

I've been trying to identify the proper word that will convey how this gospel text, this statement by Jesus that we often call The Great Commission, makes me feel this week. After mulling on this the past couple of days, I have decided that The Great Commission is causing me to feel embarrassed. That's not always been how this passage has affected me, but today I am embarrassed.

I know this passage well, having committed it to memory long ago. The Great Commission – “Go therefore into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them everything that I have commanded you.” It's a great mission statement for the church with strong action verbs – go, make disciples, baptize, teach. It's like a pep talk Jesus gives his team before sending them out for the big game. “Okay, team – we've been together for a couple of years now. You've heard my teachings. You've watched how I interact with people. I've given you all the training you need. I have confidence in you. Now it's up to you. Just remember the basics – make disciples, baptize, teach. You're going to do great! Now go out there and make me proud of you.” And the disciples gather around their coach, put a hand up in solidarity, chant “One, two, three, JESUS!” and they run out, charged up to change the world.

In the past this Great Commission has made me feel energized and motivated. This week it makes me feel embarrassed. There are two reasons for my sense of embarrassment and both have to do with my misquoting and therefore misrepresenting what Jesus says. By saying that I misquote Jesus I mean that I don't fully quote him. I've been leaving out something – not intentionally, to be sure. But by not quoting the Great Commission fully, I realize that I have missed its rationale and fundamentally altered its purpose.

My first embarrassment is to not heed my own word of caution that I have often given to you about reading the Bible. I have cautioned you to be wary when reading a passage that begins with the word “therefore.” The word “therefore” means that everything that is about to be said is premised on what has just been said. If you start reading a passage that begins with a “therefore” and are not aware of its underlying premise, you run the risk of misunderstanding, or at least not fully understanding, the speaker's point. So when Jesus says, “Go, therefore...” what should our first question be? Our first question should be, “What did he say in the previous sentence?” So look at the front of your bulletin where the Great Commission is quoted fully. What precedes the “therefore?” “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

Several times in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has been questioned about what authority he has to teach and do the things he does. Never does he reply, “Well, I do and say these things because all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” What has happened that prompts Jesus to now say, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”? The answer is simple and straightforward – the resurrection. So this is part of my embarrassment – never have I preached a sermon or heard a sermon saying that the Great Commission is premised on the resurrection and that without the resurrection the Great Commission is meaningless. Now to justify myself and other preachers, I think there's a reason for this oversight. The reason is that we typically pull this passage out of its context and preach it as if this was part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount or some other situation in his ministry. This is one of the reasons I like the Narrative Lectionary we are using this year – by reading from Matthew's gospel 18 weeks in a row and reading the Great Commission in its proper context on the Second Sunday of Easter, we now hear the Great Commission as the words spoken by the resurrected Jesus. And the Easter message is not, “Because I am risen from the dead you all get to go to heaven when you die.” The Easter message is, “Because I am risen from the dead, I am the world's true Lord and you can trust that what I have taught you is true. Therefore, go make disciples, baptize, and teach.”

In saying that last sentence I have again demonstrated my second cause for embarrassment. I have quoted or summarized the Great Commission four times in this sermon and I have left out a verb each time. Look at the bulletin again. What have I left out?

I've left out the verb “to obey.” Jesus says “Go, make disciples, baptize them, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.” We are not called simply to teach, but to teach people to obey Jesus' teaching. This is a huge omission on my part and it has huge consequences for fully understanding what Jesus is saying. To explain why, let me tell you about a man who died 70 years ago this past Thursday.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor who was 27 years old when Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party came to power in 1933. You may be aware that Bonhoeffer participated in the German underground resistance during the war and participated in a plot to assassinate Hitler, which led to him being arrested by the

