

Let us pray:

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom and open our hearts and minds that we may sense the cry of our brothers and sisters who are hurting and hungry and dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

*He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*

These are familiar words spoken almost every Sunday when we join with Christians throughout the world to affirm our faith with the Apostle's Creed. It is a statement of faith almost as old as the faith itself. Designed to combat the heresy that Jesus was only a spiritual being, that he never lived as a human being and that he could never have died for us because a spiritual being cannot die. This phrase from the Apostle's Creed speaks directly to the day that we celebrate today.

Today is Ascension Sunday. It marks the Ascension of the Lord that was celebrated this past Thursday. On the 40<sup>th</sup> day after the resurrection, Jesus met with his disciples one final time. His final words to them are reported with minor variances in the four Gospels, but there is a common theme. In his final words, Christ commissions the disciples to go and preach repentance in Jesus' name to *all* the nations. In Luke's Gospel, the usual text for this morning, we hear:

*Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to*

*rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father has promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.*

Parallel texts can be found in all of the Gospels and in the opening of the book of Acts.

In John, we hear “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*”

In Mark, “*Go into all the world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation.*”

At the opening of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we hear “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*”

But the description of the final words of Christ that we know best are found in the Gospel according to Matthew:

*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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

This *Great Commission*, as it has come to be known, along with the other scriptures, call all of us to a life of action. Here again the action words in the Great Commission.

We are to *go*.

We are to *make*.

We are to *teach*.

And, we are to *remember*.

Clear directions, yes. But first, we must understand what a disciple is. I am preparing to participate in an online book club reading of Jack Deere's book, *Why I Am Still Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Zondervan, 2020). In chapter one of the book, he gives one of the most concise descriptions that I have read. He writes, "Discipleship is not about passing on some skills. That's a mentoring relationship. Discipleship is not an accountability relationship. People stress accountability when they don't know how to relate. Discipleship is loving someone, enjoying a person with whom we have a special chemistry, and teaching them to love the things that Jesus loves. Discipling someone is not an obligation; it is a pleasure. (Deere, 12)."

When Jesus ascended to the Father as we heard it described this morning in Acts 1, we hear these words: *While he was going and they (the disciples) were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."* The angels were telling them to get off their duffs, to stop looking and start living; living the life that Jesus had called them to live and living the commission that he had given to them.

Ours is a faith that cannot be contained or repressed. We, who call ourselves *followers of Christ* **must** reach out to others in the name of the very Christ that we claim to follow to preach, to teach and to remember.

We are called to love one another as Christ loves us.

We are called to *delight* in one another as Christ delights in us.

We are called to care for widows and orphans.

We are called to visit the sick and the prisoner.

We are called to provide food to the hungry, drink for the thirsty, clothing and shelter for those who have neither clothing nor shelter.

Jesus said, *“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”*

And it doesn't matter how old or how young we are, this calling is for all of us. One of our families' dearest friends was a sweet lady named Peg Butler. Now, Peg Butler was a character. For instance at age 97 she considered her ministry to be driving the old folks to the store. She died around this time in 2014 at age 104 and 6 months. One of the stories told about her at her memorial service was from when she was in her mid 80's and serving on a visitation team at Brainerd UMC. The visitation team stopped by to greet visitors to the church, leave them a basket of home made cookies and invite them to come again. On one visit, as the story goes, as Peg issued the invitation, the person receiving it said, “I don't know. I'm 73 years old and find it difficult to get out.” Peg's response was “Well, I'm 86 and I'm there every week.” Peg loved her neighbors and she loved the Lord. My prayer is that should love as she did.

On the opposite end of the scale, in 2011, a 10 year old boy named Jack Skowronnek, read a book about a 4 year old boy with cancer and his teenaged brother who shaved his head in solidarity with his baby brother when the 4 year old lost his hair from chemotherapy. Jack started what is now known as Jack's Chattanooga and from 2011 until its final year in 2016, Jack organized a day at the Chattanooga Market where folks would

shave their heads to raise money for Children's Hospital at Erlanger. During that time, over 200 thousand dollars was raised. All because a young man felt the need to love as Jesus loves.

Like I said, no excuses.

As followers of Christ in the Wesleyan tradition, we believe that our greatest task is in reaching out in Christ's name to the local community and to the entire world and to share the message that God loves us, that he cares for us and that he is there with us each and every moment of our lives.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement experienced assurance of his salvation 282 years ago today on May 24, 1738, at a group meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. Wesley believed that there is no religion but social religion, no holiness but social holiness. We are not meant to live out our faith in a solitary manner. It is through our work as a community of faith that the Methodist movement has been known.

Through the connectional system of the United Methodist Church, we work to create change in the local community and throughout the world. Our work locally through the Common Grounds Free Store, supplying the Food Blessing box at Rossville Elementary and our continuing support of the Rossville Schools, our support of Holston Home and our support of initiatives such as the mission offering to fight Opioid addiction in our region, our collection for Change for Children and the collection of the home buckets for Zimbabwe that we will be doing in the fall are examples of how we try to fulfill the commission that we have been given by Christ. In this year of response to the threat of COVID-19, it is especially important for us to hold on to the things that keep us together... it is the Wesleyan Way of being in ministry with the world around us.

Remember, of whom much is given, much is expected. We have been given the greatest gift of all...the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. It is our responsibility to share that gift with everyone that we meet. In fact Jesus told us that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with every fiber of our being and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

The great commission to Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to do the things that Jesus taught us is a call to action for all of us. The very Christ who gave His life so that we might live. The very Christ who taught us how to love by His example.

How can we accept the gift and not give thanks to the giver by living out the risk taking love that is expected of us?

All that we are and all that we hope to be is the direct result of the Amazing Grace that God has showered upon us. Let us be thankful for the gift. Let us be thankful for the giver who gives us life.

We have our marching orders. Orders that call us to a servant ministry that puts others first and calls us to love one another.

It is our bounden duty to accept those orders and go forth in his name.

Because it's just what we're supposed to do.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ. Amen