

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 40th 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:

45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.

46 He said to them, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and

rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things.

49 Look, I'm sending to you what my Father promised, but you are to stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power."

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 "*Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*"

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

19 Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present 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. Hear again the action words in the Great Commission.

We are to *go*.

We are to *make*.

We are to *teach*.

We are to *obey*.

And why are we to do these things? So that we can make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Clear directions, yes. But first, we must understand what a disciple is. Jack Deere in his book, *Why I Am Still Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Zondervan, 2020) 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 away and as they (the disciples) were staring toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood next to them. They said, “Galileans, why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that 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.

We are called to share the *grace* that Jesus has shown to us with everyone that we meet. And we are to share that grace in the same measure that it has been shared with us... freely and without measure.

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 my families' dearest friends here in Chattanooga 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. Peg loved her neighbors and she loved the Lord. My prayer is that I would love as she did.

On the opposite end of the scale, in 2009, a 10 year old boy named Jack Skowronnek, read a book about a 4 year old boy with cancer. The boy's teenaged brother shaved his head in solidarity with his baby brother when the 4 year old lost his hair from chemotherapy. This story inspired Jack to start what was to be known as Jack's Chattanoggins and from 2011 until its final year in 2016 when Jack graduated from High School, Jack organized a day at the Chattanooga Market where folks would shave their heads to raise money for Children's Hospital at Erlanger. During those six years, over 200

thousand dollars was raised for Children's Hospital. 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. It's all about grace.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement experienced assurance of his salvation 286 years ago 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. And even with recent headlines about our General Conference meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina, none of that focus has changed. Yes, punitive language in our Book of Discipline was eliminated, putting the focus back where it was prior to 1972 and those changes were approved by an overwhelming majority of delegates from around the world. Granted, these changes were adopted much to the consternation of folks who have been sewing the seeds of division and separation for years including a few who always intended to leave the United Methodist fold, but chose to stick around just to cause trouble. By the way, none of the changes approved by General Conference received less than a 74% vote in favor of the change and some of the changes in language were offered by delegates from Africa who

were tired of the division and wanted to get us back on our task to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Contrary to what some sources have claimed, we have not changed our doctrines and foundational documents. To do so would require super majorities of at least 3/4 of the delegates to General Conference plus a ratification by 3/4 of the members present and voting at regular sessions of the Annual Conferences around the world.

Through the connectional system of the United Methodist Church, we work to create change in the local community and throughout the world. It was through this Connectional System that we were able to get Kal back home to Canada with his belongings. Our work locally through the Common Grounds Free Store and by supplying the Food Blessing box here at the church, through our support of initiatives such as the mission offering to enable New Voices as we support the work of the Conference Camps, Colleges, and College Ministries in our region, our collection for Change for Children and the collection of the food buckets for Liberia are all examples of how we try to fulfill the commission that we have been given by Christ. In this year of disruptive elements in our church and society, 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. Even during the challenges of the disruptions of COVID-19, we continued to be in ministry. Our methods changed to suit the times, but our focus did not. Were these methods all inclusive? Unfortunately, no. But we did the best that we could with what we had to work with and we continued to move forward in mission and in ministry.

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. They are instructive commands of the very Christ who gave His life so that we might live... the very Christ who taught us how to love by His example.

So, 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?

How can we not share the Amazing Grace that has been shattered upon us to overflowing with all people?

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.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen