

**Sermon for June 11, 2017**  
**Commence**  
**Matthew 28:16-20**  
**The Reverend Roger Pancost**

Over the past few weeks millions of people have gathered in sunbaked stadiums, and overheated gymnasiums, to show support to the graduating classes of countless universities, colleges and high schools. During each one of these ceremonies someone has made his or her way to the microphone to offer what is known as a commencement speech.

In most high schools the commencement speaker is one of the school's administrators, or someone of from the local community. Colleges and universities, with larger budgets, often bring in someone famous from the political realm or the arts. Each of these speakers is given the task of sharing words of wisdom with the gathered graduates.

Because many people have had to listen to bad commencement speeches, a team from NPR Ed decided to research what makes a speech great. The team sifted through hundreds of past speeches (going all the way back to 1774) in order to build an online database of what they believe are the very best. In the process of building this database the team discovered common characteristics of the best speeches. NPR reporter, Cory Turner, shares these findings in an online article:

The first characteristic of a great commencement speech is that it needs to be funny. This includes the speaker making fun of him or herself. An example can be found in the commencement address offered by Madeleine Albright to the graduates of Tufts University. In referring to her own college years, Ms. Albright said, "I arrived at Wellesley College about halfway between the invention of the Apple watch and the discovery of fire.

Another characteristic determined by the team involves downplaying the genre. This means saying something to the effect that you can't remember the commencement speech delivered at your own graduation.

After uplifting these characteristics, team leader, Cory Turner, shares what he believes is the heart of the commencement speech. He writes, "You must have a message." While this last bit of advice sounds obvious, I understand the point that Mr. Turner is making. The person delivering the commencement speech needs to say something that motivates and inspires the graduating class.

(Anatomy of a Great Commencement Speech, Cory Turner, May 20, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2014/05/20/314264067/the-best-commencement-speech-ever>)

The definition of the word "commence" is to "start." A good

commencement speaker is one who inspires graduates to “get started” doing something meaningful with the next stage of their lives. The best commencement speeches are the ones in which this message is delivered with very few words. The recipients of such messages are able to recall the meaningful point long after graduation.

Many years before any commencement speech was ever offered, Jesus shared a similar message with his disciples. Jesus’ speech didn’t have any jokes, nor did he say anything self-deprecating. What he did offer was a powerful message, using very few words. As Jesus is about to depart from the disciples he uses this final teaching moment to say,

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 earth.”

Like a commencement speaker talking to a group of graduates, Jesus tells his disciples that it is now time for them to get started doing the work of God’s Kingdom. Jesus is no longer going to be around to lead them...they must figure out how to do this work on their own.

And what is this important work? Jesus tells the disciples that they are to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This means reaching out and welcoming others into the household of God. The fact that Jesus instructs them to make disciples of all nations reveals the inclusive nature of this movement. All people are welcome in the household of God!

In Jesus’ commencement speech he goes on to say that the disciples are to teach others to obey his commandments. The word “commandment” can have a negative connotation. We might think of someone commanding others what to do. If we look earlier in the Gospel According to Matthew we are given a different understanding of what Jesus means by obeying his commandments.

When a religious lawyer asks Jesus, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus answers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:34-40)

Since Jesus taught that these are the greatest commandments, it is logical to conclude that he is instructing the disciples to teach people how to love God,

neighbor, and self. These commandments have nothing to do with controlling people, but rather with freeing and empowering people.

Jesus concludes his commencement speech by saying to the disciples, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Jesus is not saying that he is going to be physically with them. He is saying that the love of God, which has been demonstrated through Jesus’ life and teachings, will always be with them. This assurance of God’s abiding love gives the disciples the courage and the strength they need to carry out this important work.

The commencement speech that Jesus shared with the original disciples is the same message given to the church in every age. It is the message that reveals the meaningful work of the church. There have been times in the history of the Christian church in which the commission to make disciples of all nations has been used to subjugate and dominate people. Rather than see this commission as a charge to dominate others, we can see it as a call to invite others in.

There are many people in our society, and in the greater world, who are searching for deeper meaning in their lives. What may be missing for some of these people is a connection to God. We have the ability to invite others to join us on the journey of faith, as we explore what it means to love and serve God.

The original disciples were told to “go.” If they had stayed in the comfort of their own homes, or their own communities, the wonderful message about God’s love, would never have spread.

We can’t sit in the comfort of this building and expect that this message will be received by others. To be a disciple is to go into the world...whether that means reaching out to someone in our neighborhood, or going on a mission trip to a distant place.

Like the original disciples we have the privilege of helping to teach others to follow Jesus’ commandments. That is, we can help other people discover what it means to love God, love neighbor, and love self.

We teach these important lessons when we help someone who is in need. When we take the time to be fully present with someone who is struggling. When we stand with someone who is being treated unfairly. When we offer words of hope and encouragement to someone who is overwhelmed by the complexities of life. When we work to make the world a more just place.

It is interesting that Madeleine Albright, in her commencement speech to the students at Tufts, offered a similar message. She said,

“I insist that you also be a defender and an enricher of [liberty], employing your talents to heal, help, and teach — both here at home and abroad. I insist that you be a light. Because your choices will make all the difference to you and to us all... Be doers, not just hearers. I insist that you put your opinions to the test, [and] when required, you dare — as Tufts’s motto suggests — to be voices crying for peace”

As we continue to do the important work of the church, let us remember that just as Jesus promised to always be with the original disciples, God is present with us this very day. Knowing that God is present, gives us the courage and the strength we need. Amen.

