

*God Gathers Us to Share the Hope of Jesus*

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Matthew 28:16-20 NRSV

<sup>16</sup>Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

<sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>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, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Our word from Jesus for today gets at the core of what it means to be a Christ follower and a Church of Jesus Christ. He spells out our mission. God's gift of Jesus is meant to be shared. Giving both command and promise, Jesus' words come as his mission on earth is completed - - and that of his disciples just beginning!

It's a big mission. Notice two things as we read it. What does Jesus ask them/us to do? What is the power and promise given to support this mission?

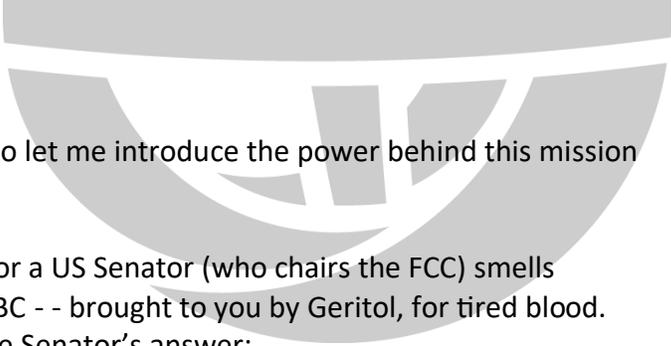
"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all I have commanded, and remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

It's hard to miss the mission, isn't it? The verbs ring out! Go. Make. Baptize. Teach. The scope staggers: All Nations.

Now if all you hear are the verbs and the scope of the command, it's pretty intimidating. I imagine the disciples think every day about the horrible things that happened to Jesus. If that got him killed, what chance do we have?

But remember, I invited you to notice how God's power and promise are behind his command.

Think for a moment: If you count the generations that have come and gone since Jesus' said this, there must be at least 70 or 80. Stop making disciples and this whole movement ends in a lifetime! But today, there are



Christ followers in pretty much every region of the world. So let me introduce the power behind this mission with a favorite movie quote.

It's from Quiz Show. A young, hot shot lawyer who works for a US Senator (who chairs the FCC) smells something fishy about a wildly popular TV Quiz Show on NBC - - brought to you by Geritol, for tired blood. He asks his boss for permission to such things out. I love the Senator's answer:

"TV. The pharmaceutical industry. That's big game, Son. You don't want to go hunting in your underwear." How true!

Jesus' vision is even bigger and it will be opposed by real big game - - Martin Luther described these as "sin, death and the devil," the Apostle Paul, "power and principalities."

But, Jesus doesn't send his disciples out in their underwear (so to speak). "All Authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" says Jesus, 'go therefore.....and notice the end...' and I will be with you always."

Here is what everyone who tries to do God's work has to learn, soon or later: Faith and transformation are not gifts we can create on our own power. That's why prayer, discernment and obedience to God's guidance are so important. That's also why just being religious can turn so sour and even destructive when leaders forget this, and why congregations that lose their sense of mission and focus instead on self-preservation inevitably decline. That is why we celebrate the Reformation and recognize our human need to constantly be reforming. The good news is: when it is God's purpose that we are about, we are never alone in that work. And sometimes, some pretty remarkable things happen, just as Jesus promised.

They did four generations ago in my family - - the Strommen side - - and the course of our family' in subsequent generations was changed for the better. Let me tell the story.

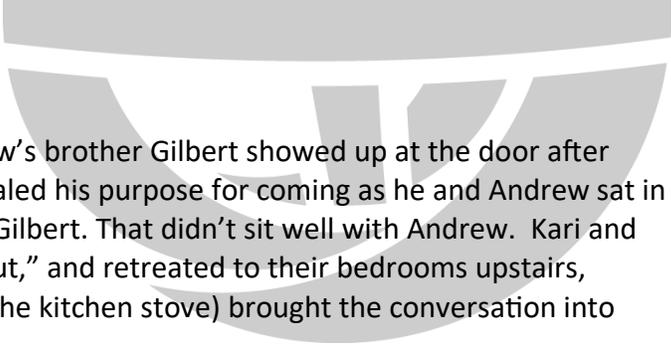
#### THE STORY

My great-grandfather's name was Andrew and his world was very different from ours. Born in Norway, he was a year old when the family left Norway for the new land, which happened to be Southern Wisconsin, just about the time the Civil War began (so you get an idea of the period). The farming land was good, in contrast to their pitifully small plot back in Norway, and with hard work, there was real opportunity in this Norwegian immigrant settlement.

Andrew left school and worked in the fields by age 7, got his own land as a young married man and soon had four children. It was a frontier culture where male status was often linked with physical strength and Andrew could hoist 350-pound barrels on the wagon and became known as the best wrestler in the county.

Fun-loving and intelligent, Andrew fell prey to a common problem in that time: when his wife Kari would send him to town with money for supplies, he would often return with no money, no supplies and roaring drunk. She and the kids lived in fear of those times because he could get abusive and angry. Although he did attend church - - most Norwegian immigrants did - - he was stubborn and refused to change his ways. He was one of the men who'd spit tobacco juice on the hot wood-burning stove heating the church, enjoying the sizzle, even during the pastor's sermon.





One Christmas season he got an unexpected visitor. Andrew's brother Gilbert showed up at the door after taking the trains from Fergus Falls Minnesota. Gilbert revealed his purpose for coming as he and Andrew sat in the kitchen that night: "I'm concerned for your soul," said Gilbert. That didn't sit well with Andrew. Kari and the children heard raised voices, their father yelling "get out," and retreated to their bedrooms upstairs, where the open registers (through which heat came from the kitchen stove) brought the conversation into their hearing.

It was arguing at first, later some tears, then voices got quieter as the family drifted off to sleep. Early the next morning they awakened to a sound they'd never heard before - - their father singing hymns with his brother. They gathered in the kitchen to see what was going on and Andrew said: "from now on, we are a Christian family" and invited them to join him on their knees for prayer. "I promise you, I will never touch another drop of liquor," he said.

And he never did. Over the last ten years of his life things began to relax at home, and the memories of the youngest children were of a happy family (compared to those of the oldest, like my grandfather, who remembered the pain). Something very real, very life-transforming happened to Andrew that night (as he put it: "I gave my life to Christ"). No doubt the shame and guilt that accompanies problem drinking didn't just vanish all at once, and the daily family devotions Andrew read could be quite dry, but there is no question of a true change.

Christian faith can be lived out faithfully in all kinds of vocations, so I don't say this to somehow glorify pastors, but my grandfather, then my father, and four of us five brothers became pastors. That shows, I think, the embrace of the life given in faith...the entire course of Andrew's family was changed. And we experienced in that change a prevailing love and affection for each other and for life.

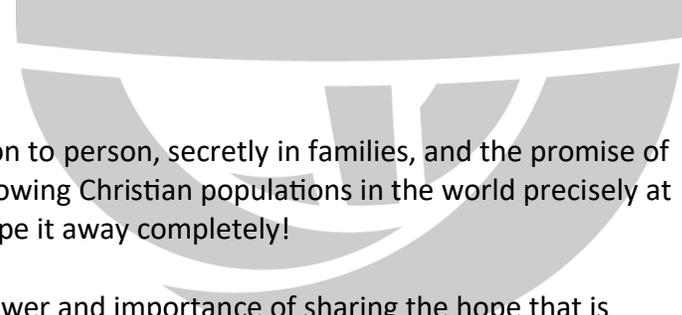
Who did the changing? It's clear to all of us that it was and is God. But in ways we cannot explain, Gilbert's long and inconvenient journey to Blanchardville, Wisconsin mattered. He loved his brother. No doubt he had second thoughts as he traveled to visit Andrew. Yet from that trip came a transforming change which has passed on to succeeding generations - - life-giving changes that bespoke of gift and grace.

When China opened up to westerners in the mid-1990s, the Christian world wondered if the Christian church there — so diligently planted there in the first half of the 20th century— survived in ANY form? Could Christians still be found?

Mao's communism had aggressively killed or kicked out all missionaries and pastors, eliminated churches and made faith illegal to hold or share. No church, no books, no meetings, no Bibles, and prison for those giving witness - -that was the situation. Then things loosened up. Westerners started to come in the 1980s and by the 90s it was possible to estimate what had happened to the church. Here's is what was discovered: the number of Chinese who designated themselves as Christian had multiplied by 1000! How was this possible?

I met a Chinese doctor studying at UMD (Duluth) who gave an adult forum at my congregation there. This doctor had twice been imprisoned for sharing his faith with another.





And there it is. Faith went underground, was shared person to person, secretly in families, and the promise of Jesus held true. Ironically, China had one of the fastest-growing Christian populations in the world precisely at a time when their government was vigorously trying to wipe it away completely!

This Reformation Sunday, let us not underestimate the power and importance of sharing the hope that is within us. Conversation among Christians and witness with others is also a manifestation of God's word. Share it in love, respect, and confidence, remembering that God is present in the sharing and that the authority of heaven and earth goes with it.

