

Commanded to Love By Elaine Swinehart

In preparation for Ascension Day, a day that (unless you are Amish, or a rare Lutheran, or Catholic) is skipped over in most churches, I was reading the last words that Jesus spoke to the disciples as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciple 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." It is so easy to relegate this passage to the first disciples, but that would be to limit Jesus' intent. Jesus intended these verses for all of His disciples down through the ages. That includes you and that includes me. [In case you need more than my word, go to John 17 where, on His final night on earth, Jesus prays for His disciples. In verse 20 He prays: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one."]

We are all familiar with the great commission. But, somehow, during this pandemic and subsequent quarantine it has taken on a new urgency for me. There are three parts to this commission and each one holds some specific truths for us during these days of trial. First, there is Jesus' declaration that He has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Notice Jesus has been given ALL AUTHORITY. Not just a little, or most, but ALL. He shares His authority with no one. Others may (will) claim to have authority but they do not. That means that although Satan tries to make us believe that he has power and authority, he does not. Humans will also pretend to have authority over heaven and earth. More specifically, some humans are proclaiming that they have authority over individual people, groups of people, entire states and countries. And sadly, people are allowing them to dictate their lives. I feel we must be alert to what is happening around us and to be in constant prayer, remembering that Jesus is the one and only one who has authority over heaven and earth, (and that includes us). We would be wise and prudent to remember that Jesus is the one in authority and to trust Him in all life's circumstances.

The last statement in the commission is: "And remember that I am with you always." This is a vital piece of information. Jesus is with us always! Jesus, is with us when Satan puts up road blocks, and we can rely upon His authority to denounce Satan and move forward. Jesus is with us when we do not have the words to say what needs to be said, or the courage to say them. Again, we can rely on Him to see us through. Jesus is with us on the good days, when everything seems to click, and on those other days when nothing seems to go right. When we turn everything over to Him, He will give us His victory. (a caveat here. the timing, the outcome, the word, the victory, may not be what we have in mind, but they will be God's perfect will.) And so, we must always remember that Jesus, the one who has all authority over heaven and earth is with us always. We are never alone on this journey - Jesus is with us all the way!

These two facts help us live out Jesus' command to us to: "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." Now, this is a very familiar verse. I memorized it way back in third grade as part of required memory work to go to camp, but during my Ascension Day meditations God opened my eyes to some very unpleasant truths. First, I was doing a lousy job at making disciples (in fact there are times I not even being a very good disciple myself) and second I was missing the boat on living out the things that He had taught me, let alone being able to teach them to others. OUCH!

Needless to say, I have a lot to learn. Here are a few of the things that He is working on with me.

1. Discipleship is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year commitment.

2. It is a constant turning over to God my will and accepting His in place.
3. It is more than being an example of Godly living to a new believer, it is joining them in the struggle of being a Christian in a hostile world.
4. Discipleship is a constantly growing relationship first with God and then with other Christians. It involves, studying God's Word, prayer, meditation, giving of yourself for Christ and for others, sharing the Good News in word and deed, and ... the list goes on.

When it came to the part of "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you", I had to go back to the Bible to find out what those commands were. So far, we have only gotten to the New Commandment that Jesus gave His disciples in John 13:34-35. Jesus said "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Again, another very familiar verse. Again, another verse I have defined to fit my needs, not necessarily God's intent. Jesus defined love by His love. A love that willingly laid down His life to save rebellious, self-centered, sin filled people, like me, like you, like everyone. This love is more than giving food to the food bank, clothing to the poor, singing in the choir or teaching Sunday School. The love that Jesus is talking about is a love that deeply care for the other person and doing everything in your power to keep them safe. So, what would that look like?

It is at this point God reminded me, as though I had forgotten, the events of the time. These are extraordinary times. I believe that we are in the beginning of the last days, the days leading up to Christ's return for His Church. Believing this, God then asked me what the most loving act would be that I could do. I'm ashamed to admit it took me a while to come up with the answer. In this time of pandemics, fires, earthquakes, pestilences, war, and government instability, (and for that matter any time) the most important act of love is to share the gospel message of God's love. To make certain that they know Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for their sins, that forgiveness is theirs for the asking, a gift from God and that in Christ those who confess their sins and believe receive God's gift of eternal life.

Brothers and sisters, how is it that we take for granted this great gift from God and neglect to share it with those who are in desperate need of His salvation? Where is our love for those who do not know of God's love and are destined for and eternity in hell? In this time of quarantine, it is vital that we stand firm, continue to grow in the faith, help others to grow and most importantly share the Good News of Jesus. That is true love. Love is what Jesus has tried to teach us. I guess I'm a slow learner. The good news is that I am still learning. Come join me on this journey. May we grasp His love, grow in His love and tell the world of His Love.

To the Glory of God, Amen.