

“The Great Commission in John’s Gospel”
John 20:19-23
December 13, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

In our series on the mission of the church, we come today to the third and final of the Great Commission texts. These texts contain the last words of Jesus to his disciples, given in the time between his resurrection and ascension, a period of fifty days. We looked last week at the last of these commissions, one that Jesus gave just before his ascension and recorded in the book of Acts. Prior to that, we looked at the most well-known of these texts, the one found in Matthew. Today, we come to the great commission text found in John’s Gospel. Though we are considering it last, it was actually the first one given. It was delivered “On the evening of that day, the first day of the week.” This was the evening of the first Easter Sunday. The disciples are all together in a locked room, and the words and presence of the resurrected Jesus have a profound effect upon them, just as they should on us as well.

I. Courage from the Peace of Jesus

The disciples are huddled together in a locked room, and their dominant emotion is fear. They are afraid of the Jewish leaders, who had such a hatred for Jesus that they conspired with the Roman leaders to have him executed. It’s not difficult to understand, then, why Jesus’ disciples are now afraid. Their leader has been crucified, and they must be wondering how far the animosity extends. Will the Jewish leaders be satisfied with the removal of Jesus, or will they regard Jesus’ works and teachings to be such a cancer upon the nation that they will not stop until Jesus’ disciples are also removed? In the midst of such uncertainties, fear is running rampant in their hearts.

I am struck by the setting—a small, locked room. It is striking because of its contrast with the world Jesus brings to them in his commission of verse 21, where he sends them out into the vast world as he has been sent. Which setting best describes your life? Has your world shrunk because of your fears? Is your world nothing more than a small, locked room? Or is it the big, wide world that Jesus created and rules even now? We dare not shrink back into a small world out of fear, but move out with a courage that comes from Jesus.

The way to get courage isn’t to convince yourself that the world is not so dangerous after all. The fact is that it is filled with threats. Like the disciples, we live in a world that is hostile to our God and to his word. At the very least, we are considered odd because of our beliefs about God. We believe in a miracle-working God. We believe that this God came to the earth by being born

of a virgin. We believe that this God-man lived in obscurity as a carpenter in a remote region of a tiny nation. We believe he was condemned as a criminal and assigned the ultimate penalty of crucifixion. But he didn't stay dead. He was resurrected with an immortal body after being in the grave for portions of three days. And then he ascended into heaven, where he reigns today over all human history. And at some point in the future, he is going to come back and put everything right that has been ruined in this world. These beliefs are seen as odd by some and quaint by others. Some, however, see them as dangerous. We are seen as dangerous because our ultimate allegiance is not given to any earthly ruler, but to God. We believe today that God gets to define right from wrong, and more and more that is seen as dangerous and threatening in our culture, a culture which wants every person to be able to define for themselves right and wrong.

These early disciples were not guilty of an unreasonable fear. This world has always been somewhere on a scale between mildly and severely hostile to Jesus and his word. Their fear may not have been unreasonable, but it was unnecessary and unhelpful. We read, **“Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’”** If the doors were locked, how did Jesus get in? We can't know for sure because the text doesn't tell us. But we do know that earlier on this same day Jesus was able to pass through his grave clothes. And we know that a sealed tomb guarded by soldiers was unable to keep him locked inside. So he comes to his people in their fear because Jesus always comes to his people in their fear. Nothing in the entire universe is able to keep him away.

When Jesus comes, he speaks this word of peace to them. Twice he says to them, **“Peace be with you.”** We should read this as more than good advice from Jesus. It is his spoken, powerful word, by which he brings about what he speaks. It is the same powerful word he spoke at creation when he said “Let there be, ...and there was.” Just as he spoke the world into existence, he here speaks peace into existence in the hearts of his disciples. In order to help them believe this, he presents himself to be touched by his disciples. He shows them his wounds, as if to say, “The worst the world can do to you is what has been done to me, but I have overcome the world, the devil, and even death itself. You need fear nothing.” As a result, **“the disciples were glad”** (v. 20).

Can you imagine what your life would be like without fear? That's the life Jesus brings as he speaks his peace to us. It is Jesus' word of peace that gives us courage to leave our small, locked rooms and venture forth into the wild and dangerous world. It is the peace that comes from the word of the gospel. It is by the blood of Jesus that we have peace with God, knowing that our sins are fully pardoned. And it is by the resurrection of Jesus that we can have the courage to venture forth as Jesus' sent ones.

Rose Marie Miller is an inspiration to many in this regard. She is the 95-year-old widow of Jack Miller, the founder of Serge Mission Agency, which I serve as a member of the board. At an age when many shrink back in fear, Rose Marie has not done so. She lives in London, where she is still actively involved in evangelism and discipleship among the Asian Indians in her community. She recently led the hundreds of missionaries in this agency in a prayer meeting calling us to prayer and to pressing forward with the gospel. That brings us to our next point.

II. Instruction in the Commission of Jesus

Jesus' commissioning words here seem on the surface to be quite simple. **"As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you"** (v. 21). But as is often the case in John's Gospel, things that appear simple on the surface prove far more complex when we delve into them. Some have interpreted this text to mean that our ministry will look like Jesus' ministry in every respect. So we should expect to perform the same kind of miracles as we see Jesus performing. If that's the case, this is not working in my ministry. I've never raised anyone from the dead or had anyone healed by merely touching me. I don't think Jesus meant by this to say that our ministry in every respect would look exactly as his did.

Others have taken the position that Jesus meant by this that the dominant feature of our mission should be service. So those with this view would say that our mission as the church should simply be that of finding any way we can to serve our communities. If students need tutoring, our mission is to meet that need. If there is a food shortage, health care shortage, job shortage or any other need, the church's mission is to do what it can to address these needs. While it is certainly true that Jesus came to serve rather than be served, it needs to be pointed out that the key text on this, Mark 10:45, says that Jesus' primary service was **"to give his life as a ransom for many."** Jesus didn't allow his agenda to be set by whatever needs people thought they had. On one occasion, when the disciples wanted him to continue his very popular healing ministry, Jesus refused, saying, **"Let us go on to the next town, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out"** (Mark 1:38). Jesus would often command silence of those he healed, lest the clamor for meeting physical needs should become a distraction to his real purpose in coming (Mark 1:44; 7:36). And Jesus was clear about his real purpose. John's Gospel states clearly that Jesus came that **"whoever believes in him may have eternal life"** (3:15), **"that the world might be saved through him"** (3:17). So while the church is definitely to serve the needs of the world, it is a mistake to place this as the central mission of the church. That central place, in keeping with Jesus' central purpose in coming, is the proclamation of the good news of forgiveness and salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

There are several other positive meanings we can derive from Jesus' statement, **"As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."** Jesus was sent from another world to ours, from the heavenly world to this fallen world. Similarly, there is a sense in which we are sent from another world. Jesus taught earlier in John's Gospel that we **"are not of the world"** (15:19). This is not our home. Jesus was sent to this world to accomplish a specific task, and as soon as he finished it, he was taken back to his home with the Father. In the same way, God will bring us home as soon as we finish the work he has for each of us. That means that if you can still hear my voice, God has work for you.

A second meaning of this brief statement is that just as Jesus went forth with the authority and power of God, so we go with divine authority. To be sent with divine authority has several implications. It means that the message we carry is not ours, but God's. And the message we carry to this world will be met with hostility, which was exactly identical to Jesus' experience. But when our message is rejected, God is the one being rejected, not us. There was a report in the news this week about the conclusions of a scientific panel investigating the sicknesses of numerous state department employees in the American embassies in both China and Cuba. Their conclusion was that they were sickened as a result of microwaves sent into those embassies. This hostility was not personal, but national. They were the victims of this not because anyone was against them personally, but because they were representatives of our nation. It is the same with those who are sent by God.

A third way we are sent just as Jesus was sent is that we go with dependence on God and obedience to him. Jesus emphasized this point to his disciples when he sent them out during Jesus' earthly ministry. He told them not to take any money with them, but to go to each town trusting in God's provision. Jesus did the same during his ministry, reflected in his rich prayer life.

We are also sent out with a message of forgiveness, which was the central message Jesus brought. Jesus' central message was the one John recorded earlier. **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him"** (3:16-17). We are sent with that same message, which is taught in the last verse of our passage. **"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld"** (v. 23). I'm confident that Jesus doesn't intend us to understand him as saying that any of us has ultimate authority on whose sins are forgiven and whose aren't. No mere human is able to handle such authority and responsibility. I think what he is saying is that when we take the gospel to people, matters of life and death are being decided. Those who receive and believe the gospel that we bring are forgiven and those who reject it will not be

forgiven. As Matthew Henry says, “Those whom the gospel acquits shall be acquitted, and those whom the gospel condemns shall be condemned.”

III. Boldness from the Breath of Jesus

For such a commission as Jesus here gives to his disciples, help will be needed. Such help is promised them and us in verse 22. **“And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”** This action of Jesus whereby he breaths on them as he gave the gift of the Holy Spirit seems odd to us. What is its significance? I think its significance can be seen by remembering something that happened at the very beginning of the Bible. In Genesis 2:7 we read, **“then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.”** Lifeless dust came alive through the breath of God. The breath of God began the first world, and now the breath of God will create the new world of the redeemed who are filled with the Spirit of God.

Then Jesus gives a command. **“Receive the Holy Spirit.”** The Holy Spirit is given by Jesus to his followers, but this is a gift that must be received. What does it mean to receive the Holy Spirit? We receive the Spirit in the same way a patient receives the work of the surgeon on his or her behalf. As many of you know, Wendy had shoulder surgery about six weeks ago. There were multiple times when she had to receive the work of the surgeon. She had to sign a consent form. She had to show up at the appointed time of her surgery. She had to allow them to put a mark on the shoulder to receive the scalpel. She had to submit herself to the anesthesia. But the real work of restoring her shoulder was accomplished by the medical people attending to her. We do the same when we receive the Holy Spirit. We submit ourselves to his work and his leading. We make use of his empowering of us to reach out to those God may lead us to, loving them with the truth of the gospel.

CONCLUSION:

There is movement in this passage. It is movement from the locked room where the fear was thick and palpable, to the wide-open world to which Jesus sends his people. It is the same movement we mentioned last week when we spoke of those two images of the church: the outpost of the coming kingdom or the castle. It is the difference between playing defense and playing offense. It is the difference between seeing the dangers of this world as objects of fear versus seeing them as opportunities for God’s glory. Where are you between these contrasting places? May God help us all to receive his Spirit that we might move out from fear to faith, being sent by Jesus as the Father sent him!