

*The Next Day*  
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

### **Introduction to the Morning Lesson**

Someone once commented that the ending of fairy tales, "... and they lived happily ever after ..." stops one phrase too short. Another line should be added: "However, the next day ..." Today is Trinity Sunday and it belongs to "the next day." In the liturgical calendar Trinity Sunday is always the Sunday after Pentecost. Pentecost ushered in the birth of the church with ecstatic power. But then what?

We're living the "then what." The community faithful to Jesus Christ lives perpetually in "the next day." At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus. But then what? At Easter we celebrate God's power raising Christ from the dead. But then what? At Pentecost we celebrate the Holy Spirit bringing the good news of Jesus to the whole world. But then what? What are Christians to do the next day? That's what today's text tells us in the well-known words of the Great Commission.

Matthew 28.16-20 (NRSV)

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

### **Introduction**

There was a man who attended church only once a year. Not on Easter or Christmas, but on Trinity Sunday. He said he loved to see the preacher get so confused.

Well, you don't have to come just on Trinity Sunday to see this preacher get confused. But the idea of Trinity — a triune God, one God in three persons, a Tri-unity — is confusing, even to preachers. Trinity Sunday has been a tradition of the church since the 1300s when Pope John XXII ordered that the festival be celebrated each year. The idea of Trinity has become one of the great doctrines of the church yet the word trinity is not in the Bible. It is nowhere spelled out or defined. The scripture leaves it a mystery, a holy mystery. In fact, today's lesson is one of a very few texts in the New Testament that even mentions God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

On the day of resurrection, the angel at the empty tomb instructed the two Marys to tell the eleven remaining disciples to go back to Galilee where they would see Jesus, alive. Today's text is the story of that appearance in Galilee. The disciples came to see Jesus and then they were sent out into the world to do ministry in the name of the Tri-unity. That is still the mandate for the Christian community today: make disciples, baptize, teach obedience to Jesus' commandments. Here are two thoughts to help us realize what this means for us today.

### ONE: The authoritative presence

First, the mandate to make disciples, baptize, and teach is based on the premise of Jesus' authoritative presence. He began by saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." That is not a frivolous comment to be taken lightly. The one who has authority and power over all things earthly and all things heavenly is Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Jesus has the right and the power to command us because all authority belongs to him.

But notice something about Jesus' authority. He has the right to command us but he also declares that he is with us. He gives us an order but he also gives us our greatest comfort.

During World War II at the Westminster Chapel in London, the great British preacher G. Campbell Morgan preached on this text from Matthew. He spoke of the proclamation that Jesus will be with us always. Morgan said it was important that we understand this as a proclamation, not just a promise. The distinction was impressed upon him early in life. He said, "I used to go every Saturday night to read to two old ladies, one of them 85, and the other 87. One night I read this chapter to them, finishing at that point by saying, 'Is not that a wonderful promise?' Whereupon one of them with sparkling eyes and wrinkled face said, 'That is not a promise at all, young man, that is a fact. A promise is of something to come. This is of present application. Moreover a promise is always conditioned. There is no condition here.'"

"I am with you always."

What a proclamation, says Morgan! It's a "word of untiring love" that means the Lord will not tire of our company. It's a "word of perfect patience and power" which means that the Lord is with us "in places of difficulty into which He may lead us, or paths of foolishness into which we may wander." Jesus is present with us in times of "danger through adversity" and "the more subtle danger of prosperity." He is present in times of loneliness, hours of temptation, and in every service rendered. The Lord is with us, and our "only difficulty is that sometimes we are so foolish that we do not see Him, but He is there."<sup>2</sup>

A retired professor, who had lost his wife shortly after retirement, was told by a young pastor, "The church is not a lonely hearts club." The professor was incensed and responded, "That's all the church is, a lonely hearts club. I come here because I am lonely for God, and I need to know that God has not abandoned me."<sup>3</sup>

The professor was right and not the young preacher. (Hopefully he learned from that.) We are here because our hearts long for God and the authoritative presence of God is with us in Jesus Christ.

### TWO: The Imperative

My second point today is about what Jesus commands us to do. The authoritative presence of Jesus Christ places an imperative upon us: make disciples, baptize, teach obedience to his commandments. That's the imperative. That's the mandate. That's Jesus'

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts For Preaching, Year A* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 344.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Bryant, "Sermon Reviews," *Lectionary Homiletics* 10.6 (1999): 34.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Boyd, "Sermon Ideas for Matthew 28:16-20 Part 3," The Sermon Mall, May 1999, [webedit@theology.org](mailto:webedit@theology.org).

command.

Do not think of this just as a generic commandment for disciples long ago. This is a living word addressed today to you and me in the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury. This church is to make disciples, baptize, and teach obedience. There is nothing optional about it. We cannot say that we don't want to do this, that we're too old to do this or too young, that we're too busy to do this, or that we don't know how to do this. Our Lord, Jesus Christ himself, our connection to God, our Savior, our Boss — to speak in crass business terms — has told you and me to do this. Jesus has told us to jump and our only question can be “how high, Lord, how high?”

But notice something about the text which I commented on in my Easter sermon a few weeks ago. At the beginning of the text we're told that the eleven disciples went to Galilee to see the risen Jesus. “When they saw him, they worshiped him; *but some doubted.*” Isn't that amazing? Some doubted. After all they had been through and seen, even in the presence of their crucified and resurrected Lord, some doubted. That's one of the most amazing statements in the New Testament and one of the most realistic for it describes how we really are even today.

We believe in Jesus Christ but we also have doubts. We don't see everything the same way. There are different perspectives and opinions here on almost any subject we could name. “They worshiped him; but some doubted.” That described the first disciples and it describes us too. We believe but we also doubt.

But notice that Jesus did not say to those first disciples, “Will those of you who have some doubts please step aside.” He did not say, “My imperative doesn't apply to you who have questions or differing viewpoints.” No. To the worshiping doubters and the doubting worshipers, he said, “Go. Make disciples. Baptize. Teach obedience. And I'm always with you.” Jesus didn't say, “Do ministry when you all agree about everything.” He said, “Do ministry.” So to be Christians who do what Jesus told us to do means we need to renew our commitment to the church and its ministry.

Of course, this means we have a big dilemma. The dilemma is that it is not very important that we as an institution prosper. I don't think God cares at all about the *institution* of the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury. But on the other hand, we don't relate to, know, or serve God in a vacuum. We relate to, know, and serve God in a community and human communities always take some kind of institutional form. So the challenge for all of us to grow in our faith isn't for the point of making this institution prosper but it cannot be done outside of this institution or some other institution. If this church isn't to your liking, find some other church that is but when you do, there will be an institution there. That's the dilemma.

The challenge to serve Christ “on the next day” is to have greater faith. But the arena where this is going to happen is within a community of faith. That's why our commitments of money and time and energy to this church are so important. It's also why I'm preaching what some of you may think of as a stewardship sermon on a non-stewardship Sunday. Obedience to Jesus' commands in terms of money, time, and energy isn't just for stewardship campaigns. Faithfulness is for every Sunday and every “next day.”

## Conclusion

In a little book called *Good News from North Haven*, a pastor named Michael Lindvall writes about his experience in a small church in rural, northern Minnesota. He tells how once after a baptism in church he found one of his members sitting alone, weeping, in the sanctuary. Baptisms in that little church traditionally involved the grandparents and aunts and uncles all standing as the newest member of their family was held by the minister for the sacrament.

The woman who was crying was named Mildred Corey and through her tears she told Michael that she had a new grandson and that she was thinking about his baptism. Pastor Michael said, "Have your daughter Tina and her husband call me to make arrangements."

"Tina's got no husband," Mildred said. "She's eighteen, was confirmed in this church just four years ago ... she started to see this older boy." She hesitated and then the rest of the story came tumbling out. Tina got pregnant and the boyfriend joined the Air Force. Tina decided to keep the baby and she wanted to have him baptized in her church but she was nervous to come talk to the pastor.

This happened long enough ago that Tina's situation raised eyebrows. Actually it still does. It was controversial enough that the Session had a discussion about the appropriateness of the whole matter before approving, which it did. The real problem, everybody knew, was when the minister got to the part when the whole family stands up and there wasn't going to be any, and Tina's situation would be there for everyone to see.

So the day arrived, the last Sunday in Advent and the church was full. An elder announced "Tina Corey presents her son for baptism ..."

Down the aisle she came, nervously, shaking slightly with month old Jimmy in her arms, a blue pacifier stuck in his mouth. The scene hurt every bit as much as they knew it would. "Who stands with this child?" Pastor Michael asked and Mildred, Tina's mother, stood up all by herself.

Michael writes, "I was just about to ask Tina the parent's question when I became aware of movement in the pews. Old Angus McDowell had stood up in his blue serge suit, Minnie McDowell beside him. Then a couple elders stood up, then the sixth grade Sunday School teacher stood up, then a new young couple in the church, and soon, before my incredulous eyes, the whole church was standing up with Tina and little Jimmy."<sup>4</sup>

You see, that's what we're about. This is the community where we baptize and where we celebrate what it means to be baptized people on a baptismal journey, and where we receive our marching orders to go out in the name of Jesus Christ to tell the Tinias that it doesn't matter how much life has beaten you up. Here's the place where you are welcomed and forgiven and loved.

And isn't it worth some sacrificial effort on our part to be that kind of place? This is the next day, the time to reach out, to deepen our faith, to pray harder and work harder and give more than ever before, in the name of our triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — one God, now and forever.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael L. Lindvall, *Good News from North Haven: A Year In the Life of a Small Town* (New York: Crossroads/Carlisle, 2002) 168-175.