



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



A Vision to Reach Out in Evangelism

Text: Matthew 28:16-20

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Have you ever noticed that very often after an evening of visiting with friends or relatives that the most meaningful things said are the things said when you are going out the door. Final words almost seem to be the most important or at least the ones we want people to remember.

Matthew's Gospel ends with this text.

So here is Jesus and he is saying, "Go and make disciples of all the nations." He speaks about the authority God has given him, he tells people to obey him, tells them to baptize others, and know that he is present with them till the end of time. But the key words of the passage are "Go and make disciples of all the nations."

The theme is a major one. Jesus calls twelve apostles to "Go and make disciples of all the nations." He sends out the 72 to "Go and make disciples of all the nations." The entire book of Acts of the Apostles is dedicated to them choosing to "Go and make disciples of all the nations." The entire life of St. Paul is one living out the command to "Go and make disciples of all the nations."

One would get the impression that going and making disciple of all the nations is important. Obviously. This going and making disciples of all the nations is called Evangelism and to teach out in evangelism is one of the key components to the Mission Statement of St. Marks.

We haven't done a bang up job on evangelism. Frankly, Christianity hasn't.

I attended a workshop in Cleveland last weekend and there are some startling statistics coming out about church attendance.

At this juncture, 80% of people under the age of 20 have never attended church. That's 80%. We're in the Bible Belt so maybe it's 70-75%. Still staggeringly high. I've begun to notice this as being real. It is customary, at Committal Services after a Funeral for the Lord's Prayer to be prayed at the grace. I am noticing more and more of younger generations do not know this prayer. They stand there dumbstruck. The Lord's Prayer. It doesn't end there. At this point in time 93% of people under the age of 30 do not attend Worship. Thank the people here who are under 30 because they are a unique and special group of people who are bucking the trend.

These are the children of the baby boom generation----and it's the baby boom generation that

first disappeared from churches.

Additionally, many of the fastest growing churches in the country are mega- churches that do not utilize Worship Services that have been a part of the historic heritage of Christianity and they teach a theological perspective that only dates back to the latter part of the 19th century. Most of these churches have chosen to have clergy who have not attended seminaries as their pastors because, frankly, the seminaries teach future clergy a much older, more traditional theological perspective that has been part of Christianity for 2000 years.

All of this took place because Christianity forgot to evangelize. It forgot to “Go and make disciples of all the nations.” It even forgot to evangelize within its own walls and has lost two generations.

Here’s the good news. We still have Jesus. We still have the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we still have the command to “Go and make disciples of all the nations.” And we don’t have to go far. The vast majority of people living within driving distance to St. Marks are unchurches and many of them know little to nothing about us. I’ve heard many times from people who have joined St. Marks that they didn’t know a place like this existed in New Albany.

We have to accept displacement. Some times when new people arrive they sit in pews where we usually sit and that’s not always met with great joy.

On one hand we need to understand that where people sit becomes an important place for them. Churches are sacred spaces and often, when people sit down, they look at the cross, the altar, the windows around them from the perspective of their seat. It is from their seat that they pray for loved ones, mourn those who have passed, and celebrated moments in life. Someone sitting in our seat can become painful because of all the memories and sacred moments had while sitting there. When people find being displaced from their seats painful, we need to have compassion on them.

Having said that, however, it is important to welcome people to our church family, even if we do become displaced. As I’ve gotten older I have sentimental memories of holiday family meals and the family seated around the table. In time, everyone got displaced. Spouses joined the family and needed a seat at the table. Children were born and needed a place at the table. Others passed away and there were openings at the table. Family life does change and we always manage to welcome people around the table.

Displacement may be painful and it may be difficult, but we need to recognize that we need to be welcoming to those who come and sit in our midst.

Secondly, we need to be gracious in inviting people into our home.

I read once that there were three topics one not ever venture in when preaching. The topics were sex, politics, and religion. Sometimes we who preach are a little too good at missing all three. I tend to agree about not preaching too much about sex and politics, but it might be nice if some

religious themes popped in now and again.

Religion, or better said, faith, is something many people do not want to talk about. I've heard many people make the statement that their faith was private.

So, how's that been working for Christianity?

In Europe faith was a private matter and Christianity is almost extinct from Europe.

In the United States where faith has been a private matter the baby boom generation has mostly vanished and the following generation has almost completely vanished from churches. The pollster George Barna said that most churches will cease to exist in the next 10 - 20 years.

The philosopher/theologian Dallas Willard once wrote that the system we have now is perfectly designed to produce the results we are now getting. If Christians continue to see faith as a private matter and Christianity is rapidly diminishing as a faith, then if we keep that approach up we will have the same results we have been having. If we, as people of St. Marks continue to be silent to others, if we fail to be inviting, if we fail to be welcoming guess what the end result will be? The system we have now is perfectly designed to produce the results we are now getting.

Christianity will not change until Christians change. St. Marks will never change and grow unless we, the people of St. Marks change and grow and become more inviting.

Lastly, I've heard people wonder what we have to offer here at St. Marks. We have to get past an idea that we don't have anything to offer.

There's an old story about an old preacher on a train many years ago with a young man who was very anxious. Seeing that the young man was so nervous, the old preacher asked him what he was so anxious about.

"Well," the young man said, "I am on my way home. A few years ago I had a falling out with my family and stormed out. I wrote them and told them that I wanted to come home and now I'm on my way. I don't know if they'll be happy to see me or not."

The old preacher said, "Surely it couldn't have been that bad."

The young man said, "Yes, it was. What I said and did was awful. I told them that I was coming in on the train today. You can see the house from the train tracks. It's a white house up on a hill. There's a big oak tree at the bottom of the hill. I told them if they were going to welcome me home, they needed to tie a white ribbon around the tree to let me know if I was welcome or not."

The train got to the stop and the preacher saw the young man look out the window and excitedly get off the train, and running up the hill to the house.

Some time later the old preacher said, "I'll never forget it. The tree was covered with white

ribbons. White ribbons were on every tree and every telephone pole as far as you can see. I'll never forget that young man running excitedly up the hill to see a family that was so anxious to have him home."

What is it that we have to offer? We may not seem to be a white house on a hill, but for many people we have been and is so now. Those words we say when we start Worship, "No matter who you are and where you are on life's journey," have been words of welcome, white ribbons around the tree, for so many people who have walked in these doors. When we say the words, and more importantly, when we mean what we say, we have the ability to change lives.

What we have to offer is the great gift of ourselves inviting and welcoming others to join with us in our journey with Jesus Christ. One of my favorite stories in the Bible is the story in Acts of the Apostles when the lame man asks Peter and John for money, and Peter says, "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have, I will give you." All Peter had was the gift of Jesus Christ, and that gift healed the man and changed lives.

What we have is a invitation to walk with us as we all walk with Jesus together. That is what we have to offer----and there is nothing richer, nothing better than that.

Jesus, as he was departing gave us a great commission that is part of our mission as a church. Go and make disciples of all the nations!

So, what are we waiting for?!?!?!?! Let's go and make disciples of all the nations!