

*The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
"Welcome Heretics"
Rev. Amy Morgan
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Psalm 8

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

2 Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

5 Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

9 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Matthew 28:16-20

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.

17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

19 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,

20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

“To doubt is heresy, to inquire is to admit that you do not know,” and according to agnostic thinker Robert Ingersoll, “the Church does neither.”

But this has not always been the case.

Take, for example, the sorry remnant of disciples we read about today, trudging up a hill in the middle of nowhere to meet up with a flash-in-the-pan, has-been rock star who is supposed to be dead and inexplicably isn't.

They meet up with Jesus, they worship him, *but some doubted*. Now, the last time someone doubted in the Gospel of Matthew – in fact, the only other time this verb is found in the New Testament – the hot-shot disciple Peter was sinking into the sea and being chastised by Jesus. “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

But today, Jesus has no words of judgment for the worshipping doubters. He doesn't label them faithless heretics. Instead, he declares that all authority in heaven and on earth have been given to him. The disciples can doubt and question and misunderstand all day long. Because they don't have the authority. No one is looking to them to be right, to know the truth, to have all the answers.

But over the next couple of centuries, all of that begins to change. By the beginning of the 4th century, we have presbyters and bishops and all manner of ecclesial hierarchy jostling for supremacy in matters of doctrine and discipline and order. And it is into this melee that an ambitious theologian named Arius inserts his questions and doubts.

By this time, the church was pretty clear about the fact that there was only one God, and that Jesus was to be worshipped as God. But how exactly all of that worked out was a topic of hot debate. Some people leaned in a direction that bordered on worshipping two - or when you factored in the Holy Spirit, three - different gods. Others took a position that compromised God's power over creation. Still others held beliefs that diminished the importance of Christ.

So Arius took it upon himself to help synthesize all of these positions into a doctrine that declared Jesus as the “firstborn of all creation” but of a “different substance from God the Father.” This position ensured that Jesus was still worthy of worship and devotion but also allowed God to remain immune to change and death.

Despite the church's clear teachings on the unity of the Trinity, Arius constructed and promoted his position throughout the synod of Alexandria in eloquent sermons. He and his ideas gained popularity, but that wasn't necessarily a good thing. The bishop of Alexandria caught wind of what Arius was promoting and had him banished. Arius didn't let this stop him, however. He fled to the north and bunked up with his buddy and former classmate Eusebius and continued to find support for his position elsewhere.

The controversy was so destructive that Emperor Constantine demanded it be addressed at a Council in Nicaea in 325. Doubting, questioning, and disagreement within the church were politically problematic for the ruler of the Roman world. Arius's misfortune in this debate was that the regions where his

position was most popular also happened to be those places where, only a year before, Constantine's political rival, Licinius, had been ruler. Arius's defeat and excommunication paralleled the defeat and execution of Licinius as the authority of political power solidly usurped that of Jesus Christ. The church, as a political entity, needed authority, absolute truth, unified power.

And so, today, we have the Nicene Creed, the very first creed in our Book of Confessions, with its affirmation that Jesus is "eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father."

Now, don't get me wrong. I have no problem with orthodoxy or the Nicene formulation of the Trinity. But the Arian *controversy* gives me pause. It makes me wonder what might have been. It causes me to be concerned that Robert Ingersoll had a valid critique of the church.

The word "heresy" comes from the Greek word "to choose." What we, as Christians, over the centuries have labeled as misguided or wrong or outright evil is, in fact, simply people choosing for themselves what to believe or how to live their faith.

But that terrifies the established church, especially in times of turmoil. In the early life of the church, Christians were fearful for their lives and livelihoods. In the Reformation, Christians were fearful of corruption. And today, we're fearful about the survival of the Christian faith itself. We have to seriously consider the possibility that the faith as we know it will no longer exist at some point in the foreseeable future. And so doubt, inquiry, heresy, choice are all dangerous things.

I once had the privilege of taking a master class with the legendary Broadway producer Hal Prince. In this class, he talked about the difference between a flop and a failure and between a hit and a success. A flop is something that the public rejects or fails to appreciate, but a failure is something that is possibly great but is somehow compromised. Likewise, a hit is a show that the public loves and is commercially prosperous, while a success is a show that is the best it can possibly be, done with integrity and passion.

By the time Jesus gets to the hill in Galilee, he's a solid flop. Yes, you could argue that rising from the dead was a pretty major accomplishment, but notice that he only has 11 followers coming out to meet him. That's right, the text is pretty specific – 11. That's because one of them was so disgusted with Jesus' performance that he left in the middle and sabotaged the event.

But it's also clear that Jesus wasn't a failure. He did what he came to do. He stuck with the script, he had the right intentions, and he gave a flawless performance. He was, in fact, a success. But his reward was not fame and fortune. No, his reward is all authority in heaven and on earth.

The church, on the other hand, has been a huge hit. Almost a third of the world's population today follows the Christian faith. But I'm not certain we can claim to have always been successful. Throughout our history, we have given authority to governments, institutions, human reason, morality, doctrine, and charismatic personalities. And this has greatly impacted our performance. Maybe we have survived and even thrived for over two thousand years. But have we really fulfilled this Great Commission Jesus gave his first followers?

Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth have been given to me. Go *therefore*," meaning that only by his authority can we do what comes next.

He tells these 11 dubious disciples to, first "go make disciples of all nations." Now, there are two things we need to hear in this directive. The first is that "all nations" are included in this discipleship mission. Up to this point, Jesus' message was considered to be primarily aimed at his own people, the Jews. And a Jewish messiah would have been a much easier sell to a Jewish audience. But Jesus meets up with his follower in a Gentile, meaning non-Jewish, part of the country, and sends his them out to disciple "the nations," those people who have no context for what these Jewish guys are talking about, people who are happily following their own completely different and unfamiliar belief systems.

The second thing we need to understand is that disciples are kind of like interns. When we talk about being disciples of Christ today, there is this air of piety. If you call yourself a disciple, it must mean that you go to church every week and pray and read the bible every day, and love God and your neighbor and yourself in perfect harmony. Disciples are like gold medalists in the Jesus-following contest. Because everything in America is competitive, even our Christianity.

But that's not what a disciple is. A disciple is a student, a follower, an intern. And if you've ever had an intern, you know that it takes a lot more work to get an intern to do something right than it would be just to do it yourself. Interns are going to make mistakes. They will lose your favorite stapler. They will make the coffee wrong. They will lose important phone messages. But Jesus is telling his disciples, his interns, to go make more interns. Why would Jesus do this? What a bad idea! This is clearly going to flop!

But the interns don't have the authority. Jesus does. If they mess up, if they flop and even fail, that's okay. Jesus has been successful, and Jesus has the authority. So it's all going to work out.

Once the interns make more interns, they are supposed to baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Now, this little Trinitarian reference is really the only reason this passage gets placed in the lectionary on this Trinity Sunday. I know you all have Trinity Sunday marked in red ink on your calendars right along with "Rural Life" Sunday and "Small Membership Church" Sunday. For those of you who may not have looked at those calendars this morning, however, this is, in fact Trinity Sunday, the day that preachers are supposed to try to explain the inexplicable mathematics of three equals one and one equals three.

But rather perform the theological gymnastics necessary to explain what the Trinity *is*, I think it's more important here to talk about what the Trinity *means*. Because the truth is, at the time that this text was written, there was no doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus wasn't giving his disciples secret knowledge about the interrelated personhood of God, and he wasn't establishing the orthodox formula for the rite of induction into the institutional church. There was no orthodoxy and there was no institutional church.

For Jesus, and his disciples at the time, baptism meant new life in relationship with God and the world. The Trinitarian formula expressed the interrelatedness of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but only inasmuch as it could model the intimacy of relationship God desires to have with us and for us to have with one another.

Jesus is commissioning his disciples to go make more disciples, and go belong to one another.

And only after that are they to teach them to obey everything Jesus commanded them. Now, when we talk about obedience, all too often what we mean, or at least what people hear, is that the church has the authority to tell people what to believe and how to behave.

But the word “obey” found here in Greek literally means to keep in view or guard and protect. It isn't a subservient word, but in fact, it is rather empowering. The things Jesus commanded are to be regarded as treasures to be protected, as something vulnerable and valuable that we need to keep an eye on.

And then there is the word “command,” which we all love. Because it should be super easy to pay attention to EVERYTHING Jesus commanded, right? Over 2,000 words of Jesus are recorded in the New Testament, most of them meant to teach people something.

The church throughout history has decided for people which words are actually commandments we're supposed to follow and what those words actually mean in practice. And we've spent most of our time disagreeing about it. This is one place the church has gotten stuck on the question of authority because maybe Jesus has all the authority, but aren't we the ones who are supposed to enforce it? Isn't that what Jesus is saying here?

Perhaps there's another way to look at it. The word “command” can also be translated “commission.” So when we talk about this passage being the great commission, it isn't just the disciples who are being commissioned. They are commissioned to go make more disciples, to create relational community with them, and then help those new disciples keep that commission in their sights. They are commissioned to commission new commissioners.

Notice that nowhere in this commission does Jesus say “remember how I taught you to pray” or “don't forget what I said about the fig tree.” Jesus knows the disciples will get it wrong, and that's okay. That's why he promises to be with them, always, to the end of days. The boss will be there to fix the things we break and smooth out the waters we muddy and help us find our way to the cafeteria.

The Jesus movement started with 11 confused, worn out, divided disciples. Some doubted, questioned, chose what to believe for themselves. They were heretics, in the best possible way.

But *all* of the disciples worshipped Jesus *together*.

They had no hope of accomplishing the monumental task Jesus set before them. All they had was this promise: "Look, I am with you always, even to the end of days." Their only hope was to depend completely on the authority and power of Jesus. And that's exactly what they did. They were persecuted and killed, imprisoned and ridiculed. They were a complete flop. But they successfully got the show off the ground. And they all fulfilled the Great Commission.

We may not throw the word heretic around much anymore, but we might as well use it when we mean it. Too often, we refuse to listen to people who choose for themselves what to believe. The third most populous faith group in the world after Christians and Muslims is "unaffiliated," in other words, "heretics," people who want to choose for themselves.

Perhaps fulfilling the Great Commission has more to do with welcoming the heretics in our midst than it does with teaching people in remote parts of the world about the doctrine of the Trinity. Perhaps instead of consuming our energies with debates over policies and procedures, studies and "seasons of reflection," we need to recognize that we're all interns and none of us are going to get it right.

And maybe welcoming heretics will help us do that. Because if we are wise and courageous enough to remember that Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth - not us, not this church, not the PC(USA) - perhaps Christianity can ultimately be both a hit and a success. Perhaps our own doubts and questions will lead us to deeper faith and reliance on the authority and power of Jesus.

My greatest hope for the church today is that we will eventually become a big enough flop to make us a success. As the growth of heretics outpaces the growth of Christians, perhaps a remnant will find its way back to a hilltop in the middle of nowhere and the doubters and believers alike can worship Jesus together and go out to serve him in the world. Amen.