

Adventure (Part One)

“Go and make disciples of all nations”

Reflection 40 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

We have noted so far in this series that there are many people, a good many of whom do not attend church at least regularly, who still seek a sense of wonder and awe. They still seek to encounter the presence of God. They still seek community but not community that’s focused primarily on itself – rather community that addresses global concerns, community concerned with human flourishing everywhere, community that cares for the oppressed, the marginalized and the poor, community that embodies God’s love in practical, meaningful, inclusive, healing ways. And these things they should seek. They have every right to seek these things.

They seek enlarged understandings of salvation. They are more drawn to the promise of Paradise than driven by the threat of Hell. They seek a Grand Narrative, the real story of which their life stories are a part. They seek a strong sense of God’s love, a dynamic, never-failing love that draws them into intimate relationship with God, with their neighbors and with their own deepest selves. They seek in their faith a palpable sense of joy. And in all this, they seek less dogmatism and greater diversity. They understand Scriptures in their original historical contexts and they find in Scriptures multiple perspectives and always the possibility that there are more ways to interpret a text than just one.

But perhaps most of all many people seek adventure, some in ways robust and vigorous, others in ways more quiet. But they seek lives that matter, lives that are devoted to something larger than themselves. Let’s consider then a text from the very end of the Gospel of Matthew (28:16-20) where the writer of this Gospel – we take him to be Matthew – chooses this scene and this message as his climax: the resurrected Jesus with his surviving eleven apostles back in Galilee. On a mountain. Was it the same mountain where Jesus had first introduced this whole idea of poverty of spirit and all that goes with it? In any case, Jesus now tells the eleven he has left: Go and make disciples of all nations. Get the message out. People have to change. They have to learn from me: to feed the hungry; to shelter the homeless; to preach good news to the poor; and to end the cycles of violence and counter-violence. But the world really can start over. There can be a new humanity, a new world, brand-new possibilities.

Jesus goes on with this mandate: Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Lead them to this fundamental turning point, a burial in and resurrection from water that will always remind them of my burial and resurrection, Jesus says. Stamp this pattern deep on their consciousness. Make sure that they know they are cleansed and forgiven. And one more thing: Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. Everything I have commanded you. Tell them to do it. “Like what, Matthew?” we ask. “Like what I’ve written in this book,” Matthew answers. Tell them to do these things.

The Gospel of Matthew, you see, is a primer in Christian discipleship, a handbook for students of Jesus, a manual for “the few” who really get it and want to do something about it. Maybe only a few will find it at first, but this is it, this is the manual, and it has to go out to all nations. It’s a global mission. It’s a global story. Disciples of Christ, Matthew is saying, have: to master their anger; to let their ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and their ‘No,’ ‘No;’ to be able to turn the other cheek; and to

go the second mile. They have to know to stop worrying not just because it's bad for you because it elevates your blood pressure, or because it suggests a lack of faith, but because worried people can end up doing very destructive things to others. Disciples of Christ have to know: that the way you judge others is the way God will judge you; that the way you forgive others is the way God will forgive you; that the way to find yourself is to lose yourself; and that the things that matter most in life are not done by force, that, in fact, "all who draw the sword will die by the sword." And so Jesus asks his followers to get these teachings out, knowing that everything depends on disciples being made of all nations, knowing that the future of the world depends on this.

Well, this commission was a staggering thing for those eleven. If you were giving them a job review, they'd get pretty mixed marks. One of their associates had already betrayed Jesus. He was gone. Another had denied him three times in just one night. He was still around for some reason. All of them were still confused – still didn't even understand what Jesus meant by his kingdom. Though that's what Jesus had spent almost his whole time talking about.

Let's go back for a moment and look at verses 16-17, especially verse 17. "When they [who? 'the eleven disciples'] saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted." Some who? If we follow Matthew here, some of the eleven! What after all do we know about Thaddeus, James, Alphaeus's son, Simon the Zealot, Bartholomew, Philip, even Andrew? And why don't we know more? Whatever the case, they worshiped him; but some doubted, some were uncertain and hesitant.

Notice, however, that it's to disciples like these – flawed, confused, doubting – that Jesus gives this commission, this invitation to high adventure. Which of course means that anyone can get in on this!

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week