

“Go west, young man!” I can’t actually tell you when in my life I first heard this phrase, but I know I’ve heard it before. I wouldn’t be surprised if some of you could say the same. It’s a quote that has made its way into our collective cultural landscape, and some way, somehow, made its way to me and embedded itself into my brain as “something I know.” It’s such a shame that I would waste perfectly good brain cells...ok perfectly average brain cells...on something I know absolutely nothing about!

I knew the words, but no idea why or where they came from. In fact, if you had quizzed me on this expression before my preparation for the sermon this week, I would have failed that quiz miserably.

So I decided to do some *extremely* thorough research to find out more about it. I delved deep into historical records, into academic papers, you name it...just to get you this information. Now if you don’t believe I went through all that, fine. You got me. I googled it and read a paragraph about it on Wikipedia.

“Go west, young man!”

Here’s what I can tell you about what I learned. The quote has widely been attributed to U.S. Congressman and newspaper editor and publisher Horace Greeley and was adopted as an unofficial slogan of the concept of Manifest Destiny of the 1800s, where people were encouraged to colonize, in their view, the wild and untamed west.

Greeley, in some sources, is quoted as saying, “Washington is not a place to live in. The rents are high, the food is bad, the dust is disgusting and the morals are deplorable. Go West, young man, go West and grow up with the country.” Tell us how you really feel, Horace!

While some have disputed the claim that it was Greeley who coined the phrase, one of Greeley’s friends, Josiah Grinnell, wrote in his autobiography that Greeley gave him this advice that included the famous phrase: “Go west, young man, go west. There is health in the country, and room away from our crowds of idlers and imbeciles.”

Grinnell responded, “That is very frank advice, but it is medicine easier given than taken. It is a wide country, but I do not know just where to go.”

It is a wide country, but I do not know just where to go.

I couldn’t help but be taken by Grinnell’s response, especially in light of our Gospel lesson this morning.

The resurrected Jesus Christ tells the disciples...and tells us, “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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”¹

Part of me wants to respond to Christ’s commands here by using the words of Joseph Grinnell.

“That is very frank advice, Jesus, but it is medicine easier given than taken. It is a wide world, but I do not know where to go.”

Go therefore and make disciples of *all* nations?

Teach them to obey *everything* that you commanded us?

Oh, that’s all, Jesus? Well OK, then. I’ll just make that my new weekend project. I’m sure it’ll take me no time.

I’m joking, of course, but the scope of what Jesus is asking of his disciples and of us is staggering if we take a moment to digest all of what is said in these few verses.

I guess they don’t call it the “Great Commission” for nothing.

Rev. Dr. David Lose, Senior Pastor of Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church and former President Luther Seminary in Minnesota made this observation after his time exploring this text. He says, “I’ll admit, I don’t have statistics to back this up yet, but I’m still willing to wager a considerable sum on the proposition that most [folks], when they hear the ‘Great Commission’ in Matthew, feel neither inspired nor encouraged but instead just a tad guilty. Why? Because day in and day out they do not perceive themselves as called and sent to bear witness to their faith and, even more, do not feel equipped to do so. So when they hear Jesus’ very clear instructions they are reminded of one more thing they should do -- which is as sure a recipe for guilt as I know.”²

I think Rev. Lose is on to something here.

In the past, I know that:

- I have felt guilty that I have not done enough to live up to Jesus’ instructions.
- I have felt guilty that I have not made disciples of those in and around my own life, much less to all the nations.
- I have felt guilty that I have not taught people enough to obey all that Jesus has commanded.

¹ Matthew 28:19-20

² “Reclaiming the Great Commission” by David Lose. <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1584>

Not only that, but I have also had times when I wondered if I'm even *capable* of doing *any* of it.

I wonder if any of you have felt the same way?

If you have, don't worry. You are in good company: you, me, and the disciples.

Let's take a look again to our selection that closes out the Gospel of Matthew. Verse sixteen says, "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them."³

Did you catch it? The *eleven* disciples. We are immediately reminded that they are one short of the twelve. They are one disciple down because of Judas and his betrayal and eventual death. It's a reminder of the reality that the disciples were living with, that sin and death were among their ranks. It's obvious that the events of Judas' betrayal and Jesus' death have shaken the disciples to the core.

The writer continues in verse seventeen, "When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted."⁴ Even face-to-face with the risen Lord, some disciples still doubted. Yes, they worshipped him, but lingering doubt and disbelief were also present on the mountain that day. Jesus knew this...and yet he still chose to give these instructions, the Great Commission, to his disciples.

So yes, we are in good company.

Jesus did not choose to ask all of this of the disciples because they were certain or confident or without doubt.

And Jesus did not choose to ask all of this of you and of me because we are certain or confident or without doubt.

Jesus chooses to instruct those of us who are not perfect, who don't have it all together. That is surely good news for us.

So it comes to this for us, then: in the words of Princeton New Testament Professor Dr. Eric Barreto, "faithfulness is obedience to Jesus even in the midst of doubt. Even though some are still unsure, [the disciples] still go to the mountain together."⁵

³ Matthew 28:16

⁴ Matthew 28:17

⁵ Eric Barreto https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2422

Are you unsure?

Do you doubt?

Do you have anxiety about sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ and God's work in the world?

Do you feel unequipped?

Do you feel you don't have what it takes?

Do you feel afraid?

From our story, it's par for the course for followers of the risen Christ.

Even the Psalms join our voices and our prayers as the writer of Psalm 8 reflects on humanity's role on having responsibility given by God.

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.”⁶

The psalmist himself wonders aloud what in the world God is doing even messing with us. And looking at the history of humanity here on earth, can you blame him for wondering?

But the truth remains. We, as God's creation and flawed as we are, have been given great responsibility. First by being given dominion over all of God's creation, and then by Jesus Christ through the Great Commission.

Friends, over the past few weeks we have been looking at the ways in which God has called us, loved us, and nourished us here at St. Andrew.

- God has called us, yes. But to what end?
- God has loved us, yes. But to what end?
- God has nourished us, yes. But to what end?

⁶ Psalm 8:1b-8

God has called us so that we can be sent out to a world in need.
God has loved us so that we can be sent out to share that love to the world.
God has nourished us so that we can be sent out to satisfy the hungers of the world.

As I said before, there could be those here today that hear this and want to respond with something similar to Joseph Grinnell's words, "Well Pastor, that is very frank advice, but it is medicine easier given than taken. It is a wide country, but I do not know where to go or what to do."

That's OK. That's why we have each other....and that's why God has promised to be with us, too.

Jesus does not just dump his instructions on the disciples and just disappear. Instead, he tells them how to be faithful despite themselves...and he tells them, more importantly, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."⁷

So as we continue this journey together here St. Andrew, remember that it is God who calls us, loves us, nourishes us, and yes, sends us. Remember that you are not called, loved, nourished, and sent alone. No, with the help of the one who makes it possible, we'll do it all...together.

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

⁷ Matthew 28:20