

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.

June 30-July 1, 2007
Luke 11:1-9
Rev. Scott Carlson

Questions You May Have Asked:
#5: How Can I Pray?

I have a couple of questions to start with today. My hope is that you are going to help me out. Are you willing?

I love golf. How many people here golf? Raise your hands? Okay, for all of you golfers, what makes a good golf swing? What are things you need to remember to do to strike the ball well?

(Listen to their responses).

Wonderful, thank you for your help. Now that we have all heard what makes for a good golf swing, I want to tell you the following story that brought a smile to my face. A young man and a priest are playing together. At a short par-3 the priest asks, "What are you going to use on this hole my son?" The young man says, "An 8-iron, father. How about you?" The priest says, "I'm going to hit a soft seven and pray."

The young man hits his 8-iron and puts the ball on the green. The priest tops his 7-iron and dribbles the ball out a few yards. The young man says, "I don't know about you father, but in my church when we pray, we keep our head down."

Today, we are going to talk about prayer and it is not just about keeping our head down. We are continuing our sermon series for the summer about *Questions You May Have Asked*. Prayer is one of those things that for some reason, we are just expected to know how to do, but many of us don't.

If you have ever wanted to learn how to pray, you are not alone. In fact, for our scripture for today we are told that when the disciples saw Jesus finish up in prayer one day. They asked him to teach them how to pray. ***What we learn from his response is that prayer actually helps us develop and deepen a relationship with God.***

"When you pray say this: 'Father, You are Holy, reveal who you are to us. Bring your justice to the world and set the world right. Continue to provide for us with the food we need. Forgive us and teach us to forgive others. Keep us safe from ourselves and from the Devil.'"

In the model of prayer that Jesus offers, he invites us, to remember several things. He invites us to remember who God is. He invites us to remember that we are a part of a larger world, in which God is at work and in which God wants to bring wholeness and justice to it. He invites us to remember that grace and forgiveness come to us from God, and we can share it with others. He invites us to ask God for protection, from ourselves and the forces at work in the world that want to harm us.

This is the model of prayer that Jesus offers. When you pray, how do you pray? Do you use a model? Do you have a practice for prayer already? If you do, great! Keep it up!

If you don't, then let's talk about prayer. I find that many people want to do better at prayer. But they just don't know where to start. They aren't sure how to go about building prayer into their life. If you want to build prayer into your life, I invite you to consider the following guidelines for your life.

First, determine a time and a place to meet with God. Imagine that you are setting an appointment with God. When you set an appointment with another person, one that is very important to you, you agree on a time to meet and a place to meet. When you are working on building prayer into your life, find out the time of day that works best for you, day after day.

For me, the best time for a regular prayer time is in the morning. I like to do it early, before everyone gets up and moving around the house and before I read the paper. It has now become a habit for me.

I also have my prayer time in the same place each day. There is a chair in our living room that I gather at each day. It is hard for me to sit in that chair at other times of the day, when my mind isn't drifting toward God in prayer.

Second, set a goal that you will pray daily for fourteen consecutive days. What this does, is that it helps prayer to become a habit for you. If you commit to doing it for fourteen days, when you haven't been doing it already, it allows you to move through the one or two difficult days of prayer and get to a place where you can actually experience the presence of God.

Third, find a model for prayer. In our bulletin, I have included one model it is called *The Secret to Abundant Life*. It is a very good model; I have used it for a number of years. But there are other models of prayer as well. In the back of the church, there is another model for prayer and devotion that will help you read through the bible in a year, it is called the *Life Journal*. There are other methods on our website. I have included information on our prayer card on how to access that ([www.sunprairieumc.org/worship/methods of prayer](http://www.sunprairieumc.org/worship/methods%20of%20prayer)).

The most important thing prayer does, is that it helps us connect with God and grow in our relationship with God. It allows us to be open and receptive to the presence of God. It allows us to remember how much God cares for us.

I want to close by telling you a delightful story of being loved. Mary and her husband Jim had a dog named 'Lucky.' Whenever Mary and Jim had company come for a weekend visit they would warn their friends to not leave their luggage open because Lucky would help himself to whatever struck his fancy. Inevitably, someone would forget and something would come up missing.

Mary or Jim would go to Lucky's toy box in the basement and there the treasure would be, amid all of Lucky's other favorite toys. Lucky always stashed his finds in his toy box and he was very particular that his toys stay in the box.

It happened that Mary found out she had breast cancer. Something told her she was going to die of this disease ... in fact; she was just sure it was fatal.

She scheduled the double mastectomy, fear riding her shoulders. The night before she was to go to the hospital she cuddled with Lucky. A thought struck her, "What would happen to Lucky?" Although the three-year-old dog liked Jim, he was Mary's dog through and through. "If I die, Lucky will be abandoned," Mary thought. "He won't understand that I didn't want to leave him." The thought made her sadder than thinking of her own death.

The double mastectomy was harder on Mary than her doctors had anticipated and Mary was hospitalized for over two weeks. Jim took Lucky for his evening walk faithfully, but the little dog just drooped, whining and miserable. Finally the day came for Mary to leave the hospital. When she arrived home, Mary was so exhausted she couldn't even make it up the steps to her bedroom. Jim made his wife comfortable on the couch and left her to nap. Lucky stood watching Mary but he didn't come to her when she called. It made Mary sad but sleep soon overcame her and she dozed.

When Mary woke for a second she couldn't understand what was wrong. She couldn't move her head and her body felt heavy and hot. But panic soon gave way to laughter when Mary realized the problem. She was covered, literally blanketed, with every treasure Lucky owned! While she had slept, the sorrowing dog had made trip after trip to the basement bringing his beloved mistress all his favorite things in life. He had covered her with his love.

Mary forgot about dying. Instead she and Lucky began living again, walking further and further together every day. It's been 12 years now and Mary is still cancer-free. Lucky? He still steals treasures and stashes them in his toy box but Mary remains his greatest treasure.

This story is a reminder to me, that you and I are a great treasure too. We are a great treasure to God who wants to wrap us in God's love. Prayer helps us open our lives to the love of God.

Are you willing to make a commitment to prayer?

Amen.