

Use your words
Matthew 28:16-20

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In this morning's gospel we hear the Great Commission - 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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Are you all ready to go and make disciples of all nations? In the middle of a pandemic? In a country suffering from the effects of racism with no clear path to go forward? Amidst protests, sharp rhetoric and families and friends divided? Making disciples of all nations is tough even in the best of times.

I found myself struggling with the word "make" as in make disciples. What does it mean to make disciples? Often when I have trouble with a piece of scripture, I take a look at different translations. I looked at the New International Version – It also used the word make and so did the Common English Bible. I turned to the King James Version which said, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." The translation called The Message is similar - Go out and train everyone you meet ...

Teach. Train. Those are words I can work with but still it is hard. How do we teach people about the commandments that Jesus gave us? How do we train them in living life as a baptized Christian? The answer I usually get when I ask this question is we do teach and train through our actions. We teach others to love by loving, and to forgive by forgiving. We train others how to care for the poor by caring for the poor. We teach others to stand up for justice by doing the same.

You have heard the saying 'actions speak louder than words' or maybe the one attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary use words". I have that one hung up in my office. Actions are powerful yes, but so are words. I am actually thinking about taking that sign down in my office, because I think it give us permission not to use our words at all and I think our words are needed.

When I take a class at the Crossfit Box. The coach always shows us the movement – the action. But he or she always uses words as well. Without the words, I would not know that I had to clench my abs while holding a plank, or take a deep breath as I begin a front squat because I might not have been able to see that when they showed the action.

Using words can be downright scary and uncomfortable. A few years ago at our diocesan convention, I got up to speak. I didn't want to speak. I wanted to concentrate on my knitting and just listening. But one of my clergy colleagues glared at me and said you know you need to get up. And so I did. I got up and spoke in front of a room of 1000 people and said that I thought we needed to wait until next year to create the new position of Canon for Black Ministries congregations to give time to plan (don't like the

word plan) what the position would be about – in the same way we planned the position of Canon for Latino ministries. My words were not well received by my fellow black brothers and sisters and I heard about it for while. For many days, I had what Brene Brown calls a vulnerability hangover.

Words have a way of making us vulnerable and getting us into trouble and so we are tempted to stay silent. But Jesus sends us out to make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Jesus sends us out to teach people about following him which is so beautifully described in our baptismal promises – engage in reading scripture, prayer and worship, persevere in resisting evil, seek and serve Christ in all persons loving your neighbor as yourself, and strive for justice and peace among all people respecting the dignity of every human being. Jesus sends all of us – not just the preachers, not just the clergy. Jesus sends all the baptized out to teach and train and while we can do that by our actions, we also have to use our words.

Words are getting used a lot these days with many repercussions and you may be tempted to wait until things calm down to use your words. As people who follow Jesus and who are sent to teach others about how Jesus taught us to live, we cannot stay silent. It will not be easy. It will probably be messy and we will get it wrong much like a toddler learning to walk. But if we play it safe, the work our country needs to do around racism and human rights will not get done. If we all stay in our homes and only talk to the people who agree with us, we will stay in the same place we are right now.

When I did interfaith work with Rabbi Saks who used to be a Temple Beth Mordecai around the corner from St. Peter's, he told me about a technique he had learned for difficult conversation which often happened in interfaith discussions where it was easy for one person to offend the other. You used the words - oops, ouch and wow. During a conversation, if someone said some things that tweaked you a bit, you could say oops and then you and the person could talk about why that was. If it was really bad, you could say ouch and again discuss why you felt that way. You would say the last one, wow, if the person said some that really made a deep connection with you or your belief. While using words can lead to trouble and hurt, they can also lead to wow. We cannot lose the wow because we are afraid of the oops and the ouch.

Now I am not saying to go out and use words wildly. I am asking you to first listen and pray. I am asking you to listen to what God is putting in your heart and when you feel that nudge, as the Holy Spirit will do, to go ahead and speak knowing that you may not get it right. And if you don't get it right stay engaged and take the risk to keep using your words.

I have been impressed at how many companies are taking a stand and using their words. From the CEO of Uber - "I wish that institutional racism, and the police violence it gives rise to, didn't cause their deaths. I wish that all members of our Black community felt safe enough to move around their cities without fear. I wish that I didn't have to try to find the words to explain all of this to my two young sons."

She continues the email by promising action by her company to support the black community and work for a more diverse and equitable workplace. She ends the email by saying Black lives matter. I was in awe. It was not something that was happening to this extent in 2014 when Eric Garner was killed. Many people are taking the risk to use their words.

These may or may not be your words. What are your words? What will you say to your child, your parents, your neighbors, your co-workers or your fellow parishioners when it comes to why so many people are out protesting? Will you listen to the words they say to you? Will you say oops, ouch or wow and share why you feel that way?

What Jesus asks of us when he gave us the Great Commission has never been easy. When the disciples started proclaiming Jesus, they risked alienation from family, jail and death. And yet proclaiming Jesus has the potential to get us to that wow – when we get a little closer to the kingdom of God, where we are loving our neighbors as ourselves, where we are seeking and serving Christ in all persons and striving for justice for all.

"Keep the Great Commission in your hearts, go forth and find your words to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ."