

## Ants In The Pants

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, June 11, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Matthew 28:16-20](#)

Copyright © 2017 by Jeffrey S. Spencer

The Gospel lesson we just heard is traditionally called “the Great Commission,” but I noticed this week that the commission is just one of the three important things in this passage. Three things, and they are all interrelated.

First, there is the wonderful line about doubt. The resurrection has happened. The disciples have experienced the presence of Jesus even though he’d been killed. Matthew has the disciples gather on a mountain top, a location of holy events throughout the Bible. They see Jesus and they worship him; “but, Matthew says, “some doubted.”

How glorious is that?! There they are in the very presence of the resurrected Christ, and some of them doubt.

Doubt is part of the life of a disciple. Doubt is normal and as much a part of the life of a disciple as trust is. In fact, the famous theological Paul Tillich said, “Doubt isn’t the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.... Sometimes I think it is my mission to bring faith to the faithless, and doubt to the faithful.” 16th century reformer John Calvin said, “Surely ... we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety.” Madeleine L’Engle said, “The minute we begin to think we know all the answers, we forget the questions, and we become smug like the Pharisee who listed all his considerable virtues, and thanked God that he was not like other men.... Those who believe they believe in God, but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, and even at times without despair, believe only in the idea of God, and not in God himself.” And, perhaps my favorite quote about doubt comes from Frederick Buechner: “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”<sup>1</sup>

Getting back to the scripture lesson, there they are on the mountain top, worshipping Jesus, and some of them doubting, and Jesus gives them a job to do. This “great commission” is the second thing in this passage. “Go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you,” Jesus tells them. This is one of several passages used by the church through the ages to inform their sense of mission.

Now, I suspect I am not the only one here who has some resistance to a call to go into all the world to make and baptize disciples. It sounds too – what? – too aggressively Christian, maybe? It sounds too much like going out to save souls. But when I can get past that knee-jerk reaction, I can hear an invitation – for me to go extend the invitation, within and beyond the community of Jesus-followers, to a deeper and deeper life of discipleship.

---

<sup>1</sup> These quotes taken from Tim Suttle, “Ten Great Quotes About Doubt & the Christian Experience,” *Patheos*, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/paperbacktheology/2016/04/ten-great-quotes-about-doubt-the-christian-experience.html> (posted 25 April 2016; accessed 7 June 2017).

Figuring out what it looks like to love God and neighbor in any given situation is not always easy to do, and I need people who are on the journey to help me figure that stuff out. That's what the line about "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" means to me. I need to come together in prayer and worship, in study and fellowship and service to figure out how to best obey the most basic thing that Jesus taught: That the law and the prophets can be summed up in these two commandments – love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. That's one of the reasons it is important to pause and say thank you to all the people who make our coming together on Sunday mornings possible and meaningful.

And then there's the third thing: a promise. Jesus comes to his disciples despite – or maybe even because of – their doubt. And he commissions them to keep going deeper into their own discipleship even as they invite others to discipleship with them. And he finishes with a promise: "And I am with you always, to the end of the age."

"Notice Jesus' language: it's not just future tense. Christ is with us. Even now. Even here. Even amid our struggles at home or at work or at our congregations or in the world. Christ is with us. Encouraging us, comforting us, working with us, guiding us, granting us the grace and courage necessary to be the people of God in the world right now."<sup>2</sup>

"The very last thing Matthew records of everything Jesus said and did is a promise: 'And I am with you always, to the end of the age.' Right here, right now, and forever."<sup>3</sup>

This sermon started out as being for our high school graduates and I was going to focus on doubt, because doubts are such a normal part of the faith journey, especially for young adults. It became something for us all. We all experience doubts in the midst of our faith, and we can use those doubts to encourage our journeys. We are all called to mission, often in different forms, for we are different people, often in different forms at different stages of our lives, for we are evolving people. And we all are recipients of Jesus' promise, that he is with us, present tense, to the end of time.

"Go ahead and doubt," Jesus says. "I've got work for you to do anyway. And don't sweat it because I'm still around."

Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> David Lose, "Trinity Sunday A: 'The Great Promise,'" ... *in the Meantime*, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/06/trinity-sunday-a-the-great-promise/> (posted and accessed 7 June 2017).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*