Sunday, November 8, 2026
Sermon: "Disciples Transform the World"
Matthew 28:16-20 NRSV/UE

Where we're heading in today's message: Charged by the Great Commission, disciples of Jesus Christ seek to live into the vision of the kingdom that our Lord proclaimed. This is a world-changing task, one we embrace with adverbial faith, as we love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously.

We've come at last to the Great Commission, the call to go—to love boldly, to serve joyfully, and to lead courageously. Our work is laid out for us, for the whole church. But take a moment at look at the context for the charge. Jump to the end, for example. The final word is important and comforting, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Great stuff. Necessary stuff. Thanks be to God stuff. A reminder that all that we do we do in the presence of the Christ who calls us.

But what about the beginning of the passage? There are a couple of things we need to hear there too. There are a couple of conflicting modes, or attitudes or something in there. First of all, there is that glaring statement "the eleven disciples." It is a new reality, a new mode of being expressed in a simple description. For three years they were twelve. Or twelve plus, there was always a crowd that followed. But now there is eleven. The passion was not just something for Christ to experience, it had ripple effects that touched other lives, that reordered existence. Because of what Christ has done, things are different.

The Gospel of John emphasizes the fear of the remaining disciples. He talks of the locked room and the hiding out. Matthew tells us that even if that were true, even if fear gripped them—and why wouldn't it?—they were still followers of Jesus Christ. Even before they got this final great commission, they went to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. They didn't just wander aimlessly and find themselves by a happy accident where Jesus wanted them to be. They chose, even in spite of their fear, they chose to go where Jesus sent them.

"When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." There it is. Worship and doubt sitting there side by side. It doesn't fit into our understanding. Worship is about certainty, it is about will and choice and commitment. Doubt is something else entirely. It is what keeps us from worship. It is what makes us fall by the wayside and give up, because nothing makes sense any more and we just aren't sure. In our heads we misread this verse, I think. We read that there were some there who didn't doubt and they worshiped and there were some there who did doubt and therefore didn't worship. Right? At least that would make some sense. OK, they showed up. They put in their pew time, but there is no way that they could have worshiped because they doubted. You can't have those things together. Right?

One of the first implications of this verse is that we no longer have an excuse for our own doubts. Sometimes we are inclined to say, or to think if we never are brave enough to articulate it, that if only we could see Jesus face to face then there wouldn't be any room for doubt. We are jealous of those guys who got to hear his human voice and see his human face and touch his human hands. And we think if only we were given that gift, then we wouldn't have worry about doubt anymore. But verse 17 tells us that we would be wrong about that. These guys saw him face to face and still some doubted.

The odd thing is that there is another way to translate the last phrase. In fact the "some" that has been included is an assumption. And we've assumed it was related to the disciples—some of them doubted. But what it might have meant is that there was some doubt. They worshiped, they all worshiped, but there was some doubt. Even in the worshipers. Even in those who were ready to give themselves, to receive the commission, to go where he directed them, there was still some doubt.

Doubt need not be understood as the opposite of faith or of worship. In fact, it might simply be the human side of worship. The human side of worship is the recognition that there is more going on here than I can figure out. The human side of worship is the acknowledgment that I have no idea what all the implications are of my songs of praise, that I am not sure on where I need to go next to

live out my prayers for peace, that I don't know even know what is being asked of me or even who it is doing the asking. Doubt in this case might refer to the realization that there just might be moments in front of me that I have never in my wildest dreams even contemplated and the fear that I might not be up to the challenge. Is that the opposite of worship? Maybe. But I don't think so. If we are really worshiping the God of all things, if we are really placing ourselves in the presence of the Creator of the Universe, if we are really claiming the name of the Eternal Word through whom all things that are made were made, then it only makes sense that we have to acknowledge the limits of our human capacity to comprehend or even imagine. We can, and do, worship and doubt at the same time.

The key is to not let doubt determine the willingness to serve. A part of the doubt came from the fact that the worshiping preceded the commission. They wondered what they should do next, and Jesus, who knew they wondered, told them. Go, disciple the nations, baptize into the community, teach what I have placed in you to teach. Ah, now I see. But did they? Luke's story in the Acts of the Apostles indicates that they didn't even see then. "Surely he didn't mean all the nations, did he?" Yep. They were still learning. And teaching. And worshiping. And doubting.

So, Paul says give everything to this task.

The New Life in Christ

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:

prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Romans 12 begins with the idea that God wants all of us. Each of us, yes, but all of each of us. All of you, all of me. God wants it all. So, present your bodies! Paul means literally that, present them. Offer your whole being to God for service, for worship, for transformation, for all of it. And don't get caught up in serving like the world does, serve like Christ does, not for return, not for gain, but for love.

The second thought from this text is the idea that Paul returns to again and again. We have gifts that differ, he says in this passage. We all are different parts, he says in other places. But we give them and share them, these gifts. We give them away for the joy of others, for laughter and for tears. We serve together as a part of a community. We grow together, learning from one another and helping one another to learn. We sing and we worship together, we break bread and tell stories together, we let one another into our lives in sometimes surprising depth because we are open to the Spirit at work in each of us. And we do our best to find ways to let this spill out into the world around us.

That's how the world changes, by the ripples from committed individuals and groups who are seeking the kingdom, seeking to bring to life the vision of living in community that Jesus described throughout his ministry.

> *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*
> — Margaret Mead

There are some questions about whether this is an actual quote from the cultural anthropologist, Mead. But if anyone can give witness to the truth of such a statement, it is those who are disciples of Jesus and who stand in the tradition of a small group of worshiping doubters, or doubting worshipers who empowered by the Spirit launched a movement that did indeed change the world. And we might add that they did it with a song, with a gospel of invitation and inclusion.

O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord; bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts. Worship the Lord in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth. Say among the nations, "The Lord is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity." Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar and all that fills it; let the field exult and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth.

This is the new song the psalmist writes of in Psalm 96. A song that will change the world, but only if we sing it to the nations, to all of creation. Only if we live it as we sing it. Only if we sing it invitationally. Only if we are willing to go anywhere, and everywhere to sing the new song of glory to God and inclusion and grace. Alleluia, Amen.