

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 9, 2019**

**ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH:
THE GREAT COMMISSION AND US**

**Matthew 28:16-20;
2 Corinthians 5:14-21**

Since almost the beginning of this year, we have been focusing on the core beliefs we call the *Essentials of Our Faith* in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. The motto of our denomination, which I hope you know by heart, is:

*In essentials, unity;
In non-essentials, liberty;
In all things, charity (love).*

In this series of messages, we have examined what we believe about:

- The Bible;
- The triune God: That there is only one God, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
- The person and work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of sinners;
- The person and work of the Holy Spirit;
- Our sinfulness and God's provision of salvation by grace;
- The nature and distinguishing marks of the church; and
- The promised return of Jesus Christ our King.

Today we look at the last of the *Essentials of Our Faith*, which focuses on the Great Commission Jesus has given His church. It is as much a call to action as it is a statement of belief, because, by its nature, the Great Commission compels us to act, to go, to speak, to witness, to teach, to serve, and to love, all in the power of the Holy Spirit, in the effort to make disciples of people everywhere – men and women, girls and boys who learn, understand, believe, and obey the word of Jesus; who embrace the message of the gospel by faith and seek to live as fully-devoted followers of Jesus.

For biblical perspective on the Great Commission and its implications for us, I want to read two passages of Scripture: First, from Matthew 28:16-20, the most commonly cited statement of the Great Commission; and then from 2 Corinthians 5:14-21, where the apostle Paul speaks to our role as ambassadors for Christ, to whom (us!) God has entrusted both the ministry and message of reconciliation.

Let's look at God's Word together. And let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of His Holy Word.

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The story I'm about to tell you is true. Not even the names have been changed to protect the innocent (or the guilty). If you have heard this story before, that's okay. It is a great story, and it won't hurt you to hear it again. For those who have not heard it before, it is a story I want you to hear.

The story is told by Eugene Peterson, best known as the author of *The Message* paraphrase of the Bible. It took place during his childhood in the 1930s as he was growing up in the small town of Kalispell, Montana (which also happens to be the hometown of former Faith member Don Hanger). This is how Peterson tells it in his memoir, which is simply called *The Pastor*.

"I grew up in a Christian home with good parents. I was told the story of Jesus and instructed in the Jesus way. I was loved and treated well. Childhood in my memory was a fair approximation of the Garden of Eden – a good and wonderful life.

"But there was also the neighborhood. It was a neighborhood with plenty of playmates, none of whom went to church. But their unbaptized condition never seemed to make any difference in that preschool life of games and imagination. There were trees to climb and a creek to swim in."

[We also had a creek to swim in when I was growing up in western Pennsylvania, but, as Pennsylvanians do, we pronounced it "crick" instead of "creek."]

Peterson continues: "A meadow in which cows grazed bordered our backyard. We used the dried cow flop for bases in our ball games." [That is something we never did when I was growing up. Baseball, yes. Lots of it. But no "cow flop" for bases.]

"And then I went off to school and discovered what the Gospel of John named 'the world' – those people who do not regard God with either reverence or obedience. This knowledge entered my life in the person of Garrison Johns, the school bully. I had never seen Garrison up close, only at a distance. He wore a red flannel shirt, summer and winter, and walked with something of a swagger that I admired and tried to imitate. Being a year older than I, and living just far enough away, he was beyond the orbit of my neighborhood games and friendships. I knew of his reputation for meanness, but I wasn't prepared for what was to come.

"About the third day after entering first grade, Garrison discovered me and took me on as his project for the year. He gave me a working knowledge of what 25 years later Richard Niebuhr would give me a more sophisticated understanding of – the tension between *Christ* and *Culture*. I had been taught in Sunday school not to fight and so had never learned to use my fists. I had been prepared for the wider world of neighborhood and school by memorizing 'Bless those who persecute you' and 'Turn the other cheek.' I don't know how Garrison Johns knew about me – some sixth sense bullies have, I suppose – but he picked me for his sport. Most afternoons after school, he would catch me and beat me up. He also found out that I was a Christian and taunted me with 'Jesus sissy.'

“I tried finding alternate ways home by making detours through alleys, but he stalked me and always found me. I arrived home most afternoons bruised and humiliated. My mother told me that this had always been the way of Christians in the world and that I had better get used to it. I was also supposed to pray for him. The Bible verses I had memorized (‘Bless ... and ‘Turn ...’) began to get tiresome.

“I loved going to school. But after the dismissal bell each day I had to face Garrison Johns and get my daily beating that I was supposed to (accept) as my blessing.

“March came. I remember it was March by the weather. The winter snow was melting, but there were still patches of it here and there. The days were getting longer – I was no longer walking home in the late afternoon dark. And then something unexpected happened. I was with my neighborhood friends on this day, seven or eight of them, when Garrison caught up with us and started in on me, jabbing and taunting, working himself up to the main event. He had an audience, and that helped. He always did better with an audience.

“That’s when it happened. Totally uncalculated. Totally out of character. Something snapped within me. For just a moment the Bible verses disappeared from my consciousness and I grabbed Garrison. To my surprise, and his, I realized that I was stronger than he was. I wrestled him to the ground, sat on his chest, and pinned his arms to the ground with my knees. I couldn’t believe it – he was helpless under me. At my mercy. It was too good to be true. I hit him in the face with my fists. It felt good, and I hit him again – blood spurted from his nose, a lovely crimson on the snow. By this time all the other children were cheering, egging me on.”

If you are wondering what in the world this could possibly have to do with the Great Commission, stay with me. We’re almost there.

Peterson continues: “I said to Garrison, ‘Say “Uncle.”’ He wouldn’t say it. I hit him again. More cheering. And then my Christian training reasserted itself. I said, ‘Say “I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.”’ He wouldn’t say it. I hit him again. I tried again, ‘Say “I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.”’

“And he said it. Garrison Johns,” writes Peterson, “was my first Christian convert.” (Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor*, 46-48)

I don’t tell you this story to make light of bullying. Bullying is not a laughing matter. It wasn’t then and it isn’t now. Nor am I endorsing retaliation by means of physical violence as the only proper way to deal with a bully. Self-defense is sometimes necessary and may be the only effective antidote to the belligerence of a bully.

Nor, as tempting as it may be in some cases, am I endorsing the evangelistic method Eugene Peterson used with Garrison Johns. Not even Peterson would endorse it. All that said, maybe this story can be a good starting point for us to think about the Great Commission and how it applies to us both personally and together as a church.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

The term “Great Commission” is not actually found anywhere in the Bible. Most often, though, we use it in reference to the charge Jesus gave His disciples in Matthew 28, to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing ... and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you” (28:19-20a).

This great, global, God-ordained commission is accompanied by an equally great promise: “And surely I am with you always” (literally, ‘all the days’) “to the very end of the age” (28:20b). It is the promise of His presence with us – the presence and power of the Lord Jesus, to whom “all authority in heaven and on earth: belongs (28:18) – that makes it possible for us to carry out this Great Commission.

In addition to Matthew 28, the New Testament contains several other versions of the Great Commission. In Mark 16:15, for example, Jesus says: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.”

Another version is found in John 20:21, after His resurrection, when Jesus appeared to His disciples behind locked doors. He pronounced the benediction of God’s peace on them and said: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” God the Father sent God the Son on a mission into the world. *This* world. *Our* world. The mission? To accomplish our salvation through His substitutionary, sacrificial, atoning death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. And now the Son, having completed His mission, sends His followers into the world on a mission. He sends *us* into the world with the message of the gospel – the message of God’s amazing grace and redeeming love, the message of forgiveness and peace and healing and hope, all of which are found through faith in Jesus and His saving work for us. “As the Father has sent me (into the world), so I am sending you (into the world).”

Still another version of the Great Commission is found in Acts 1:8, in the last recorded words Jesus spoke to His disciples before He ascended into heaven: “You will receive power,” Jesus said, “when the Holy Spirit comes on you” – as He did ten days later, on the Day of Pentecost – “and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The charge Jesus gave His disciples then is the same charge He gives us today: To be His witnesses. To get the word out about His kingdom and His kingship. To tell others about Jesus and His saving love. It starts right here where we live and work – in northern Virginia and the metro D. C. area (our Jerusalem), and spreads throughout every region of the U. S. (our Judea and Samaria), and to every continent, every island, every nation and people-group everywhere in the world, to the ends of the earth. It really is a “Great Commission.”

AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST

There is one more statement of the Great Commission I want to bring to your attention today. It is found in 2 Corinthians 5, where the apostle Paul speaks of the “ministry of reconciliation” (5:18) and the “message of reconciliation” (5:19) that God has entrusted to the

church, so that we are in fact “ambassadors for Christ” (5:20) with God making His appeal to unbelieving hearts through us.

As you know, in the geo-political world, governments of nations establish and maintain diplomatic relations with one another through embassies led by ambassadors who are authorized to speak and act on the behalf of the government or crown or administration they represent. So, for example, the U. S. ambassador to Russia, Jon Huntsman, represents our government in its official relationship with the government of Russia, just as the Russian ambassador to the U. S. represents Russia in its diplomatic relationship with our country. Among the ambassadors who have represented our country are: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison, James Buchanan, and George H. W. Bush (41), all of whom later became President; Benjamin Franklin; Frederick Douglass; Robert Todd Lincoln, the first son of President Abraham Lincoln; former Vice-President Walter Mondale; former child actress Shirley Temple Black; and Dan Rooney, the long-time owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers football team.

It is a big deal and a great honor to represent your country’s government and, by extension, your country itself as an ambassador. Or to serve as a diplomat on the staff of an embassy. It is an even bigger deal, though, to be appointed and commissioned as “ambassadors for Christ” whose mission is to take the message and ministry of reconciliation with God to a world estranged from God and in rebellion against Him. To say it again, this is truly a “Great Commission.”

WHAT GOD DID

This Great Commission is not something we thought up. Neither the gospel nor the gospel imperative to go and make disciples was our idea. The message of the gospel – what Paul calls the “message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19) – did not originate with us. It was God’s idea from the beginning. As Paul says in verse 18: “All this is from God.” It is all God’s doing.

What exactly did God do? Two things. First, He “reconciled us to Himself.” *He* reconciled *us* to Himself? How? *Through Christ*. God did not need to be reconciled to us. He was not and is not responsible for the estrangement between us and Him caused by our sin. But we desperately need to be reconciled to Him. We desperately need to be brought back into a right relationship of peace with God. So God did what only He could do in and through the suffering and death of His Son on the cross for us. As one Bible scholar (Philip Edgecombe Hughes) has put it, the rebellion of humankind against God, both individually and collectively, is “met and matched by the love of God in Christ Jesus. God’s holy and loving work of reconciliation has been accomplished once and for all” in Christ. *He* reconciled *us* to Himself through *Christ*.

The second thing God did was to give us the *ministry* and the *message* of reconciliation (5:18-19). Central to this ministry and message of reconciliation is the decision of God to not count our sins against us (5:19), which is to say that being reconciled to God involves having our sins forgiven. Reconciliation with God required the forgiveness of sins. Why? Because our

sin – both our sinfulness and our actual sins – disrupts our relationship to God and causes our separation from Him. The forgiveness of our sins is absolutely essential if the barrier that separates us from loving fellowship with God is to be removed and we are to be restored to a relationship of peace (*shalom*) with God. Through Jesus’ death on the cross, God has done exactly this. He has removed the barrier. He has reconciled us to Himself. He has declared the punishment for *my* sin, for *your* sin, for the sin of *anyone* and *everyone* who believes the gospel and trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ paid in full. *Paid. In. Full.*

Isn’t that good news? Of course it is! And this is the message – literally, the word (*logos*) – of reconciliation that God has committed to *us*, to *you* and *me*, and commissioned *us* to communicate to our world as ambassadors for Christ.

This is our “Great Commission.” If we are to be faithful followers of the Lord Jesus and serve His purposes in our generation, being committed to the Great Commission is not optional. It is an essential of our faith. We owe nothing less to “Him who loved us and gave Himself up for us” (Ephesians 5:2; Galatians 2:20). We *must* be Great Commission Christians. We *must* be a Great Commission church.

There is more we need to talk about concerning the Great Commission and its implications for us. There is a problem with the Great Commission that we must not try to sweep under the rug. The problem is not with the Great Commission itself, but with us, and our tendency to leave it to others, while we’re mostly content to just come to church and enjoy the benefits and blessings it afford us. We’ll talk about this and other things related to the Great Commission and us next Sunday.

FOUR “ALLS” FOR ALL Y’ALL

For today, I want to close by pointing out that Jesus uses the word “all” four times in giving the Great Commission in Matthew 28, starting in verse 18. One way to remember it is to think of what Jesus says here, in Southern vernacular, as *Four “Alls” for All Y’All*. What do you think of that?

Here they are:

1. “*All authority* in heaven and on earth has been given to Me” (verse 18). The authority to carry out the Great Commission does not reside in you or me. It belongs to Jesus. Because of who He is and what He has accomplished, *all* authority everywhere in creation is His. It is in light of His authority that we are commissioned to go and make disciples.
2. We are to make disciples of *all nations* (*panta ta ethne* in Greek) (verse 19). In other words, the gospel is for *all* people everywhere. People “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (Revelation 7:9) will one day be included in the fellowship of God’s redeemed.
3. Making disciples involves more than simply sharing the gospel and inviting others to become followers of Jesus. It involves more than getting someone to say “I believe in Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord,” as in the case of Garrison Johns. Jesus

commissions His first disciples and us in verse 19 to teach others to obey (or keep) “*all that I have commanded you.*” As disciples of Jesus, we are to saturate our lives with the Word of God and live by it. In the making of disciples, we are to teach the Word of God to others, encouraging them to saturate their lives with it and to live in obedience to it.

4. Jesus ends the Great Commission with a promise – with *this* promise: “And surely I am with you *always.*” Literally, what He says is: “I am with you *all the days* until the end of the age” (verse 20). His presence with us, along with His power at work in us, guarantees that His mission will not fail. The Great Commission will succeed. Jesus can and will use ordinary people like us to fulfill the Great Commission. He will use our church. He will use you. If you let Him. If we let Him. We *must* let Him. We *must*.

He is with us, “all the days” – always. Give yourself to Him. Make the Great Commission priority one in your life, and in our life together. Lord, let it be so. Amen.