiet example of others. Those who preached by their lives rather than their words, those who made neither a secret nor a flashy neon sign of their faith. Those who went on with their normal lives, and let *me* ask the questions to which they then responded.

Ah, but we must be careful here, lest *I* come up with a general, one-size-fits-all rule. For you see, as much as the confrontational style doesn't work for me, and isn't something I could use, it may be just what some people need. Likewise, the laid back "preach by example" style that worked for me, and that I try to use, may be way too subtle for some people. The simple fact of the matter is that not every method works for every person, and that not every person is good at every method.

Perhaps we're each called to reach what people we can with whatever method we're good at. Maybe *that's* the general rule we should consider.

Last week two friends of mine at school were sitting in the faculty room discussing fertility and adoption issues. Some of you may have forgotten - especially with Cheryl being quite rotund lately, and those of you who have joined since Devra was born may never have known, but we've been there. As a result, I very cautiously entered the

conversation and shared what insights I had from our experience.

I'm not sure that it went well. Not because I said the obvious wrong things. Not because I was totally insensitive - after all, I asked if I should enter the conversation or just walk away, and they told me to enter. But because despite my great desire to help, perhaps these weren't the people I was meant to help. Perhaps *someone else* could've done a better job.

And yet, I'm not saying that it's never my job. I entered this exact same conversation with another teacher four years ago, saying the exact same things, and not only did she thank me for it, but she came back for more information.

Very simply, sometimes you're the right person for the job and sometimes you're not. Sometimes it's your job to do the talking and sometimes you're more effective by getting someone else to do the talking.

I've designed my website to be a sort of one-stop information center for things that I want to know about and tools that my students might be able to use. And in alphabetical order, about halfway down the "site navigation" section on the opening page is a link for "Lutheran Stuff." Nothing too fancy, no flashing text, no animated graphics there. Just the words "Lutheran Stuff."

Who knows how many people hit my website on a daily basis (I don't have a counter)? But I'm sure that some people have noticed that little Lutheran Links heading and decided to see what was there. And who knows how many people have gone on to find out just a little more about the church because of the sites that that

particular link led them to? Talk about making disciples of all nations.

Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them all the things I have commanded you."

"Teaching them all the things I have commanded you." But what about the extras? What about the things he didn't specifically say, but that *we* have tacked on over the past 2000 years?

For some reason we don't seem to be content to just teach what Jesus commanded us, and then live with what ambiguity may exist in some situations. Despite the great freedom that Jesus gives us, we still have a need to come up with rules and regulations for everything in our religious life.

This is not to say that rules aren't a good thing. But we need to distinguish between *our* rules and those that come from Jesus. We need to be able to understand that the rules we've put in place for the sake of "good order" are *not* Holy Writ. We also need to understand that the rules that might have made it easier for us to live what we consider to be Christian lives might not only not be necessary for others, but may well be impediments to someone else being able to follow Jesus. We need to remember that the rules of our personal piety, and indeed the rules of our denomination, are not even close to being on the same level with what Jesus commanded.

A few weeks ago, in my surfing the internet, I stumbled across a website that talked about the evils of alcohol, and why it shouldn't even be used for Communion. One of the things there that both amazed and amused me was the statement that "If

Jesus had known how harmful alcohol was, he surely wouldn't have condoned its use."

Excuse me. *If Jesus had known?* Is this person really trying to say that Jesus didn't know, and that *he* knows better? Or is it just this person's clumsy way of trying to deal with the fact that Jesus does something that runs counter to *his* personal piety?

So many things that outsiders think Christianity forbids - drinking in moderation, playing cards, dancing, gambling, and a host of others - aren't even mentioned by Jesus, but are instead added on as a result of the personal piety of later generations. What do we tell people is necessary to be a Christian,

that perhaps really isn't? Can we be satisfied to tell them the simple facts without including our personal practices as part of the deal? Do we make it harder for people to be disciples than it really has to be because we add so much unnecessary baggage?

Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them all the things I have commanded you." But he doesn't say *how*.

I'll do it by the example of my life, and answering questions when people have them, being careful not to place upon requirements that Jesus doesn't ask. How will you?