

“Are We There Yet?” Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 16:6-10 2/28/16

Many of you have taken a car trip with children, and heard that inevitable, annoying question, “Are we there yet?” On long trips, you might hear the question many times! On this occasion when we have our whole church family together, I thought we might think about this question in regard to our church. Are we there yet? Have we gotten to the place God wants us to be? And, more basically, where the heck are we going?

I thought I’d start with our church’s mission statement, which is based on Jesus’ command to his followers shortly before he returned to heaven. We’ve printed both this passage from Matthew 28, as well as our mission statement in your bulletin. I’d encourage you to follow along. Here are Jesus’ words from Matthew’s gospel. <sup>16</sup>*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.* <sup>17</sup>*When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.* <sup>18</sup>*And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.* <sup>19</sup>*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,* <sup>20</sup>*and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* (Matt. 28:16-20)

“Go therefore and make disciples,” Jesus said. That’s the central mission for followers of Jesus. And that mission is mirrored in our own GPC mission statement which calls us to “invite people to faith in Jesus, and equip them to grow as his fully devoted followers.” Obeying Jesus’ words, our mission statement says that we are called to make disciples, and then it defines what a disciple looks like. Again, you may find it helpful to follow along with our mission statement in your bulletin.

What does a disciple look like? First, disciples study regularly. This one is the sweet spot for most Presbyterians. We have long valued the life of the mind and have encouraged our people to study the Bible. At GPC, we offer Sunday School classes for children, youth, and adults. For kids, we also offer youth groups, youth club, kids club, confirmation classes, Vacation Bible School, Traveling Daycamp, and more. For adults, we have small groups, women’s circles, and the high-commitment “Disciple” series, all of which have important study components. We’re doing pretty well with studying regularly!

Second, disciples pray daily. Hmmm. We’re not so strong here. We have the prayer chain, and the email notification system for prayer concerns. We pray at meetings, in small groups, in worship, and on mission trips. I don’t know about our personal prayer lives, but my sense is that we don’t have the same kind of passion for this one, do we? There are

a couple of aspects of prayer we should consider. One has to do with listening to God. It's hard to do that without slowing down, centering ourselves, and being quiet before God. Because it's hard to get your mind to be still long enough to listen, it requires an intentional decision on our part to set aside time to be with God. It's especially hard for busy people, and it's easy to forget.

Another part of prayer has to do with asking God for what we need and waiting for his response. I'm told that the following story is true. A pastor had a kitten that had climbed high up a tree and gotten stuck. The pastor tried all kinds of things to coax it down, but nothing worked. Finally, he decided to loop a rope around the top of the tree, tie the rope to his car, and carefully move the car to pull the top of the tree down toward the ground so he could reach the kitten.

He pulled the tree a little at a time, stopping several times to check his progress. Finally, he figured if he just pulled the car forward a little more that the top of the tree would be low enough that he could reach the cat. But as he moved forward this one last time, the rope snapped, launching the kitten through the air and out-of-sight. He stood there, open-mouthed, stunned. He frantically searched the neighborhood, but to no avail. The kitten was gone. He was saddened, but prayed that God would take care of the little animal.

A couple days later, he was at the grocery store, when he spotted one of his parishioners. He was very surprised to see her shopping cart loaded with kitty litter and cat food. He knew this woman was not a cat lover, so he asked her what was going on.

“You won’t believe this,” she said, and told him how her little girl had been begging for a cat for months, but she had steadfastly refused. The daughter kept badgering her, and finally she told her, “Well, if God gives you a cat, I suppose I’ll let you keep it.”

She continued, “I watched my child fold her hands and ask God for a cat. And, Pastor, you won’t believe this, but I saw it with my own eyes. A kitten suddenly came flying out of the clear blue sky, and landed unhurt in the yard in front of us!”

Hmm. I have to admit I was a little skeptical about this story. Maybe you are, too. But then I caught myself wondering, why is it so hard for me to believe that God could answer the prayer of a little girl in whatever way God decided to do it? Where’s my faith? Maybe if I believed that God is really in the business of actually answering my prayers, it would be a higher priority for me. I think I need some work in this area of prayer and faith, and maybe you do, too.

Disciples also witness boldly. We tell others about our faith and invite them to church or other places where they can learn more. A number of years ago, shortly after the Berlin Wall fell, I met a young Romanian Christian, named Rei, who was youth minister in Romania. He attended one of our Session meetings as part of his research into how American churches work. One of our elders asked him how he had become a Christian in Romania, because Christian activity was forbidden under Communist rule. He said that he came from a Christian family, that his parents and grandparents had both been Christians.

Christian faith first came to his family when his great-grandfather was a prisoner of war in Russia during WWI, working on a farm labor camp. The farmer who owned the land where he was working was a Christian, and he shared his faith with Rei's great-grandfather. He became a Christian through the witness of this Russian farmer, and when he was released after the war, he returned to Romania, where he shared his faith with his family, and founded a church. That faith was eventually passed along to Rei, who was now passing it along to faithless young people in Romania.

I love Rei's story because it reminds us that we just don't know what God may do with a simple witness to our faith. Disciples witness boldly.

OK, followers of Jesus study, pray, and witness. They also live faithfully. A woman was preparing to go on a business trip the next day. She realized that one of her suits needed cleaning, so she looked on line for a dry cleaner that could clean the suit quickly. She found one called “One-hour Dry Cleaning,” and took her suit there immediately. She told the clerk that she needed the suit back in an hour. The clerk replied, “I can’t have this ready for you until Thursday.” The woman replied, “I thought you did one-hour dry cleaning.” “No,” replied the clerk. “That’s just the name of the store!”

Some people are Christians in name only. Being a follower of Jesus means that we live a life in keeping with the name “Christian.” It has to do with how we behave in our families, how we vote, our integrity at work, etc. Do we walk the talk? This is hard to measure, but I’d like to see us find ways to better equip our people in this area, especially exploring together what it means to live faithfully at work.

Disciples also serve passionately. This is another sweet spot for us at GPC. We are involved in all kinds of local service- Habitat for Humanity, Ruth’s Harvest, the Soup Kitchen, and Gettysburg CARES. We have mission trips in our own country to New Orleans, South Carolina, Appalachia, and South Dakota, as well as international mission trips to Honduras and Mexico. We support missionaries and mission groups all

around the world. Our people are involved in all kinds of community service projects and organizations in Gettysburg and in Adams County. I think serving passionately is a strength at GPC.

Disciples give generously. We've really grown in this area. You have given to support the "Foundations for the Future" Capital Campaign as well as the annual budget over the last three years. Thank you for the sacrifices that you have made to make that possible. (portico, boiler, MacAskill Room and Ike Lounge, bathrooms, purchase of Wall St. property) I hope we can continue and even grow that level of generosity in the coming years!

Finally, disciples worship weekly. This is an increasing challenge not just at GPC, but at most churches. There are many activities that now compete for people's time on Sunday mornings. There are programs for kids in which children and youth are expected to participate on Sundays during worship. Some of our parents have drawn a line, telling coaches that their kids will be available for those activities after church, but not before. That communicates that we believe worship and Sunday School are important. Also, some of you travel on Sundays to care for aging parents. Others have your own recreational activities that compete for Sunday time, and more and more of you are working on Sundays.

And yet, spending time honoring the God who made you, and contemplating what that God requires of you each week is important. It helps disciples remember what their foundational commitments are about. It keeps us grounded and focused. Regular worship together is important.

When we consider the question, “Are we there yet?”, beginning with our mission of making disciples is a good place to start. It appears that we’re closer to being “there” in some areas than others, and I’m sure it varies from member to member in some individual areas.

It’s very possible that simply being faithful to our calling to live as disciples is all that God is calling GPC to at this time. But I wonder if there might not be another way to look at the question, “Are we there yet?” Maybe God has a specific vision for how we as his disciples are supposed to live out our calling in this place and time. The vision thing!

In Acts 16 the apostle Paul was busy fulfilling his mission to proclaim the Good News and to plant churches wherever he went. But we’re told that the Spirit kept him from entering a couple places he had planned to go with the gospel. And then he had a vision one night of a man in Macedonia calling to him, saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Paul regarded that vision as a godly one, and immediately got on a ship and went to Macedonia, taking the gospel into Europe for the first time.

I wonder if God may have a special vision for GPC. A BHAG, a Big Hairy Audacious Goal, in the terminology of James Collins. Maybe it would be something we would attempt that only God could make happen here. Planting a new church nearby or far away. Pioneering a new ministry to help people escape from poverty in our area. Forming a center to explore the intersection of faith and work. I don't know. But I'm asking for your help as we explore the possibility that God may have a special task for our future. Keep your eyes and ears open. Look for unmet needs in our community. Talk with each other and members of the community. Pass your ideas along to staff members or members of our Session.

So, let's stay faithful to those practices of being a disciple we described earlier, and also be open to God's vision for our future. Maybe that will help us more completely answer the question, "Are we there yet?"