

## **We are Commissioned!**

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Grace Church in New York  
Trinity Sunday  
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From our Gospel reading in 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.” (28:19-20a) And from our epistle reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians; “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” (13:13) Then as we say the in *Gloria patri* daily and weekly in our worship and prayer; “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever.” (BCP p. 46)

Today is Trinity Sunday. But wait. The word Trinity is not found in Scripture. I suppose it would not require a rocket scientist or an internet genius to come up with the concept of the Trinity with the way that God the Father and Jesus Christ, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are presented in the verses written by Matthew and Paul. As I understand it, a fellow by the name of Theophilus of Antioch wrote about the concept of the Trinity of the Godhead in the late second century. He termed it a Triad; “God and His Word and His Wisdom.” Never mind that Wisdom or Sophia is widely understood as a feminine concept but this sermon is not about gender in religion, although we still have work to do on this front. I will simply trust that the church fathers received input from the church mothers whether they wanted it or not!

Trinity Sunday is one of the seven Principal Feasts in the Church. Five of the seven Principal Feasts relate directly to the life of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We have been on this great and glorious journey since last November living out the drama of Christ’s earthly life. Christmas marked the nativity of Jesus. Epiphany revealed Jesus as God as he is baptized. Easter day delivered us our salvation with the resurrection of our Lord. Ascension Day, just a couple of weeks ago, witnessed Jesus go forward to heaven. Then just last Sunday, Pentecost Sunday and the Holy Spirit came upon all of us. We certainly did a wonderful job, celebrating the feast with eleven children baptized and sealed in the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever. We followed this sacrament in the worship service with a joyous and fun filled picnic on Huntington Close celebrating the superb music and so much more that we enjoy as part of our celebration of the Lord in this particular part of the body of Christ that is Grace Church.

I would suggest that the last two Principal Feasts of our Church calendar, Trinity Sunday today, and All Saints’ Sunday right at the end of the Church year were established by Christians to demonstrate how Jesus was so successful at making his point. That point being to call women and men who would be witnesses of what Jesus was and what he did. Leaders of the early church spent several hundred years hammering out the doctrine of the Trinity. This work culminated in the great Church Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople in the fourth century. A reasonably unified agreement was reached about this dogma that is central to our Christian faith. Yet Trinity Sunday itself was not formally recognized as a Principal Feast on the church calendar until the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

I propose that, while a celebration of Trinity Sunday is a good thing, we should focus on the act of Jesus commissioning the disciples and us as the really significant substance of today’s Gospel reading. Our Apostles and Nicene Creeds do a fine job of defining the relationship among the three persons of the Trinity. I believe that the action Jesus calls for is the very spirit of the Holy Trinity for that matter. Let’s do a simple edit to the passage. “Go therefore and

make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Jesus is empowering the disciples and us to do more than just listen or hear his word. He is effectively turning over the keys for us to drive the bus. Furthermore, Jesus wants everyone on board, not just Jews and Gentiles but all nations. All peoples. It is still a powerful statement even without the Father, Son and Holy Spirit images.

Well we did the baptizing thing last Sunday. It is well worth noting that Jesus’ commission includes this critical sacramental act. Then we should take to heart the teaching commission too. It seems to me that the teaching envisioned is a highly practical concept of teaching about the whole way of life in following Jesus. I believe this is the essence of Trinity Sunday, to take the baton that Jesus passes us as we seek to run the good race.

To help us to delve deeper into our commission, I will cast my lot today with the insightful British missionary and churchman, Lesslie Newbigin. In his book, *The Open Secret*, Newbigin states that “the center of Jesus’ concern was the calling of women and men who would be witnesses of what he was and did. The new reality that he – Jesus – introduced into history was to be continued through history in the form of a community, not in the form of a book.” (p.52). This is our commission, to, as Newbigin puts it “do something that will otherwise remain undone: to bring the forgiveness of God to actual women and men in their concrete situations in the only way that it can be done so long as we are in the flesh – by word and act and gesture of another human being.” (p.48)

Jesus recognizes our imperfect faith and he still commissions us. He affirms us. Our “faith in progress” is acknowledged by our Lord and Savior. He urges us into action adding his assurance that he will be with us “always, to the end of the age.” On that mountain in Galilee, now and forever.

Look at how Paul responded to the messy scene in Corinth. Not in the least dispirited, he ends his second epistle to the church there with joyful care. He asks people to “agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love will be with you.” Paul is not simply being idealistic in my reading, he tells people to “put things in order.” Get organized about what he has told them concerning doing church. As I think about these readings today and our commission, I am compelled to draw from our experience last Sunday. Over four hundred people affirmed their faith together in the Baptismal Covenant, after saying the Apostles’ Creed together, we responded to five additional questions. I want to present the final two questions and answers again today.

“Will you seek to serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” “I will, with God’s help.”

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” “I will, with God’s help.”

These last two questions of our Baptismal Covenant are where I believe that the “rubber meets the road” in our faith journeys. We gather together in worship and parish life with great participation on a large number of fronts. However, our commission from Jesus is to “make disciples of all nations.” I think that this includes folks who are not part of our church community. How we connect with the world outside of our sanctuary is significant.

I suppose that I learned this in a fairly important way when I answered a sense of call to ordained ministry. At the time, my sanctuary was a financially very profitable private bank on Wall Street. But I saw a polarized world within that place which seemed to exist at odds with

what I was experiencing on the streets in so many parts of this great city. I could give thanks that my church, in reasonable ways, reflected and included people of all nations. Lay people, deacons, priests and bishops include a pretty good variety of people. Now I should be out on the street corner at 10<sup>th</sup> & Broadway shouting “hallelujah” knowing that over half of the members of the Episcopal Church are not cradle Episcopalians. We’re doing something right!

While this is a step in a positive direction, I must wonder aloud, in the context of Jesus’ commission call to us all today, what are we being summoned to do. I honestly feel that we are doing a number of good things in our parish when I think about the first of the two Baptismal Covenant questions that I have asked us to think about together. “Will you seek to serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” Perhaps I am on a bit of a spiritual high after our lovely Pentecost Sunday worship and social time. I truly think that people in this parish do have the spirit and love of Christ front and center in all that we are doing.

It is probably the second question that poses larger challenges for us as a parish. “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” There is no doubt that everyone already has many demands on their time whether family, job or any number of other important matters that beckon for our attention. Not the least of which are the expectations that we have of one another in our parish life together. At the same time, I earnestly believe that we are called to outreach beyond the parish.

Now the Outreach Community here at Grace has made good progress on a number of projects and activities, perhaps most notably the ongoing commitment to help rebuild in New Orleans. Scores of people have participated in this multiple year venture. Closer to home, we have developed relationships with local organizations such as the Interfaith Alliance for Homelessness and Housing and the New York City Rescue Mission. In our own backyard, we have abundant potential to connect in new ways with young at risk public school students through the remarkable work of the Grace Opportunity or GO Project. Just yesterday, Grace Church served as a hub while college students and other volunteers, coordinated by Picture the Homeless and Hunter College, counted vacant buildings and lots in the area. These are all activities that exemplify the type of “striving for justice and peace among all, and (seeking to) respect the dignity of every human being” that we affirm in our Baptismal Covenant.

It makes me wonder if we, as a parish, might determine a shared vision about a mission from our commission by Jesus that connects in new ways to the communities that surround the church. The important Open Door ministry, while based in the sanctuary, has made many interesting connections with people who visit Grace. We have initiated a partnership with First Presbyterian Church to support their homeless shelter by having parishioners serve as overnight volunteers. Are there additional collaborations with other local churches, synagogues or mosques that we might be called into? Does our Episcopal Diocese call us to further action around the city?

I ask these questions today with the simple hope of sparking some new discussions in light of the call to action that Jesus presents at the end of Matthew’s Gospel. He commissions us to be both a sacramental community and a community that literally goes out into the wider neighborhood and to all peoples to share a love for God’s justice in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This is echoed today, daily and weekly as we say “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.” We are assured that the Holy Trinity is among us urging us onward with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

AMEN