

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
6/15/2014, Trinity Sunday
Matthew 28:16-20
The Great Commission

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon text this morning is called “The Great Commission.” It comes from our Gospel Lesson, from Matthew 28. This reading gives us our marching orders. No army can long endure without its marching orders. No co-operative enterprise can flourish without understanding its mission. Here is Immanuel’s mission from Jesus, the Lord of the Church:

¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

I summarize our job this way: We are to win souls to Christ and teach them the faith of the church. That word “souls” — “win souls to Christ” — is not actually in our text. I could just have well used the word “people” — our job here at Immanuel is to win people to Christ, baptize them, and teach them the faith of the church. But I have used the word “souls” because I want to lift up the divine dimension of human life. I want to lift up the eternal dignity of every person in this city, every person on the face of our earth. For I fear that the sense of this dignity is at risk. I fear that our modern world might be losing its feel for how precious each person is in our town and in our world. I mean to return to that word “soul” toward the end of this sermon. For now, let me begin by tell you about the most fantastic evangelism program ever!

It took place in my childhood church, Greensboro Pilgrim Holiness Church in Greensboro, Maryland. We were a small congregation — much smaller than our congregation, Immanuel — but there came a time when we were especially inspired by the Great Commission to win souls to Christ and teach them the faith of the church. So our church elders came up with a clever evangelism effort. I don’t think this was the idea of our preacher, Rev. H.D. Dukes, who was a dear old man, but rather of our Sunday School Superintendent, Jack Boulais, who was a younger and more forceful personality. In any case, here is what happened:

We came to church one Sunday morning and discovered that two wires had been hung high in the air stretching the entire width of our church. And here was the fantastic thing for a boy of my age back then. On each wire was attached a

model jet plane. One was red, one was blue. One was on the left side of our church and the other was on the right side of our church.

You younger folks take jet planes for granted, but when I was a boy, I had never seen a jet. I had heard tell of them, but I had never seen one, nor, I suspect, had anyone else in our church. But these two model jets, one red and the other blue, looked just like I imagined them to be. I could picture them soaring aloft into the wild blue yonder high above this everyday world.

And then we were told that these two jets were going to race, and the first one to advance along its wire all the way to the other side of the church would win.

Now, here was the evangelism trick to this wonderful race. Each jet would advance along its wire according to how many new people each side of the church brought to worship. Our family always sat on the right side of the church. And each family had its favorite pew on its favorite side.

Our side had the red jet. Those folks on the other side had the blue jet. To win, all we had to do was to bring people to church. The more people we brought, the more our jet would slide along its wire toward the other side of the church, to victory!

The next Sunday was thrilling for me. Our side brought some new people, and so our beautiful red jet advanced some along its wire. But, then, our new-found enemies – all those folks over there on the left side of the church – they brought some new people too, and so their blue jet was off and running too. The next week, the same thing happened again, only not so many new people appeared and so the jets moved ahead only a little bit. Then the next week, no new people came. The problem was that it is not only the Lake Wobegon Lutherans who are shy. So were the Methodists back on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. I guess we rather quickly ran out of folks we felt we could invite to church. Soon things became rather embarrassing. Both the red jet and the blue jet were stuck in place. Neither of them had even reached the center of the room. This went on for a while, and then one Sunday we came to church and found the wires and the jets had been removed, never to be mentioned again.

All things considered, I fear that this evangelism project failed to bring many new people to our church. And yet, it was a worthy try. It was creative and fun, and it had a good heart. It was an attempt by our little church to be true to our Lord Jesus who always says, generation by generation, “Go, win souls to me and teach them the faith of the church.”

The Holy Trinity

In this morning's worship folder, we have a clip art drawing of Jesus:



I don't usually pay much attention to clip art, but this one has always interested me, always moved me. I think I am drawn to this sketch of Jesus by its ruggedness. This is not the pretty Jesus. This is more along the lines of Isaiah's prophecy of the Suffering Servant:

...he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. ³He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isaiah 53:2-3, RSV)

This humble sketch is of Someone who bore the weight of the world upon this shoulders. This is a sketch of our Lord Jesus, who bore our sins in his own body on the cross – your sins and my sins – that we might have hope of forgiveness, renewal of life, and heaven one day.

This Sunday is not only Trinity Sunday, but also Father's Day. I can hardly reckon with this Trinitarian fact: that God the Father sent his Son into our world to die that we might live. "For God so loved the world that *he gave* his only begotten Son..." I have two sons. I can hardly imagine sending either of my sons to die for others. Fathers have done that in time of war or to be police or firefighters. I honor both the fathers and sons for that. But I would grieve to join them. But our heavenly Father sent his Son to die for us -- to die for a race of creatures who are so very unlike God, so flawed, so very much inferior compared to the Father and the Son. But we believe that God the Father and God the Son were agreed on this mission. Both of them felt that you and I were worth it.

And then, there is the Holy Spirit. Think of him as the very Spirit of Jesus and of his Father. Think of him as Jesus taking up residence in your heart and saying many good things to you through his Holy Word and Sacraments, including this good thing today: "There is work to be done. Go, and save others. It is what we do. It is what *you* must do. Go, save souls and teach them the faith of the church."

John Lucker

In olden days here at Immanuel, we had a Church Worker named Mr. John Lucker. He lived from 1877-1951. We do not have many plaques in our church. We do have impressive granite plaques in our nave of some of our early pastors, including Pastor C.J. Renz and Pastor Louis Halfmann. But in the long history of Immanuel, with the thousands of good souls who have come through this place, there are very few plaques. But right here in our undercroft, there is one more plaque. You can see it here. It is a plaque honoring John Lucker.

Ann Siemer remembers him from her childhood. He walked among the Sunday School classes singing his heart out, and the children would join him and they sang along with all their hearts. We had hundreds of children in our Sunday School then. John was always smiling and loved the children. Ann Siemer told me that he was the finest man she has ever known. Immanuel people of her generation all glow at the mention of him.

A Sunday School of 200 children

That is what I want again here at Immanuel. That generation back in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s did what was appropriate in their day and age that they should have hundreds of children in their Sunday School. I hope that we will do what is appropriate in our generation that we might have hundreds of children too in our Sunday School. It might take a long time. It might go beyond my lifetime. But I earnestly hope we will work toward it.

Forgive a pastor for dreaming perhaps overmuch. I might be overreaching, but when our Children's Choir sang "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" a few Sundays ago, I thought it was the best thing on earth. And it put me in mind of some of the pillars of our congregation. As our children were singing, I could picture, say, Louise Schalow as a child in Sunday School singing her Sunday School songs along with Mr. John Lucker. I could picture a little Marie Kohl singing her Sunday School songs with Mr. John Lucker. I could picture little Ann Siemer singing her Sunday School songs with Mr. John Lucker and learning about Jesus from the many, many Sunday School teachers in our church in those days. Such children grew up and became the pillars of our church and other churches across the land.

So, in my dream, I see a little saints in the making in our modern Immanuel Sunday School – a little Louise Schalow or a little Margaret Stanschus or a little Katherine Weidmann or a little Marie Kohl or a little Hans Quitmeyer or a little Evelyn Junge – future pillars of the church in the making, right here in our Immanuel Sunday School.

And not only that, I see quiet little boys and girls who perhaps will be saved from some terrible turns in life, maybe from crime or betrayal or forsaking of solemn responsibilities, by what they learn in Immanuel's Sunday School.

Lots of people

From day one for me in the city, I have loved New York City. Naturally I love the culture and Broadway and the Statue of Liberty and all the things tourists come to see. But chiefly I love the people. There is something about New York City that invites virtue. There is something about our town that invites us to be the best people we can be. Otherwise we can hardly make it here.

On our block, on the diagonal from our church, at the corner of Park Avenue and 87th Street, there is a forty-five story building. I have often glanced at that building as I walk to church and I have said to myself, “I bet there is enough talent in that one building to run the entire town of Denton, Maryland where I grew up. There are all the attorneys, all the physicians, all the teachers, all the musicians, all the artists, all the financial people, all the administrators we would need – all in but one building in New York City. The architecture of that forty-five story building is boring, in my opinion, though it does have lovely gardens along the sidewalk. I would sometimes run into dear old Anna Ehrmann taking her daily constitutional and stopping and admiring the flowers at that building. But one way or another, whether the architecture of that building is lovely or plain, it is the *people* inside the buildings of New York who matter to me. It is the mothers and fathers, the sons and daughters. They are the ones who matter to me. I want the people throughout the Upper East Side to come to our church and I want all the children to come to our Sunday School, and I hope we will get ready for them.

Souls

And I want us to get ready for them because souls are at stake. Do you not feel that something is changing in our world? I fear that we are losing our feel for the dignity of humanity. The old Biblical teaching that human beings are made in the very image of God – that we are “but little lower than the angels,” as today’s Psalm 8 puts it, is starting to fade away. What is going to become of our world when people are no longer thought to be precious?

When there is a school shooting or a mall shooting or a marathon bombing , or an army base shooting, or a shooting at a fast-food restaurant, what does the shooter imagine he is aiming at? Does he think he is aiming at paper targets? Does he imagine he is aiming at a video screen? Doesn’t he understand anymore that he is dealing with a human being – a grand and beautiful creature of God so precious that God was willing to die for such a one?

What is becoming of the image of humanity in our technology and our research?¹ What is happening when the day may soon come when a fourth-grade boy can take an image of his school teacher and use his computer to undress her

¹ Questions raised by Travis Kroeker in his lecture “Technology as Principality” at the 2014 Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology Conference at Loyola University, Baltimore, MD. Dr. Kroeker has a PhD from Chicago (1989) and teaches at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. <http://www.religiousstudies.mcmaster.ca/faculty/kroekert>

and do with her what he wants. He can do whatever his imagination leads him to, because he is not actually touching her, not actually harming her. He does not need to grow up. He does not need to fall in love, to marry, to pledge his life henceforth to her, to suffer with her, to laugh with her. In fact, he doesn't even need to leave his room. And if his parents should suddenly enter his room, he does not need to flinch because it is all thought to be okay, and the parents do such things themselves in their own rooms.

And research is hard at work at the human genome project, as if the pace of God's change of the DNA structure of humanity is just too slow and we will take charge of it ourselves! We will fashion human beings ourselves!

I fear that there is going to come a day when such things as lifelong faithfulness in marriage will become simply a rumor, simply a memory. A generation will say, "Yes, we have heard that in olden days people married and were true to each other for their whole lives. We have heard that people actually left their rooms and worked in some program called 'Meals on Heels,' in which they prepared food for frail elderly people and they actually walked up urine soaked stairwells in project buildings and brought meals to old folks, gave them their meals, and said 'God bless you' to them. Yes, we have heard of people who tried for purity in thought, word, and deed, who considered their word to be their iron bond, who bypassed profits because they had promised do such and such and they meant do it. We have heard of such quaint things."

Well, I want such quaint things to be taught in Immanuel's Sunday School. I want the stories of Jesus and of the Bible to fill the thoughts and fill the imaginations of two hundred children in our Sunday School or however many we can manage to draw.

Love is afoot here in Christ's Great Commission. Jesus does not want humanity to have to stray along like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus does not want gunfire in the schools and bombing in the marathons and people stuck in their rooms manipulating images of one another. Love is afoot in Jesus and he invites us into it when he gives us our Great Commission: We are to win souls to Christ, baptize them, and teach them the faith of the Church. It is a wondrous thought: we are invited to be co-workers with God in his love of this world – co-workers with God the Father, the ✠ Son, and the Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory, now and forever. Amen.