



Go Therefore ...

Matthew 28:16-20

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

June 4, 2023

Good morning! It is a joy to be gathered today, and to be sharing in the blessings of the United Methodist connection with our guests from Newnan First United Methodist. I don't know how much Rev. Chappell shared with you all about his connection to me – but Andrew's (that's what I call him), who is the senior pastor at Newnan First, and I go way back. Andrew's father, the Rev. Davis Chappell, was my pastor while I was in high school. So, as Andrew is just a few years younger than me, he and I spent quite a bit of time together in the youth group at Lawrenceville First UMC. We learned to play the guitar together, and we spent more hours than I care to imagine watching and/or quoting Family Guy.

I'm certain I could say more, but to ensure you arrive back home with as reverent a picture of the Rev. Chappell as you had when you left, I don't think I should offer anything else about our high school days. But again, it's a joy to have you sharing your musical gifts in worship this morning.

In these first few weeks of June, as we are energized by the gifting of the Spirit, which we celebrated at the remembrance of Pentecost last week, we are reflecting on the mission and ministry of our church. Washington Street Methodist has a long history in this community. The building we worship in this morning was first constructed in 1851. Our congregation has long been located here at the center of Old Town.

Last week, we talked about how the first gift of the Spirit at Pentecost is the capacity to cultivate community. The first change in the disciples following the gifting of the Spirit was that their quiet prayer gathering became a boisterous fellowship, which attracted the attention of those around them. As the community around the disciples came to inspect the early morning commotion, they found themselves welcomed and invited in to the Spirit-ed gathering in the native language of each.

Last week we heard from Kelli and Jenn, who talked about our Open Table Breakfast Ministry and ALIVE!, both of which, though presenting as programs to offer food resourcing to the hungry and underserved, are ministries of community. Central to both of those ministries is the shared fellowship they offer and the community of partnerships which give them life.

This morning, I want to consider another gifting of the Spirit – which is the capacity to bring about change.

On that Pentecost morning, following the commotion when the Spirit arrived, Peter delivered a sermon that further invited the community to embrace the power of God in Jesus Christ. His invitation echoed the charge of Jesus in Matthew 28 – as part of what we call, the Great Commission.

In Matthew's Gospel, there's little narrative regarding the resurrected Christ. In Matthew 28:1, Mary goes to the tomb, and we learn that Jesus is not there. By Matthew 28:20, just 19 verses later, Jesus is offering his final farewell with a missional charge to the disciples, saying: "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."

The United Methodist Church adopted this *Great Commission* as its own mission statement through an act of the General Conference in 1996. The mission statement at the time offered clarity to our doctrinal directives and church constitution that the United Methodist Church exists, at its core, "To make disciples of Jesus Christ." A decade later, the mission statement was amended by addition. In 2008, the General Conference added on a clarifying clause, so that, as of today, the mission statement reads, "The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ *for the transformation of the world.*"

Bishop Gregory Palmer, who was the president of the Council of Bishops at the time, stated that the addition came in response to a question that asked, "To what end do we make disciples of Jesus Christ? Is making disciples an end in itself, or does God have a purpose for which He redeems us, recovers us, and makes us whole?"ⁱ Palmer further offers in affirmation, "We seek to join God in the redemption of the whole world."

As I've stated before, the arc of the Biblical narrative is one long story. You can't read a single verse, or even a single chapter, and understand the invitation of the full Gospel. For example, if you only read Acts, chapter 2, verses 1 - 41, you might think that the purpose of the gifting of the Spirit was simply to bring people in. After the Spirit arrives and gifts the people with the disruption of invitation, we find in verse 41 that 3,000 people were baptized that day. There's a joyous reception of new members that seems to be a fulfillment of the Great Commission.

But chapter 2 doesn't end in verse 41. Chapter 2 continues by telling us that "all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." This kind of communal sharing was in itself a radical shift in the way of 1st Century life. The welcome of baptism was not the end of the process – the welcome of baptism was just the first step in a radical transformation.

If we keep reading, going into chapter 3 and beyond, we find that the disciples were now healing people, as Christ had before. Though the narrative in Acts centers around Peter, and eventually Paul, we continue to read examples of community transformation, with the expansion of the witness of the Spirit to those who had never been welcomed into the Jewish community before. Gentiles were claimed as part of the body. A Eunuch was baptized, which was something no one thought God would allow. Saul, a persecutor of the Christian Church, became Paul, a fierce defender of the gospel. It's story after story of transformation.

The Spirit doesn't just gift us the capacity to welcome others in, the Spirit gifts us to be part of God's transforming work in the world. The work of transformation looks differently in each church and

community. There are people, systems, and structures that need transformation that vary from city to city, and nation to nation. The kind of work we do at Washington Street may not look like the work of Newnan First, because our communities are quite different. The work we do as churches in America may look quite different than the work of our European or African siblings, because our nations, continents, and cultures are quite different.

In just a minute, I'm going to invite Carroll and Whitney to come and speak about a couple of ways we share in ministry with our community partners – partners who are focused on the work of transformation. As we are celebrating and highlighting a few of the ways we engage in the ministry, I invite you to consider how you are sharing in this work. The Leadership Board invites you to consider your financial commitment to our congregational work; how might your financial giving support the work of transformation in Alexandria through Washington Street. But just as importantly, I invite you to consider your commitment of time and of sharing in the work of God in and through the church.

There is great work to be done for the glory of God in this community, and we have maintained our location at the center of town to be a part of that transformative work. I invite you to claim your place in the work of God, that together we might be part of the United Methodist mission, as we make disciples of Jesus Christ *for the transformation of the world*.

Our ministry highlights today are offered by Carroll Robertson, who, among other areas of service, helps lead our team that provides lunches at the Carpenter's Shelter. And our second speaker today is Whitney Parnell, who is the Founder and CEO of Service Never Sleeps. I appreciate you both being here today, and invite you to come and offer a few words.

ⁱ Christie R. House. "United Methodist mission statement revised." May 1, 2008. <http://umnews.org>. Retrieved June 1, 2023.