

“What’s Our Assignment?”

Matthew 28:16-20

Trinity Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

In our text for today, Jesus changed the assignment.

In what is traditionally known in the Church as the Great Commission, the risen Jesus appears to the 11 disciples and he gives them a new assignment:

“Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations...”

Those two words, “all nations,” is a fair translations. Another way to translate the Greek is to use “all Gentiles”.

“Go therefore, and make disciples of all Gentiles...”

I wonder what the disciples thought about that assignment, because it was a different assignment from what Jesus gave them before.

Back in chapter 10 of Matthew’s Gospel, we’re told that Jesus “summoned the twelve disciples,” (Judas was still with them at that point), and Jesus “sent [them] out with the following instructions:

“Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

That was their mission back in Chapter 10.

So, when the disciples meet the risen Jesus on the mountain in chapter 28, I wonder what they were thinking when he expanded their assignment.

One thing to note: this new assignment does not imply that Jesus was turning his back on the people of Israel. There is continuity between Jesus' identity as a faithful Jew, and this new assignment.

It is a mistake that Christians sometimes make, to think that somehow Judaism becomes INFERIOR to Christianity with the resurrection of Christ and the Great Commission.

That is not what's being implied in these words.
Judaism is not being given lesser status.

But Jesus decided to EXPAND the assignment for his followers.
To CHANGE the mission to something larger than his disciples had ever imagined.

I think this has bearing on you and me right now, in our country's life.

Is Jesus changing our assignment?
Or asking us to look at an old assignment in new ways?

Are there any ways in which Jesus is asking US TO CHANGE, expand the ways we practice and live out our faith at this time in our country's life?

With the killing of George Floyd and the protests that have ensued, change is most definitely on everyone's mind.

People want change.
People want the evil of racism in our country to stop.

People want African-Americans to stop being killed because of the color of their skin.

People want a society in which not just some of us can feel safe going for a jog or driving by the police, but a society in which ALL of us feel safe, no matter the color of our skin.

There is a call going on in our society right now for CHANGE.

So what's our assignment in the Church?

I do not believe that a violent response is a faithful way to create change.

I do believe that the OUTRAGE is faithful, and the question of change, the question of our assignment, is squarely in front of God's Church.

How can we be a part of the solution?
How can you and I be a part of the change that needs to occur?
Or even more to the point, how can God's Church help lead the way?

It's a necessary question, an important question, but also a frustrating question, because the same thing keeps happening again and again in our society.

Whether it's George Floyd,
or Breonna Taylor,
or Ahmaud Arbery...nothing seems to change.

And if nothing is changing, and the Church keeps doing what it's always done, then the Church is not simply an innocent bystander to the problem.

The Church is part of the problem.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote 57 years ago:

“I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate.

“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that [our] great stumbling block...

is not the...Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice...

“Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”¹

I wonder if part of the Church’s assignment these days is to figure out how we’ve been LUKEWARM...how we have preferred a negative peace with the absence of tension to a positive peace with the presence of justice.

If we want things to change things in our community and our country, then we need to forge new relationships, we need to step out of whatever box or whatever bubble we find ourselves in.

Jesus is always asking us to get out of our bubbles.

When Jesus tells his disciples in our text to go out and bear witness to more people, to different people, people with whom they would NOT be familiar, I suspect it made those disciples uncomfortable.

¹ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington, New York: HarperCollins, 1986.

You want us to go where, Jesus?
To do what, Jesus?

But that's where the gospel belongs, says Jesus in chapter 28.
In places that make us uncomfortable.

In a place or in a conversation or doing work that's outside our box
or our bubble.

Do you know what I mean when I say "bubble"?

Let me give you an example of a bubble that I did not realize I was
in. As a parent, I think a lot about being a parent, and what it means to
be a parent.

This past spring, I was at a leadership gathering, various leaders
throughout the state of South Carolina. One gentleman at my table, an
African-American man about the same age as I am, shared with others at
the table the kind of worry that he has sometimes for his teenage son
when his teenager is out driving with his friends.

He shared what's happened to him in his own life, when he's been
pulled over by the police, and he worries that something worse will
happen to his child.

He talked about the conversations that he's had to have with his
son about what to do if you're pulled over by the police.

I was not surprised to hear it.

But I tried to remember this past week, when was the first time I
heard about those kind of conversations.

I'm pretty sure it was after Trayvon Martin was killed.

And I realized that I never imagined needing to have those kind of conversations with my own sons, because of the color of my skin.

How could I have lived for over four decades, and be oblivious to what African-American parents, and other parents of color go through?

You know another example of one of my bubbles?

I don't know what it's like to be a police officer.

While maybe 2 or 3 police officers have been members of churches that I've served, I don't recall ever having a conversation with those police officers...about what their daily life and daily work is like.

Being a police officer is an honorable thing to do.

It's a courageous thing to do.

We obviously need police officers in society.

And we obviously need REFORM in that institution of society.

So what can we do to help CHANGE to occur?

If doing nothing is not the answer, what is the answer?

Westminster has a fine history of being at the forefront of racial issues in our city, of supporting integration back when that was the issue of the day.

So how can we EXPAND our faith and witness from where it is today?

You may have had thoughts in recent days.
Here are some of mine.

What would it look like...once this pandemic is over and we can meet again in person, what would it look like to have conversations within our church about race relations in our country?

What would it look like to invite other people, African-American leaders and other people of color from our greater Greenville community to talk with us about THEIR experiences of race relations in our country?

What would it look like to invite police officers, to hear from them what it's like to be a part of a police force?

Maybe this is one of our assignments.

When Jesus says, Go and baptize all nations—he's not saying that Westminster needs to start trying to convert people of other religious faiths to the Christian faith.

He's saying that WE, who are commissioned by Jesus to be witnesses to God's love and God's justice everywhere, in every place, at every time...we need to have the courage to take new steps.

New steps AGAINST racism.
New steps FOR a more just society.
New steps to work with all the people of our community.
New steps that get each of us out of whatever bubble we might find ourselves in...

Not just ONE step. But steps every day.
Steps that communicate clearly that we are in this for the LONG HAUL.

I've been thinking this week about a story that I read a few years ago. It was posted by an African-American woman who went to the store one day to buy some ramekins.

Ms. Owens is this woman's name.

When Ms. Owens got in line to check out, another woman was behind her in line. This other woman—a white woman—noticed the ramekins.

She commented on how beautiful they were, and asked where in the store she could get some of her own.

But the ones that Ms. Owens had were the last ones.

And the lady behind Ms. Owens looked at her...and looked at the ramekins that she couldn't have...and she said to Ms. Owens:

"Well what are you going to do with all of them? Do Black people cook with ramekins? I'm sure y'all aren't using them properly... Do you actually need all 10? I just need 5...."

Ms. Owens writes:

I stopped dead in my tracks. My ears were on fire. I could see myself as that cartoon character whose head was about to blow and ears had steam coming out of them. All of these things were rolling thru my head...Should I curse her out? Let her know that black people's ramekins matter? Punch her...so that she would never be able to utter another...racially-charged syllable?

But Ms. Owens did nothing of the sort.

She goes on.

Ramekins are used for various baking purposes, pastries, casseroles...etc. Ramekins are a culinary staple for anyone who cooks. This lady was convinced that a person of my background would not know what...a ramekin is! So instead of going off, or being belligerent, I played the game!

"Oh, I'll probably only use 1 or 2 at the most. I may plant some flowers in them, store my lipsticks in them, use them as cookie cutters...or probably just let them sit in the box in my cabinets collecting dust."

Well, at this point, a number of the other customers who had been standing in line and listening to this conversation—they started to chuckle.

And the woman who wanted the ramekins?

She was furious.

She left the line.

Ms. Owens thought good, finally, it's over.

But a minute later the lady came back with a store manager, who asked Ms. Owens to step out of the line.

Ms. Owens refused.

The store manager said, "I just want to allow this customer to purchase the items she had in her cart that were removed by you."

At which point the person at the cash register had had enough.

He shouts, "I CANT TAKE THIS ANYMORE! This lady [pointing to Ms. Owens] is just trying to purchase items that she has selected, and not be questioned, or accused!

“This lady [pointing to the woman who wanted the ramekins] has caused nothing but grief for this lady the whole time she has been in line. She [pointing to Ms. Owens] has done nothing wrong, so please do not question her about anything.”

Long story short, Ms. Owens finally purchased the ramekins and left the store.

She writes:

As I was leaving, an older gentleman asked me if he could escort me to the car and carry my bags. At first, I thought that this was a set up...

But then I looked in his eyes, and he had tears.

He said, "I'm so sorry. I just stood there. We all heard her, and we all just stood there. We knew it was wrong, we knew it wasn't about the ramekins, but we couldn't find the words to tell her to stop."

He cried a while.

I stood there, silent.

I knew what he meant, but wondered if this would actually cross over in his daily life.

That's the question, isn't it?

Followers of Jesus cannot respond to the past two weeks by doing nothing. And a one-time response does not get us off the hook.

Maybe the question we each need to ask ourselves is this:

Are we in it for the long run, especially when fighting the evil of racism is messy and hard, and is not in the headlines?

Will our response become part of our daily lives?

Amen.