

DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS

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This text is commonly called “the Great Commission.” The timeline of our church calendar and the lectionary we read from each week doesn’t exactly always sync up. This comes to us right after Jesus has died and the tomb is found empty. The disciples are confused, lost, and don’t know what to do or where to go. They are completely and utterly lost with the loss of their friend and the lack of leadership.

That doesn’t exactly sound all that different from this past week. As a white person in America, this week has been infuriating, exhausting, eye-opening, and so many more active verbs. And if it has been that way for me, I can only imagine how it feels for people of color in our country.

What do we do? I have had countless people reach out to me this week and even more folks post these questions on social media: what can I do? And there are so many good answers to this question. Read books written by black and brown authors. Support activists monetarily. Give money to bail funds all around the country. Write your politicians. Call them, too. Sign petitions.

But I think--most importantly, is to be in real and true and vulnerable relationship with people who look differently than you do. Jesus calls us to go and make disciples of ALL nations. It meant that they needed to cross country and ethnic lines. They needed to go to places where they knew no one and build relationships with people. Because just going out and telling the story isn’t how you “make disciples.” No--any missionary will tell you that--the way to make disciples is to make relationships.

And so, I had planned on saying this to you--go out and make relationships. It’s as easy as that.

Except it’s actually not that easy. One of the best things about being a clergy couple is that Micah and I can talk through our sermons and ideas. And I was talking about how grateful I was for some of the friends that we have that disciple us along the road into becoming better allies, friends, and just all around people.

And we talked about how we met each of those people--and how intentional we had to be to meet them.

I thought back to my formative years, where I went to school in a city that even my white family couldn't afford to live in the zone the schools were lined for. They proudly priced out many people of color, leaving only room for upper middle class folks that they deemed "acceptable." My family sometimes used a family member's address or an out of date one so I could attend. Eventually, I applied to be a school-of-choice student for my almost 98% white school. I was suddenly a part of a club that was majority white kids like me and the only people of color that were accepted "just so happened" to be really good athletes. Our school got better at every single sport the year they opened school of choice. My neighborhood and school were so incredibly white--and it wasn't just a coincidence.

I was a driven student. I wasn't in a single "average" class. Almost all AP classes, which you couldn't just sign up for. You had to have certain grades and then apply to the teacher to gain access to these classes. To my memory, not a single African American student was ever in one of these classes. My already white circles got even whiter.

I was incredibly involved in my church in my later high school years. Anytime the church doors were open, I was there. And in a city that was made up of at least 20% african americans, not one member of my church was black.

Thankfully, our presbytery was intentional about racial inequalities and I was weird enough that I was involved at the Presbytery level. This was the only place where I came into contact with anyone who didn't look like me.

It is this way because there are levels upon levels of systems that attempt to keep us seperated by race. Systems that our ancestors created. Redlining so that we only live near people who look like us. School districts and voting districts that are drawn so that we only go to school with people who look like us and deal with issues that only people who look like us deal with. Even stores that we shop at will sometimes not put themselves in certain neighborhoods claiming "profitability" over what it truly is--racism and classism. We are separated to the point that, for many of us, if we wanted to befriend a person of color, we'd have to go to a part of town we don't normally hang out

in and walk up to a complete stranger that lives, looks, goes to school, goes to church, and even shops at different places than we do. Our relationship circles get whiter and whiter without intentionality.

So what I'm saying here is that I used to think that the Great Commission was simple. Just go out and do it. But, if we are to take it seriously, our church must look as diverse as this city is. And we've got some work to do. It takes intentionality and putting yourself out there. Join a group that isn't filled with people who look like you. Shop in a new neighborhood. If you're looking at a new house, look in the neighborhoods where diversity is thriving. Listen to a Kendrick Lamar album. Suggest a person of color author for your book club. Teach your children that kindness and how you treat others is more important than their GPA.

Go out and make relationships with people of all nations, and if you're scared, if you're confused, if you don't know where to start, if you're discouraged or daunted--just go. And remember what Jesus has told us from the beginning: he will be with us to the end of the age. Thanks be to God.