

Holy Trinity A 2023 Matthew 28:16-20

In the course of cleaning out my grandparents' apartment, I found a cassette tape with a handwritten label saying "Christmas songs" that I recognized as a recording I had made of myself the first or second year I was learning to play the clarinet. My grandparents still have a cassette player, but there was no way I was going to play that tape, because although I eventually became a decent musician, I don't want to hear how I sounded when I was just starting out. I felt the same way when I remembered that it was this Sunday, Holy Trinity Sunday, 11 years ago, that I preached the trial sermon for the call vote at my first congregation. It is not exactly a seminarian's dream to preach a call sermon for a Sunday that does not commemorate an event in the biblical history or lift up one of Jesus' beloved parables, but instead celebrates a theological doctrine that was defined by committee 300 years after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. So, I did not go back and look up the sermon I preached on that Trinity Sunday. I don't want to know what I said to that poor congregation while trying to prove that I had learned *something* in seminary *and* trying to do it in a way that didn't put them to sleep. But I shouldn't have struggled so much if I had just paid attention to the scripture.

The appointed reading for today comes from the very end of Matthew's gospel, after Jesus' resurrection, before he ascends to heaven, what we call the Great Commission: *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.* We read that scripture on Holy Trinity Sunday because of the overt naming of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Even so, early Christians had different ideas of what that means and how God exists in three persons, so the church eventually resolved those disagreements through the creeds: the most basic Apostles' Creed, the more specific Nicene Creed, and finally the Athanasian Creed, which took up a whole page in the front of the LBW and didn't even make it into the red hymnal. It seems the church fathers wanted to make sure we understood our Triune God beyond the shadow of a doubt.

But look again at Matthew's gospel and the context in which Jesus gives the Great Commission: Matthew says, *When [the disciples] saw [Jesus], they worshiped him; but some doubted.* Now, here's your nickel's worth of seminary education: scholars argue over whether

it's better to translate that as "they worshiped *but* some doubted" or "they worshiped *and* some doubted" or "they worshiped *while at the same time* they doubted" ...because any of those are valid possibilities. But whether we think of individual disciples holding their faith and their doubts in tension within themselves, or whether we think of this crowd of disciples where some were focused solely on worship while others were at least somewhat struggling with doubt, Jesus says *to all of them* "go and make disciples, baptize, and teach." Jesus commissions all of them—worshippers and doubters.

That's good news for us on a day when we're asked to contemplate a God who is three persons but one being, trinity *and* unity. If we have doubts about our understanding of the Divine Mystery, we aren't too different from the first disciples who Matthew says were literally looking at the risen Jesus and doubting. I've known people over the years who are proud to tell me that they have no doubts; maybe a particularly moving spiritual experience or a significant life event cemented their faith and forever after they never felt it waiver. If that's you, great! You're commissioned. But if that's not you, and for the record, that's not me, those of us who doubt, we're not off the hook—we're commissioned, too. We don't need a perfect understanding of how the three persons of the Trinity interact in order to call on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at baptism. We don't need a page-long creed to teach people what Jesus commanded, which was to love one another as he has loved us. That doesn't take three creeds, a seminary degree, or the absence of doubt. Teaching other people to obey Jesus' command to love mostly requires us to obey Jesus command to love; we teach by loving example.

Theological certainty is not a prerequisite for Jesus' great commission, but love is. And the God who is love, who is so much love that God exists as a relationship, made us in God's image, so that we could love, too. We could spend a long time discussing how the Triune God is like a triangle—not one side, but three sides; not three triangles, but one eternal shape. Or we could go make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the God who commanded us to love one another and called us to teach others that same love. The song doesn't say, "They'll know we are Christians by our understanding and recitation of complex theological doctrines" but "They'll know we are Christians by our love." May it be so.