

A CHURCH FOR THE CITY: A SENDING CHURCH

Matthew 28:16-20

May 15, 2022

In 2016, a video went viral of a six-year-old boy named Jordan's baptism. It shows little Jordan in a large pool of water, anxiously awaiting the next few moments when he will be dunked into the water. The pastor stands in the pool next to fidgeting Jordan, and we hear him proclaim to the small boy, "By the profession of your faith and the Lord Jesus Christ, I now baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and..."

But before the reverend could get to the Holy Spirit, impatient Jordan throws himself face first into the water, shouting, "Oh, I'll just do it!" essentially baptizing himself.

As the congregation erupts in laughter, he reemerges from the pool, throws his hands in the air and screams, "I'm baptized!" Jordan wastes no time. Without waiting for instruction, he dashes soaking from the pool into the crowd of witnesses ready to welcome him to the community of faith. Trusting that God's love is *always* near, he just couldn't wait any longer; Jordan had to *go*, proclaiming God's presence in his life.

I wonder if this is how Jesus hoped the disciples felt when he sent *them* out into the world saying, "Go. Make disciples of all nations." I wonder if Jesus hoped that the disciples would be so overcome with joy about the good news that they couldn't help but run, proclaiming God's goodness without any hesitation.

Something tells me, though, that this is not how it went down, that instead of excitement for what God would be doing in their lives and in the world, that what the disciples actually felt more resembled apprehension and fear.

Fear about where they'd be sent and how they'd be received. Fear about who they would encounter. Fear

that Jesus' Great Commission would send them not into a world expectant of the good news, but instead into a desert of unknowns.

Truly, there is nothing quite like being sent without knowing where you are going. It takes a lot of courage to simply "go," trusting that the unknowns of life are no match for God's steadfast presence.

We know what this feels like. In 2020, we, as a church family, found ourselves in a similar situation. Stunned into silence and separation due to a global pandemic and yet needing to carry on. Full of unknowns, we knew that we had to "go," even if we weren't quite sure where we might end up.

But one thing became clear as time passed along. No matter how many fears we faced about the future unfolding before us, the narrative of this congregation stayed the same. With conviction, we proclaimed over and over and over again: *God is with us*.

With this refrain, we rallied together as a community, and we faithfully lived God's call on our lives in the world. Faithfully, we witnessed to God's presence in our community through our food pantry, our creative worship, how we welcomed new members and ordained deacons and elders, through starting and sustaining ministries that reached the masses even as we stayed isolated.

This resolute conviction of "*God is with us*" is key to being a sending church because in order to be people who are sent, we have to be people who believe that God is with us *now*. That God does not just go before us. That God goes with us because God has never once left our side.

Going with courage—being sent—requires us to see God *here* and to know that God is already where we are going. And that we do not go there alone. We, as people of faith, *must* go. We cannot *not* go.

The very first Sunday I ever stepped into a Presbyterian church happened to be Communion Sunday. I entered the sanctuary, took a look at the bulletin, saw that communion was taking place, and panicked. Growing up in a church tradition that emphasized communion as a sacrament taken only by those of that denomination, I was unsure where I, a non-Presbyterian at the time, stood with this church. Cautiously, I walked over to one of the available pastors. I leaned in and quietly said, “I see that Communion is today. I’m not Presbyterian, and I’m not really sure of the ‘rules.’ But can I participate?”

Before I could even get the question out, he looked me straight in the eye and said, “Of course. Everyone is welcome. This is the Lord’s table. This is not a Presbyterian table.”

That moment was the beginning of my call to ministry. For the first time in my faith journey, I truly felt as if there was nothing that kept me from God’s grace. I couldn’t help but leave that space changed. I was sent from that sanctuary with a new perspective of how Christ’s presence changes us daily because God’s grace covers us.

Reminded that God gathers us and seals upon our hearts the truth of God’s promise, of God’s grace and love that cannot be removed, we are sent to proclaim God’s wholehearted welcome to one another. The Great Commission calls us to be faithful witnesses to God’s presence in the world because we know that there is no place we go without God. Christ’s call on the disciples in Matthew 28, and Christ’s call on our lives as the church, means that we live into discipleship, and we do this by proclaiming God’s faithfulness to all people.

And we do this because God is faithful to us. We have a faithful God who came from heaven to earth, walking alongside us. Our God went to the depths

of the earth to proclaim that there is no place that we go without God with us. God, who is faithful, prepares a way, calls us to go, and guides us, even when we’re not quite sure where we are going.

And we faithfully respond to this gift. We respond by being sent, sent to declare God’s presence. And because we trust that God is with us wherever we go, as the community of faith, we also know that we go together.

Part of the Lake Fellow program here at Second Church includes partnering with a local congregation for further ministry practice. For the past two years I’ve had the privilege of serving at Edinburgh Presbyterian Church not far from here. A few months ago, at one of my last session meetings, I found myself sitting in the community room below the sanctuary of the church. We were nearing the end of our time together that evening, about to close in prayer, but first we held a moment of silence.

I was struck in that silence by two things. First, my gratitude for Edinburgh Presbyterian Church and the relationships that had been built. Second, I was struck by the sheer bulk of the silence that almost seemed alive. I became acutely aware of not just the people in that room, but of the magnitude of the ministry done there that spanned generations. God’s call on our lives and the lives of every saint who has passed through those doors and answered the call to “be sent” was there in that room with us. It was extraordinarily quiet, but the stories of all the saints sent before us were calling us forward to new ministry that would be done with Christ at the helm.

We are a community of faith that transcends these walls. And because we transcend these walls, hear this: The Great Commission is not just “great” because of the magnitude of its call. It is not just “great” because Jesus commands us to “go.” The Great Commission is *great* because the breadth of the people that it covers—the amount of people who have been, are, and will be sent out in the world to proclaim God’s welcome, grace, and love—is *great*. It’s massive! The Great Commission isn’t just

for the disciples, and it's not just for those of us in this church. It is for all.

And it is built by being sent. In just a few weeks, the Footsteps of Faith trip will take place, taking sixteen graduating seniors from this congregation as we travel the footsteps of the Apostle Paul. In these past few weeks leading up to the trip, we have been sharing our individual faith stories. Each student has faithfully shared where God has shown up in their lives. And not just God—they've shared how they have shown up in each other's lives. Upon reflecting on the stories being shared, one student commented on how striking it is that our individual faiths come together collectively to reveal God's presence. This student said, "We didn't do anything to make us think, 'Oh, I'm supporting your faith story now.' It just sort of happened."

Living life—our collective experience—joins our faith stories together and ultimately our sending, because God calls us to each other.

We gather together, remembering our community, and boldly proclaiming God's gracious love and hope into the world. We are sent because Christ goes before us, and the community of faith that we have here goes with us. Jesus commands us all to go, to go in the confidence of God's love and power and knowing that that love and power is great.

Inspired by this good news, we cannot wait to be sent. So, *go*, like little Jordan who couldn't wait to show others that he had been claimed by God in his baptism. *Go*, like our ancestors of faith before us who heard God's call in the wilderness and no matter how hard they tried could not deviate from God's presence. *Go*, as a church for the city of Indianapolis, proclaiming with gusto and assurance wherever you are that "God *is* with us!"

And as you go, hold in the marrow of your bones these words from Christ: "I am with you always..." Here...and there...and everywhere...

"Go," Jesus says.

And we do.

We go, as people who are sent, with God's promised presence and the community of faith surrounding us. We go with God's presence sealed on our hearts forever. Alleluia! Amen.