

June 16/17, 2007

#3 What Does God Expect of the Church?

Matthew 28:18-20

Rev. Susan Bresser

At the end of the first act of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, the cast sings GO, GO, GO JOE, a rousing, energetic number encouraging Joseph, who happens to be in jail, to a new kind of life, a life filled with responsibility, a future filled with hope. As the drama unfolds, we begin to understand that God has a plan for Joseph.

It's a catchy tune:

Go, go, go Joseph you know what they say

Hang on now Joseph you'll make it some day

Don't give up Joseph fight till you drop

We've read the book and you come at on top.

I've been watching a lot of Joseph rehearsals these last couple of weeks as the cast and crew prepare for opening night this coming Friday, right here ... right where I'm standing. They rehearse in fellowship hall just about every evening, so I've been hearing Joseph songs for quite some time now. Get your tickets now! All proceeds support the Sun Prairie Food Pantry.

This last week as I studied the scripture and the question of the week: "What does God expect of the church?" I kept hearing the word GO. And I keep singing that obnoxious, but very entertaining song from Joseph. As I fold the laundry... as I do the dishes ... as I read the scripture ... I'm not even in the show, but the word GO keeps speaking to me. I think God is trying to tell me something!

The word "go" is an action word, an energy word, a motivating word, a "get up and move" word that gets us going.

Our scripture reading for today features Jesus at the end of his ministry. He has been teaching the disciples for three years now; teaching them about God and about discipleship. The disciples are ordinary, common people and Jesus is teaching them to bring ordinary, common people to know the grace of God. In the reading today, Jesus is giving his farewell address before he ascends into heaven. And what does he say? "GO ... go ... go ... go ... "go, go, disciples, you know what I

say ... go, go, disciples, you'll make it someday ..." Go and make disciples, train everyone you meet, far and near, in the way of life-saving grace."

Jesus is moving us into action with the command: GO and make disciples. This is what I believe is the answer to the question what does God expect of the church. GO and make disciples.

The purpose of the church is not to make sermons or music or youth programs or buildings. The purpose of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Here's where it might get a little fuzzy. We can't make disciples by ourselves. It's the work of God that actually does the discipleship making. We human beings don't make disciples. The spirit of God works through us and we plant the seeds and offer compassion and share blessings and certainly model Christ-like living, but it is God who works the miracle, God who does the making.

But Jesus still says GO ... be about the movement, be about the journey, be about the issue. Go and make disciples.

Who's he talking to? **Who** is to make disciples?

When I was growing up, I knew the answer. It was the religious people in my church, the good, faithful people: the Mauermans, the Knezels, the Zimmerlis, the Petersens. That's who. It was the pastor, Amos. That's who. I believed they were the privileged few who were entrusted with the task of making disciples.

And then I heard the word of God. You go. Go. Go. Go. You, Susan, go. I was being called to be a messenger and a mouthpiece of God. I was being called to share with others about Jesus Christ. What do you think my answer was at first? "I can't. I'm not qualified. How can God work through somebody like me?" It took me a long time to believe that God could and would and actually does use me.

Do you know that about God? Do you know God wants YOU to **go**? Do you really know and understand that you are being called to be a messenger? You are being called to share with others about Jesus. Do you know that God can use you?

Here's what we do know about the church. The laity, you, will always be more effective at making disciples than the pastors. It's called the 36-hr principle. Let's say we have a visitor in worship with us. If that new visitor is personally called on by a lay person within 36 hrs, 86% will return to worship the following week. If a pastor calls on a new visitor 36 hours following worship, only 43% will return to worship the next week. In other words, the lay person is twice as effective as the pastor. Why? Because the pastor is paid to do it and the visitor knows that. Sometimes a layperson brings more authenticity, more credibility than the pastor. That's not to say that the pastor won't be making follow up calls, but it does say that YOU are important in helping people grow in faith.

So, who is to make disciples? You are. God is speaking to you. That's what God expects of the church.

And where are we supposed to **GO** to make disciples? Jesus said, "Into the world, far and near ..." Bring your friends to Jesus. All the research of unchurched people who join the church say that 75 – 80% of them were brought into the church because a friend personally invited them. Only 9% were brought by pastors. Obviously the power of friendship is important. The power of personal invitation can be life-saving.

Why? Why are we to GO and make disciples? I think this answer is probably more emotional than practical. Why? Because we know it's good. We know living with grace and forgiveness is good. We know that our journey is more fulfilling when Christ walks with us. I'm never going to tell you it's easier, but it's whole, not fractured. We know that a life filled with faith is better than a life filled with dis-ease. We know people who are kind and just and gracious and loving and helpful because they walk with Christ.

Why do we GO and make disciples? Because we want to share what is good. Why? Because that's what God expects of us, the church.

Sometimes the church needs a little bit more fire ... a little bit more spirit. Sometimes the church needs to be more authentic. Sometimes the church needs re-think the mission. Making disciples ... I'll tell you how to make disciples: you get a new member, you baptize them, you teach them and then you're done. Mission accomplished.

Sometimes, I'm afraid, that's our understanding of the command, of the expectation. But that isn't the understanding of Jesus. He implied ... no, he didn't imply, he forced the issue that making disciples is a life-long process. It's doesn't end with membership vows. It involves teaching people continuously to understand what being in a relationship with Christ involves. It means that the church's mission is not a matter of making people into members of an organization but it is the ongoing task of equipping people for discipleship as participants of the living body of Christ. It's a lot easier to make members; once they're in and paying their dues, you're done. Making disciples assumes commitment and responsibility.

Are you ready for that? I hope so. And I hope for me, too.

Go and make disciples. GO. Go. Go. Go. Here's how I would suggest you go: invite a friend. Invite a friend into your experience of worship, your experience of community, your experience of faith. Tell somebody that God's been good in your life. People are hungry and we don't offer them the love and the grace of a life-changing God, they will settle for lesser gods elsewhere.

What does God expect of the church? To be about changing the world. It's time to GO and do just that!

Amen.