

What's Changed?
Matthew 28:16-20

It was almost exactly 10 years ago, on May 18, 2012, that our two congregations became part of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. But what difference has that really made to us?

Well, to be honest, probably not a lot. Both before and after May 2012, both of these congregations have not only been known for our beautiful, historic sanctuaries and the unusually long tenures of their pastors but also for a great sense of unity among their members. As events like today's picnic so clearly demonstrate, Mississippi Presbyterians in general tend to be hospitable and friendly, and that has always been true for these two congregations. Whether we were part of the PCUS or the PCUSA or the EPC, we have always prayed for each other and cared for each other when we are sick or hurting or grieving. We have always rejoiced with each other at weddings and grieved with each other at funerals. We've always been ready to reach out to those in need, to share the tremendous blessings which God has given us.

But let's face it: in spite of our years of ministry, both of our churches continue to be surrounded by communities that have big problems. In spite of our friendliness and goodwill, in spite of the fact that everyone knows where both of our churches are – and even though we have plenty of seats available on Sunday mornings – don't all of us know people who don't belong to any congregation? In fact, don't we all know people who don't profess faith in Christ, or who sure don't act very much like Christians? In short, while we may have lots of blessings, there's also a lot of work that needs to be done all around us.

And in today's passage, we see Jesus call us to get busy. For Jesus tells His disciples to go into all the nations with the good news of the gospel. And that's because all authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given into the hands of Christ – so that means that there is no one who does not need to bow the knee to Him. Because of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension into Heaven, we know that there can be no other way of salvation. We have a story to tell that everyone needs to hear, and Jesus wants all of us to proclaim it, in both word and deed.

For you see, telling the good news involves much more than just handing out tracts or posting sermons on websites or livestreaming our worship services on Facebook and YouTube, however helpful all those kinds of communication can be. No, in verse 20, Jesus tells us to teach all that He has commanded us – we can't leave anything out, if we are to call one another into fuller, more consistent communion with Christ.

So, that means we all need a deeper understanding of His Word so we can share it in a more comprehensive way. That means we all need to devote ourselves to earnest, thorough study of the Scriptures, learning what the Bible says about all sorts of real problems that real people have in the real world. For it is only when we know God's Word more fully that we will be able to help one another apply it more accurately to our own lives.

But the Christian life isn't just about learning and teaching. It's also about living in a real relationship with God and with one another. That's why Jesus tells us not just to teach students but to make disciples, true followers of Christ.

Now, of course this includes administering the sign of our initiation into the Christian community, baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But discipleship doesn't stop at the font. We don't just follow Jesus down the aisle to say the sinner's prayer – we must follow Him outside the church doors and into our communities. If we are to make disciples, we must be more consistent disciples, living the life of Christ as individuals and as a community, displaying the Spirit of Christ to everyone around us.

Now, make no mistake. The presbytery and the denomination to which a congregation belongs can do a lot to either help or hinder how we go about making disciples. After all, the EPC has adopted a modern-English version of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, which are a lot easier to understand. Studying these

summaries of Christian teaching along with the accompanying Scripture texts can help all of us gain a greater knowledge of all that Christ commands us.

And since its formation in 2014, the Presbytery of the Gulf South has been involved in so many ministries. We've joined together to plant churches from New Orleans to New Braunfels. We've helped storm victims from Houma to Houston. We've nurtured many candidates who have gone on to fill pulpits across the denomination. We've helped Genesis Mercedes raise funds for a new house of worship – and they were finally able to break ground last month! And we've joined with our friends in the Presbytery of the Central South to send missionaries to work with Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

But no denomination and no presbytery can do the day-to-day work of discipleship for any local congregation or for any individual Christian. Instead, Jesus calls all believers to go into the world to make disciples of those around us, entering into relationship with the lost in order that we might share the good news that Christ is the Savior of sinners. But in order that we might share this good news effectively, we all need Christ to live His life of self-sacrifice and humble service in us and through us so that when the world sees us it might see Christ.

That's why Jesus concludes today's passage with an assurance of His relationship with us. He promises that He will be with us even as He sends us to be with others. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus promises to empower our words, giving them greater credibility as our lives become more and more like His, each and every day.

Yes, 10 years ago, our denomination and our presbytery changed. We became Evangelical Presbyterians. But what if, over the next ten years, all of us become more serious about our own walk with Christ, more focused on learning and growing in our faith? What if over the next ten years, we all get busy about telling the good news, showing and sharing the love of Christ with one another, and with those people around us who need Christ in their lives?

What difference might our two congregations make in Claiborne and Warren Counties over the next ten years? And how might we take part in the mission of the Church throughout the world and throughout the ages – to spread the good news that Jesus saves sinners and that He rules and reigns over all?