

"Go!"

Rev. Eric S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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**Matthew 28:18-20**

<sup>18</sup>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."

For fifteen months, or 66 weeks, our worship services took place without anyone sitting in these pews on Sunday mornings at 9 AM. A few of us gathered here or in other places in the prior week to record parts of the worship service, which were then edited to a complete worship service. On Sundays at 9 AM, we worshiped together from our homes, or away from home, even in your cars sometimes, I heard. We have now been gathered here in person for this 9 AM worship service for only three weeks – today is the fourth. Yes, several of us gathered at 10:15 for a couple months prior to that, but not quite like this. Just three weeks we've been in this phase of the pandemic, this lessening of restrictions. Not all of us *are* here as some are gathering with us over live stream, and it's just three weeks we've been able to come here – and I have one parting word for you in this my final sermon at First Pres, Champaign.

*Go.*

Yes, you just got here. Yes, we're not all even here, but my word is "Go." It's not actually my word, though, it's Jesus' word for us. He tells us in this passage from Matthew, "Go." Don't stay here – I know you just got here – but GO! The church of Jesus Christ is not about staying inside a building.

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.* That is Jesus' commandment for us. We call it the Great Commission. Our lives are lived not in here, but *out there*. We come here to be encouraged, to strengthen our faith, to teach and learn the good news, but we then take what we have learned *out there* to put our faith in action, to meet the needs of

others, to share the good news. In other words, we "go...and make disciples of all nations," or as *The Message* paraphrase puts it, "Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."

This is what Jesus instructed us to do...to go. But how? How do we reach out to the world out there? The only way we can, by showing them the love of Christ. Jesus said the most important commandment is to love God with all you've got, but He added one more thing...and love your neighbor as yourself. Love God and love neighbor. It is only through love that we can do *anything* out there.

We all too often hold on tightly to what we have, rather than sharing with those in need, and that includes love. I think we most often think of the needs of others as food or financial resources, but that's not the only need. Others often need someone to listen, someone to care. That need is to assist with child care or transportation or mowing yards. That need is to hear of the love of God, to hear of the amazing grace of God. The need is for us to care about the eternal souls of people, yes, but also to care about their bodies, here on earth. The need is to work toward full inclusion of all. The need is for us to work toward God's kingdom coming and God's will being done, on earth, *in Champaign County even*, as it is in heaven. And we can't do *any* of that if we stay right here. We have to go out and share this Jesus way of life with everyone we meet. We have to go out there, and we have to go out there with the love of God.

The love of God is not just heart-shaped emojis. It is not just "I love chocolate." It is self-sacrificing, other-focused love. It is love that tears down walls that separate us from one another. It is love that can do amazing things.

Before Jesus went to the cross, he told his disciples something pretty remarkable. He told them "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12) We are empowered to do the works of Jesus, and *even greater* works, and did you notice how? He said, "*because* I am going to the Father." When Jesus was on this earth, He

could only interact with a few people at a time. It was a simple limit of the human form He took on for us. But now that He is with the Father, Jesus lives in *each Christian*, so that we *all* can do the works of Christ, as He performs them through us. Jesus is no longer limited to interacting with a few people at a time, for He works through each one of us, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

If each of us goes out and shares the love of Christ with another, how many people could that reach? In the last year, we've learned the science of how viruses spread exponentially, but so does love. If the 2.3 *billion* Christians in the world truly showed the love of Christ out there, what could this world look like? *There is more than enough in the kingdom*. More than enough resources, more than enough love. We do not have an issue with resources in this world. We have a problem with people – that is, *us* – not sharing our resources, including love. God has blessed this world with more than enough. We just have to open our hands and share. Sometimes, we think that we are too small, too insignificant to make a difference. There is an old proverb which speaks to that: "If you think you are too small to make a difference, try spending the night in a closed room with a mosquito." Or, think of it this way: Richard Stearns, the president of World Vision International, an evangelical relief and development organization, wrote this in his book *The Hole in Our Gospel*: "God has created each of us with a unique contribution to make to our world and our times. No other person has our same abilities, motivations, network of friends and relationships, perspectives, ideas, or experiences. When we, like misplaced puzzle pieces, fail to show up, the overall picture is diminished."<sup>1</sup> We are like Moses, asking God to send *someone else* to do His will. But God uses the gifts that He has given each of us, as we share them with God's children in love.

We just have to start by loving each person we encounter out there.

About ten years ago, I attended a conference at which the keynote speaker was Tony Campolo. Campolo has been a pastor, professor, sociologist, and author. He is known, among other things, for his stories. Stories are powerful, and they often get better as we tell and re-tell them. One of the stories that Campolo told at that conference was one I had

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<sup>1</sup> Page 251

heard him tell before on a recording. I had also read it in one of his books, and had heard it quoted in other sermons. So, when he began to tell the story, I got a chill right at the beginning because I knew what was coming. At the end of the conference session, I told Campolo that I felt a bit like I was at a concert. You buy the CD and listen to the music, you hear it on the radio, but it's just not the same as being there live. I'd like to share that story with you because it's one of my favorites. Some of you will have heard it before, but it's a great story which just gets better with re-telling.

Campolo travels quite a bit for speaking engagements. On one such trip, he was in Hawaii, which is 6 time zones away from his home. So, when he awoke with his body feeling like it was 9 AM, it was 3 AM local time. He couldn't get back to sleep, so he went out on the downtown streets of Honolulu, looking for a restaurant that was open where he could get a cup of coffee. He finally found what he called "the epitome of the greasy spoon." He went in and saw that he was the only customer in this little place which only had seating at the counter. So, he sat down at that counter and ordered, and then he sat there quietly sipping his coffee.

As he was doing so, he walked 9 prostitutes off the streets of Honolulu. There was nowhere to sit in the tiny café but on both sides of him at the counter, and they did, talking loudly and crudely. At one point, the woman on one side of Tony said to the woman next to her, "Tomorrow is my birthday. I'm going to be 39." The reply came back, "So. what do you want from me? A birthday party? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday'?"

The woman responded, "Come on! Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

The conversation ended, and a few minutes later, all the women left. Tony Campolo sat there for a moment, and he recalls, "Every once in a while you get a good idea." He turned to Harry, the guy behind the counter, and asked, "Harry, do they come in every night?" "Every night," Harry answered. "The one sitting right next to me, does she come

here every night?" "Yeah. That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya want to know?"

"Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?"

A smile slowly crossed his cheeks, and he answered with delight, "That's great! I like it! That's a great idea!" Calling to his wife, who did the cooking in the back room, he shouted, "Hey! Come out here! This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow's Agnes's birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night!"

His wife came out of the back room all bright and smiley. She said, "That's wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody does anything nice and kind for her."

Campolo said, "If it's okay with you, I'll get back here tomorrow morning about 2:30 and decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake!"

"No way," said Harry. "The birthday cake's my thing. I'll make the cake."

When 2:30 came, Campolo was back with some crepe-paper decorations and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" Harry had baked the cake. The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15, Campolo says every prostitute in Honolulu was crammed into the tiny diner.

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open, and as Agnes walked in, Campolo had everybody ready and they screamed, "Happy birthday!"

Campolo says "Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted...so stunned...so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her." She was led to one of the stools as everyone sang "Happy Birthday" and she began to cry.

Harry gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles." And,

after an endless few seconds, he did. Then he handed her a knife and told her, "Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake."

Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I...I mean is it okay if I kind of...is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? I mean, is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure! It's OK. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home, if you want to."

"Can I?" she asked. Then, looking at Campolo, she said, "I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home, okay? I'll be right back. Honest!"

She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door. And everyone in the little diner just stood there motionless.

When the door closed, there was a stunned silence in the place. Campolo broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?"

There was agreement and so Campolo says, "I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her. I prayed that she would really have a happy birthday."

When he finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" Campolo said he had one of those moments when just the right words came and he answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No, you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"<sup>2</sup>

Is there a church like that? Is *this* a church like that? It can be such a church if it takes seriously its call to show God's love out there, to *all* of God's children. Christ said to go and make disciples of *all* nations, and that starts right outside these doors. Not all are

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<sup>2</sup> From various sources, including *Let Me Tell You a Story*, by Tony Campolo, page 216-219 and the 2010 Cumberland Presbyterian Ministers Conference

called to missions in far off places. Some of us will go to new cities to minister in other places. Most of us are called to follow Jesus right outside these doors, to show God's love to our neighbors, and we remember what Jesus taught us about who our neighbor is – a little hint: it's not just the people who live next door to you.

So, I say, "Go." Go, though you've been longing to sit in these pews again. Go, and share God's love with others. Go, and be a true apostle of our Lord. Go, and tell others about the peace you've found in God's embrace. Go, remembering that Jesus is with you always. Go, using my favorite expression of evangelism which Phillip shared with a skeptical Nathaneal in the first chapter of John: "Come and see." *Experience what I've experienced.* Go, and come back with others, and then go again, and be the church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning. Be the church that truly loves with the love of God. As you do, I'll be cheering you on. Amen