

SLD06.19.11 Trinity Sunday
Intro to Summer Sermon Series on Sacred Communities
Matthew 28:16-20
Emory Presbyterian Church
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Where Do We Fit?

The text I just read is often called The Great Commission; Jesus’ marching orders to his earliest disciples: “Go and make disciples of all nations.” There’s a lot of ways of interpreting that command – even just placing the emphasis on its various key words seems to alter its meaning:

- **Go** and make disciples of all nations. As in “what are you doing sitting around in this sanctuary? Get on out of here!
- Go and **make** disciples – that is, force people to follow Jesus or either get their heads chopped off, as in the Crusades.
- Go and make **disciples** – that is, don’t just lead people to some magical moment of conversion; nurture and grow them in faith over a lifetime.
- Go and make disciples of...what?...**all nations!** The grand justification for the “missional” domination of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

You can see why Jesus’ Great Commission has been interpreted in such a wide variety of way over the centuries.

Well, you know how each summer for a number of years now I’ve been preaching a Summer Saints Series in which we explore the lives of extraordinary individuals, both historical and contemporary, for whatever might be helpful for our discipleship? Well, this year, instead of focusing on individuals, I plan for us to take a look at sacred *communities* – at *groups* of people who, over the ages, have organized themselves according to *their* interpretation of Jesus’ Great Commission.

You can see in your bulletins the ones we’ll be exploring. They are, in chronological order of their founding, if not my preaching:

- The Early Church in Acts, from the first century

- The 4th century Egyptian Desert Mothers and Fathers
- The British Iona/Lindisfarne communities, founded in the 6th century and continuing to the present
- The Italian Franciscans of the 13th century
- The Beguines of the Netherlands, an organized group of European women of the 13th & 14th centuries.
- The Taize Community founded by Brother Roger in France in 1940.
- The L'Arche Community founded in 1964 for the mentally disabled
- Our own Open Door Community founded in 1980 by, among others, Ed Loring and Murphy Davis.
- My personal retreat center in middle Georgia, Green Bough House of Prayer, founded in 1987 by Fay Key and Steve Bullington.
- St. Brigid of Kildare, a Methodist monastery in Minneapolis founded in 1999.
- and finally, the quite recent virtual reality of the Second Life Gospel movement.

The underlying question, of course, throughout our exploration of this somewhat idiosyncratic listing of communities, will be the same as for our former summer saints series, which is, *not* how do we measure up, but what can we learn from them? What do they model for us? How do their risks, practices and life lessons challenge us, convict us, encourage us? Where does their experience warn us? Where does their wisdom broaden our imagination? And, of course, where are they just plain looney? These are the questions we'll be pondering this summer as we examine these "sacred" communities.

Of course, the same doctrinal rules apply as well to this summer's series. If we in the Reformed tradition don't worship individual saints, we sure as heck don't worship whole gaggles of them organized into communities. In fact, convinced as we are of the fundamental and inescapable brokenness of all humanity, we Presbyterians use the language of holiness very advisedly whether referring to individuals or communities, either one.

Still, if we reject any Methodist and Catholic notions of human progress toward perfection, we cannot help but note that some expression of discipleship reflect more effort, more discipline, more commitment; perhaps even more "accomplishment" than others. So even though we don't believe that you or I or anyone else can actually achieve

anything close to “sainthood” on our own steam, we nevertheless recognize and aspire to rich and generative models of discipleship wherever they surface.

And so this summer we turn our attention to *communal* models of rich and generative discipleship, in order to understand their vision, appreciate their challenges, learn from their destinies; to open ourselves to whatever in their experience captures our attention. Makes us wish we lived *that* kind of life. Or makes us ever grateful that we *don't*.

My hope during this exploration of a continuum of Christian communities over the ages is that we at EPC will discover our own place in it. Over the infinite span of God's redemptive history, we are all, are we not, pilgrims on the same path guided by the same Light? So, where along the time-honored spectrum of communal efforts to embody the Great Commission, do we here at 1886 N. Decatur Rd, Atlanta, Ga., U.S.A. fit? Where would we *like* to fit? And where, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, might the vision, dynamics and practices of other communities leaven the dough of our own?

I sought, though, as I planned this series, some sort of paradigm by which we might assess all these distinctive communities, and our own – all so different in time and form and even intention? With what sort of rubric, what Rosetta Stone, might we measure the power or effectiveness or even the faithfulness of such varied bodies of Christ?

Recently in Macedonia Ministry, the dear and ever-gifting group of clergy who have been meeting together with one another and Tom Tewell over the last three year – our final meeting comes this month with a retreat at the end of this week, which makes me both sad and deeply, deeply grateful for all that I, and we at this church, have learned over these last three years. In any case, recently Tom introduced us to a new book by one

Robert Schnase (dreadful name, “Schnase”) called Five Faithful Practices of Fruitful Congregations.¹

Now I haven’t finished reading this book though I plan to. In fact, I intend to ask Session to read it along with me, and so requested 9 additional copies of Tom, which he promptly supplied. (Now *that’s* the kind of access to resources I’m *really* going to miss.) But whatever the contents of this book, on the cover is what to me is a lively and germane list of what makes for a vital Christian congregation.

Addressing five sort of no brainer dimensions of church life: hospitality, worship, faith development, mission, and generosity, Bishop Schnase adds some delightfully piquant adjectives which, for me, helpfully distinguish between business as usual in a faith community, and the life-changing, firecracker sparkle of the Spirit.

The adjectives suggested by the good bishop are: Radical, Passionate, Intentional, Risk-taking, and Extravagant.

Now, you gotta admit, whether describing a rock concert, a political campaign, a personal relationship, or a philosophy of life, “radical, passionate, intentional, risk-taking, and extravagant” automatically let us know we’re in for a ride, right? That this is no lazy tubing down the Chattahoochee; it’s Class 4 rapids on the Colorado. Not exactly how we tend to experience or describe church, right?

But apply these adjectives to Jesus and see if they fit - “radical,” “passionate,” “intentional,” “risk-taking,” “extravagant.” I think they do. So it pleases me to borrow Schnase’s lively modifiers as a kind of rubric with which to assess our Summer Sacred Communities. Here’s what he comes up with:

- Radical hospitality

¹ *Five Fruitful Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Robert Schanse, (Bishop, Missouri Conference, The United Methodist Church, Abindgon Press, Nashville, Tn. 2007.

- Passionate worship
- Intentional faith development
- Risk-taking mission and service
- Extravagant generosity

Suddenly, John Calvin meets Liberace! Prince Charles meets *Prince!* (Or, The Artist Formerly Known as Prince.) All In The Family Edna meets Zsa Zsa Gabor! And sparks fly!

Radical! Passionate! Intentional! Risk-taking! Extravagant! That's the kind of congregation we are, right? Or *wish* we were? *Some* of us?

Certainly we've made some progress those directions in recent years, for example, moving from being a "friendly" church (did you ever hear a church described itself as "*unfriendly?*") to a genuinely open-hearted one, systematically widening our relational and institutional boundaries to make it easier for visitors not only to feel at home but to feel *connected*, and, in time, *cherished* by this community. Maybe we can't claim *radical* hospitality quite yet, but we're moving in the right direction, don't you think?

But is our worship passionate?

Well, did anybody *else* see Joan Little dancing in the aisle last Sunday? I'm not saying...I'm just saying....

But seriously, however do we measure passion?

Remember how annoyed some people got a few years ago when we kept talking about "passionate spirituality?" I mean, what the heck *is* that? Especially to a Presbyterian. "Will someone *please* define "passionate" for me, demanded Lilabet. And she had a point. A good point. So we finally quit talking about it so much and just started offering a bunch of ways people could explore and express prayer, faith, and authentic fellowship.

Risk-taking mission and service? Where are we with that?

Our Mission Ministry has led us to take some risks in recent years: several sweat-grinding forays to New Orleans, a Madhouser hut, the repairs of an *entire* dilapidated house on MLK weekend, and not 5, not 6, but 700 meal bags for parents of sick kids at Children Hospital.... Not too shabby.

Extravagant generosity? We know a little something about *that* here at EPC. Or, you know what? If you don't, why, our current Capital Campaign provides you with an *amazing* opportunity to explore just that.

All to say, we here at Emory Church are at least *familiar* with these 5 hallmarks of a fruitful congregation with which we'll be assessing our sacred communities this summer.

- *Radical* hospitality
- *Passionate* worship
- *Intentional* faith development
- *Risk-taking* mission and service
- *Extravagant* generosity

[Notice there's nothing there about location, size, program or budget. Nor a word about growth, polity, or strategy. Or even doctrine or creed!]

So, about each community we explore this summer we'll ask, did they have it? Did they do it? Were they good at it? If not, why not? If so, how'd they swing it? What'd it cost them?

And behind those questions, of course, are the same ones about ourselves. Do we offer radical hospitality, experience passionate worship, invest in intentional faith development, participate in risk-taking mission? Are we any good at extravagant generosity? If not, why not? If so, how do we swing it? And what will it cost us?

My hope is that our brothers and sisters in other "sacred" communities will have some helpful hints to share.

To the glory of God. Amen.