

A PURPOSE AND A PROMISE

June 19, 2011

No one ever had a bad word to say about Bill...and that's because there simply was not ever a bad word to be said. Bill was a man who was gentle, hard-working, honest, compassionate and, most especially, humble. And nobody knew that about Bill better than Jim did. You see, Jim was Bill's son. And Jim loved his dad with all his heart. He respected his dad. He looked up to his dad. He idolized his dad.

And it's because of that that Jim dreaded the conversation he needed to have with his dad for months. He didn't want to do it, but he couldn't avoid it. So Jim went to see his father and he said what he needed to say. He said: ***"Dad, I'm going to be a veterinarian."***

Bill's response to that news was that of a good father. He said: ***"Jim, I'm proud of you. I support your decision and I want your dreams to come true."*** And then Bill wrapped his arms around his son.

Nevertheless, in that moment, Jim knew how much his news had hurt his father. You see, Bill was a truck farmer, and he had a reputation. The produce that he grew was the best produce – everybody knew it – in the city and in the county. And the family name: that name was priceless. It meant quality to the customers and it meant integrity to the grocers who sold it. Bill was the third generation in his family in that business. His father and his grandfather before him had grown the best produce in the whole area on that same land. Jim was to be the fourth generation.

For years, Bill had dreamed of passing the farm on to Jim...just as his father had passed the farm on to him...just as his grandfather had passed it on to his father. That farm...that produce...was their family's identity and it was their legacy. It was Bill's purpose. But that day, in order to support *Jim's* dream, *Bill's* dream died. And so, for Bill, there was nothing to pass on to Jim. Eventually, when Bill couldn't manage it anymore, he sold that farm. And, of course you know that, in selling the farm, the one thing that was the most valuable single asset that Bill owned was the family name.

What is your family legacy? What is your family's identity? What is your purpose?

It was an auspicious moment when the risen Jesus with His disciples climbed the mountain and met there together. Jesus came to that mountain and summoned His disciples there so that He could pass on *His* family's identity and *His* family's legacy...so that Jesus could give to His disciples His own purpose. But that moment; that auspicious moment on the mountain wasn't a very promising one. The crowd that gathered with Jesus on the mountain that day numbered only eleven. It was a small group (in numbers, you way outstrip that group this morning!). Eleven disciples: it was pretty obvious that one was missing, and that one who was missing was Judas because he had tendered his permanent resignation.

Eleven disciples: it was a pathetic little group and, in that group of eleven, there were some who doubted...some whose attention was divided...some whose feelings were mixed about being there on the mountain with this Lord of theirs who had been crucified...some who had competing agendas who thought maybe they should be doing something else besides listening

one more time to Jesus of Nazareth...some whose commitment was compromised. Eleven disciples...and some doubted: sounds like a contemporary scene, doesn't it? It could even sound like the church!

It was, by all appearances, a discouraging situation...but it didn't discourage Jesus! To those eleven disciples, some of whom doubted that day, Jesus said:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Can you imagine any greater claim in all the world?

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

God the Father has given me all authority. It rests on my shoulders. And, guess what? Now it's yours!

Jesus takes everything that He lived for, that He worked for, that He prayed for, that He sacrificed for and, yes, that He died for and He gives it – wholesale – to His pitiful little band of lukewarm disciples. ***“Here's my identity,”*** He says. ***“Here's my legacy...here's my purpose. Take it. It's yours!*** What a gift...and what an expectation! ***“GO!”*** says Jesus. ***“Now that you've got the gift, go and make disciples of all nations.***

Disciples, you know, are students. Disciples are followers. Disciples learn and grow every day. They learn and grow, live and work, laugh and play, together in community.

“Go, make disciples of all nations.”

And in the Greek of the New Testament the word for nation is no different than the word for people. Go make disciples of all people...no exceptions. Leave no one out.

Go, make disciples and if you want to know how to do it, here it is. Do it ***by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*** In other words, bring them into the family of God...the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit...God who is, by nature, a family. Bring them into that family and give them a new birth. Give them a place to belong and to live in God's amazing grace. Tell them that God's family of Father, Son and Spirit includes them, just as it includes you. That's how you should do it: baptizing in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

And then do it by ***teaching all that I have commanded you.*** Now at first blush, that methodology sounds like it could have a syllabus fit for a graduate level course. ***Teach them all that I have commanded you.*** But it's really not so complicated after all, because this is the simplicity of what Jesus commands. You know the commands, don't you?

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and the first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

That's not so much...and yet it's everything. Or, as Jesus says it even more simply:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Teach them all that I have commanded you.

GO! GO! GO! Make disciples of all nations!

Make a new beginning in a community of belonging for a lifetime of living and growing into the life and the love of Jesus Christ.

GO! GO! GO! Make disciples of all nations!

It is the one purpose...it is the only purpose for us as individuals and for the church.

GO! Make disciples of all nations!

The command Jesus gives us is very simple. And His purpose? Well, it couldn't be more clear. And yet our tendency is to complicate the whole thing and to too easily exempt ourselves from the command. Sometimes we do that by enshrining things that don't belong in the command's place...by enshrining traditions and tools that the church uses in the place of the work that they're meant to do and the Lord they're meant to serve. The command, you see, is not about inviting people into our culture. It's about converting people to the faith, and the hope, and the love of Jesus. It's not about protecting ourselves from the changes that surround us in the world. Rather, it's about changing whatever we must to do the work of Jesus Christ.

GO! GO! GO! Make disciples of all nations!

It's not a passive gift that Jesus gives us, but rather an active directive. It's not about what God is going to come and do for us. No, it's about what we are going to go and do for God.

What is your purpose?

GO! Make disciples of all nations!

Those who heard that command first were incomplete...only eleven of the twelve...and, in that little group, some doubted.

Sometimes it's the same for us. Sometimes we're incomplete. Sometimes those in our little group doubt as well, yet the command remains as strident as it is imperative, even and especially strident and imperative when our resources are meager and the commitment is weak the command remains:

GO! Make disciples of all nations!

And the expectation in that command is that we will answer it by rising above every obstacle rather than by using the obstacles that are surely before us to exempt us from our active participation in the family of God.

Yes, friends, the greatest gift God ever gave us is not a possession! It's a command...and it's a purpose.

GO! Make disciples of all nations.

And in that command...implicit in that command...there is this wonderful good news that God *trusts* us...that Jesus *believes* in us...that the family of God has more confidence in the human family than we have in ourselves.

GO! Make disciples of all nations.

Well, I have to tell you about the little controversy we had in the church office this past week. Today, you know, is Fathers Day. The controversy is about where the apostrophe goes. Now this is important! Apostrophes, as we know, indicate possession. They are not what you need to use to add an *S* to the end of every word, although some people think that that's so. Apostrophes show possession. The traditional way of spelling Father's Day is F-a-t-h-e-r-apostrophe-s. That's traditional. The style books all say so. But, there are some who think, you know, even though that's what tradition says, it really isn't appropriate because Father's Day isn't about one father; it's about many. So it should be F-a-t-h-e-r-s-apostrophe. That would indicate that it belongs to many fathers. The third report (and if you look at your bulletin you'll see it's there) is that there needs to be no apostrophe at all, because the day belongs to God. And, in this day that belongs to our God, we celebrate fatherhood...and we honor fathers...and we give thanks for what fathers give to their families and their children.

Traditionally we have thought of fathers as those folks who, in their love, give provision, and protection, and family legacy. But, in this world, we also know that sometimes all three – provision, protection and family legacy – are beyond the possibility of a father's resources.

Because of Jim's decision, Bill couldn't pass on his family's three-generation-long business to his son. But Bill passed on something much more important to Jim. He passed on honesty, and compassion, and honor. He passed on integrity, and commitment, and gentleness. And, most of all, he passed on to Jim a deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

GO! Make disciples of all nations!

For fathers, and for mothers, and for all of us, this is our purpose! And the purpose does not come without a promise...the promise that says, very simply:

And lo, I am with you always – always – to the close of the age.

When we commit ourselves to Jesus' purpose, then the promise is ours as well. When we make disciples...when we share our faith...when we bring others along on this great adventure of trusting and believing, Jesus is with us. We are never, no never not once, on our own, no matter how difficult our days or how deep our sorrow. As the 23rd Psalm says it so beautifully:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear...

Why? ...*for thou art with me... I will be with you always, even when death's shadow is great.*

The United Church of Canada gathers its faith around a creed that is simply called A New Creed, and at the end of that creed it says this:

In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

May that promise be especially close, and real, and comforting for the family of Allison Bush today. ***We are not alone.***

We have one purpose: *Go, make disciples of all nations.*

No matter how few we are...no matter how divided our attention or compromised our commitment...we don't have a choice. We must rise up to Jesus' expectation! And we can do it...we can live up to our one purpose because we have God's greatest promise: ***Lo, I am with you always to the close of the age...*** No matter how difficult or fulfilling the work...no matter how desperate our grief or thrilling our joy, we are not alone. Jesus is always with us.

What is your purpose? *To make disciples! So say it with me! What is your purpose? TO MAKE DISCIPLES! And what is your promise? Jesus is with us always! Say it with me! What is your promise? JESUS IS WITH US ALWAYS!*

So, dear friends, let us rise to that ***purpose*** and live it out...even as we believe the ***promise*** and claim our place in the family of God.

Go! GO! Yes, *Go, and make disciples of all nations. And lo, I am with you always* – every day – *to the close of the age.* Amen.

Charles E. Mize
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Trinity Sunday
June 19, 2011