

“Final Gifts”

Matthew 28:16-20

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Communion Devotion

This morning, our attention is drawn to Jesus’ final words recorded by Matthew. We refer to this passage as the Great Commission because it is a challenge from Jesus to his followers to continue the work he began during his public ministry.

“Go and make disciples of all nations,” Jesus said to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee just before his ascension, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe everything I have commanded you.”

It is the last part of this passage which captures my attention today, though. After issuing this bold challenge, Jesus said to them, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

A few years ago, I read the book, Final Gifts, written by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley, two Hospice nurses. In this book, they chronicle the journeys and needs of terminally ill patients under their care. In particular, they describe the final gifts many of their patients gave to their family members and friends, as well as the gifts the terminally ill received from those around them, which lessened the sting of death. I recommend the book for anyone traveling “through the valley of the shadow of death.”

In our text, Jesus was not preparing to die; he’s already done that. After God raised him from the dead, he appeared to his disciples over a period of forty days, but then he ascended to heaven so the Holy Spirit could indwell the hearts of each believer.

Before he left the disciples, though, he gave them one final gift. “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Why did Jesus want his disciples to know wherever they went, he would be with them? I can think of a couple of reasons he wanted to reassure them of his abiding presence.

Jesus knew what it was like to be abandoned in his darkest hour, and he never wanted his disciples to experience this.

In the final hours of his life, Judas betrayed him, Peter denied him, and nine of the other ten disciples abandoned him. Only the beloved disciple, John, along with Jesus' mother, Mary, and a few other women were at the foot of the cross when Jesus died that agonizingly painful death.

Jesus never wanted anyone to feel this level of disappointment, loneliness and despair, not even the people who had abandoned him. So, he promised to be with them at all times and in all places, especially in their darkest hours.

"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age," Jesus assured them.

Jesus assured them of his abiding presence because he knew how much the disciples would need his help as they continued the work he began. They would face the same challenges and problems he did. Those who opposed Jesus would also oppose them. Only with his help could they remain faithful.

"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age," Jesus told them.

Jesus knew from his own experiences exactly what the disciples needed in order to remain faithful, and he promised to provide it. This was why he assured them wherever they might be or whatever they were facing, he would come to them, bringing with him an abundance of comfort, strength and courage.

A little over a month ago, Chad Watson lost eight children and his wife in a house fire. It appears a combustible container overheated while sitting near a space heater, and it exploded into flames, engulfing the house in seconds. Only Chad and his eleven-year-old daughter, Kylie, escaped the roaring blaze.

All Chad's valiant efforts to save the rest of his family were in vain. The fire moved too swiftly through the white frame house located in the tiny Kentucky community of Depoy.

I know this community well. The Watson home was about two miles from my grandparents' farm where I spent a lot of time as a child. The eight children and their mother are buried in the Oak Grove Baptist Church Cemetery where four generations of my family are buried. Their plots are on the same row as my parents in a new section recently opened.

Sometime after the fire fighters and paramedics arrived, Chad Watson and his daughter, Kylie, were flown to Vanderbilt Hospital in Nashville. Both of them had severe burns which threatened their lives.

Chad and Kylie spent over two weeks in Vanderbilt receiving treatment for their burns. They were not on the same floor, however. As a matter of fact, they were not even in the same building.

One night when a nurse went to check on Chad, she was shocked to find him missing. She searched the halls outside his room but could not find him, which caused her to fear for his safety. He was in no condition to walk very far.

Eventually, Chad was found when nurses checked his daughter's room. Somehow, he made his way over to Kylie's room and crawled into her bed. When the nurses entered the room, they found Chad curled up around his daughter, tenderly holding her as the two of them slept.

"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age," Jesus said to his disciples.

Who needs you to go looking for them?