

The Great Commission

Matthew 28

Sermons notes from the pulpit of
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In your mind, what is the most important word in scripture? If you could narrow all the scriptures down to one word, what might that word be? I'm not asking about the one book of the Bible you like most, or about a favorite scripture passage, but *one word*. There are over 788,000 words in the Old and New testaments, combined. Many of those words are used multiple times, of course.

From all of those words, which word would you choose as the most important one?

"Love"?

"Justice"?

"Mercy"?

"Grace"?

"Doughnut?"

Sara Miles spoke a few years ago in Chicago as part of a lecture series hosted by the Christian Century magazine. She was rector at St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco and founded the food pantry there, working and writing in the area of food insecurity.

She suggests that the most important word in all of scripture is the word "with." God has always been with God's people. Through every single darkness, and every rocky road, God is with us. We aren't in this alone. Even through the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord *is* my shepherd. *God is with us.*

Here in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is sending his disciples out on what we call the Great Commission. And as we are called to "go, therefore," Jesus is reminding

us that we do not go it alone. *“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

Albert Einstein said, “It is strange to be known so universally and yet to be so lonely.”

And we would do well to remind Mr. Einstein about Jesus’ promise: *I am with you always.*

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Besides having Jesus with us, we have each other. God has given us *us*.

Together we get to be the church of Jesus Christ together. We are called to walk with each other. We give money for shared causes. We stand with each other in the church—never satisfied with simplistic answers, always willing to push each other and learn from each other intellectually. (Today in adult Sunday school, we will learn about and get an update from DREAM House.) We sit with one another in worship. At board meetings. We stand together and, figuratively, kneel together. We travel together—to Cuba, to car shows in our alley, to concerts in our sanctuary, to museums, on mission trips, and THIS Wednesday to Kemmerer Village Children’s Home. We study together. We pray together. We dream together. We serve together.

Bless be the tie that binds us together.

God is with us.

And God gave us us, so we are with us. We are not alone.

Sara Miles says the most important word in the whole Bible is “with,” and she calls this a “theology of accompaniment.”

“The whole point of a life being in relationship with God,” she said, “is being in relationship with others.”

That is a name for Jesus: God-with-us. Emmanuel.

Jesus told his disciples, “for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:20). It is a ministry of presence, or, as Sara Miles calls it, a “ministry of accompaniment.” God is with us.

Eugene Peterson puts it this way: “When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I’ll be there.”

When Jesus says, “I am with you always, even to the close of the age,” I think he expects us to take seriously the world-wide community for which he laid down his life. He has pledged his presence with us, and he expects us to live together as a connected, compassionate, beloved community. He expects us to love one another as he loves us.

To say that our survival depends on our willingness to love our neighbors may be an exaggeration.

Or not.

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After his resurrection and before he ascended to heaven, in the last passage of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus encourages his disciples with these amazing words. I can imagine the disciples receiving them with a certain measure of perplexity, and most certainly through glad tears: “Remember,” Jesus said to those he loved. “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”