

Sunday, June 29th, 2008
The 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 28:16-20, Acts 11:1-18
Why Bother?

I can remember sitting in the car with Mom years ago, when she asked a question of me. I don't remember how we got around to this question in conversation, or what led her to ask. I don't even really remember my response. But I remember the question. And it has stayed with me through the year, and now I ask it to you: "Why is it important for other people to believe in Jesus?"

Now, we can frame this question in several other ways:

- ⌘ "I'm saved, who cares about anyone else?"
- ⌘ "This is how I believe, but who am I to push that on others?"
- ⌘ "Why me? If God wants them to believe it'll be obvious."
- ⌘ "It isn't my decision what happens anyways, so let God handle it."

And all of these questions have bits and pieces that we recognize. We recognize, particularly in certain parts of the country, a strong resistance to strong arming others to believe in a certain way, or to knock on doors or to push based on the supposition of one's eternal destination. We recognize, in this overly sensitive age, the resistance of people to be **told** what is good for them. And at the same time, we hear our own uncertainty about things that are way over our heads, and our caution and doubt about **our** knowledge or faith or belief, let alone our ability to communicate those things to others. And we hear a bit of resignation, a bit of the sense that this is not our problem, that this is God's problem, God's responsibility, God's work to do.

But is it really God's work alone? The passage from Matthew certainly seems to indicate otherwise. Jesus charges the disciples to go forth and make disciples of all lives, or nations, depending on your translation, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that Christ had commanded them. And while Christ promises that he is with them always, it certainly sounds as though he intends for them to be doing the work, doesn't it?

And if it is the work of the disciples, isn't it our work too? For aren't we the descendants, spiritually, of those disciples? Aren't we the ones who have heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ in such a way, by people going forth and following this, the Great Commission? So, any a most basic level, we can answer my mother with these words: "Because Jesus says we should!"

And that might be sufficient if we were a community of faith that believed in top down, dictatorial leadership and control. For the record, we aren't. As the old joke goes, wherever there are 2 Presbyterians gathered, there are 3 opinions. I think for most of us who gather in this community, "God says so" isn't good enough.

What would be good enough? For my answer, I turn to the book of Acts. This encounter is known as the Jerusalem conference, and it is the reason that

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most of us here today are able to be Christians. While I have great faith God eventually would have gotten through to the Jews that the Gentiles should get the Gospel as well, this is the encounter wherein the church realizes what God is trying to do.

Peter returned to Jerusalem following one of his missionary trips, and was immediately accosted for having eaten with Gentiles, with the unclean, with people outside the community of the chosen people of God, with the uncircumcised. And Peter relates the story of a vision sent by God to him. A sheet comes down, and God says to take and eat. Peter protests, saying that nothing unclean has ever passed his lips. God responds. God responds by saying that what God declares as clean, you, Peter, had better not name unclean (profane). This occurs three times, and for those of you who are Hebrew scholars, you know that this is as many times as God is going to do something.

After this occurs, some strangers immediately show up to talk to Peter, for they had a vision from God that assured them that this man, Peter, would show them the grace and love of God. And Peter, then turns to the crowd of his accusers, and looks them in the eyes, and says "If God is going to give it to the Gentiles, the same as he gave it to us, who am I to stop God? Who am I to hinder God?"

If we listen closely, the answer to why bother at all is found in this encounter. Because truly, the question we should be asking isn't why should we bother reaching out with God's love to others, but why should God bother reaching out to us? God gives a gift, a gift Peter recognizes in baptism, a gift we recognize in that sacrament and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a gift we recognize in this table. And it is a wonderful and amazing gift.

And that is why we should tell other people. What's the old rule of thumb? How many people do you tell if you get good service? 1-2? How many do you tell if you get bad service? 10? 20? Everyone? Why wouldn't we want the world to know the love and grace we have in Jesus Christ? Do we want to hoard it? Is it not enough? Or is it so wonderful we can't help but tell the world?

Why bother? Because it changes our lives for the better.

Why bother? Because it is a gift beyond measure.

Why bother? Because who are we to hinder what God is doing in the world?

Why bother? Because the world needs Good News.