

Matthew 28:16-20 (NRSV)

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "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 age."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

I think I mentioned last Sunday how well the confirmands did on their confirmation exam. One of the harder questions I asked them was, "Why do we gather for worship, even when we don't feel like it?" One confirmand gave what was, to me, the best answer I've gotten on that question – it was, and I quote, "It's not about us – it's about God." And that is exactly right.

Mark Allan Powell¹ tells about a discussion he had with a young man who loved Jesus. The young man said that he loved Jesus but didn't really like to go to church because he thought church was boring. And so Powell asked him, "Would you be willing to die for Jesus?" and the young man, who was very devout, said "Yes." Then Powell said, "You're willing to die for your faith, but you aren't willing to be bored for it?" Powell was making the same point – we worship not because we'll get something out of it – we do hope that, of course, and Pastor Wendy and I and a lot of other people work very hard to try to make our worship meaningful and reverent. But in the end, we worship because God is worthy of worship. Six days a week God is good to us, and on Sundays, we give thanks.

¹ Several of the ideas in this sermon came from Powell's excellent book, *Loving Jesus* (2004) Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress.

These ideas about worship and the purpose of worship came back to me as I walked with the Gospel text for this week. This reading is selected for Trinity Sunday, because it is one place in the Gospels where the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are mentioned in the same sentence, in the same breath if you will. This is, of course, the Great Commission, the marching orders for the church.

But as I walked with the Gospel the last couple of weeks, I kept seeing the sentence, “When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted.” Some doubted. Now, Powell in his analysis of this text points out that the word “some” is not in the Greek original – a more direct translation is “seeing him, they worshipped and doubted” or perhaps, “worshipped *but* doubted.” Powell said he asked a bible translator once how the “some” got into the English version, and the translator said that they put it in because the idea of worshipping *and* doubting didn’t make any sense.

Well, I’m not so sure about that. I think many of us worship and doubt at the same time. I know that sometimes I do. What might that mean, to both worship and doubt at the same time? It might mean that we can, on one hand, think that God is good to us, but on the other hand wonder whether it was God who was good or our own cleverness, our intelligence, our courage that won all the good things that we enjoy. To worship and to doubt at the same time might mean that we want to lean on God, want to place our concerns in God’s hands, but at the same time we continue to worry away at them. I know I do that. I remember telling Linda that I’d been worrying about something but now I was going to give it over to God. And every time I mention that I continue to worry about that thing, Linda reminds me that I’d given that over to God. She has an excellent memory.

To worship and to doubt at the same time might mean that you feel joyful and filled with the Spirit as you walk out the door of the church, but feel harassed and oppressed and frustrated again by the time you've finished the drive home, and that you know that that's what will happen even while you're worshipping.

It's important that "doubt" as Matthew uses it in the passage is not disbelief, but rather wavering belief – being of "two minds" as we might say. Doubt here is an inability to completely trust God in Christ.

I think a lot of us worship doubtfully, with our fingers crossed a little bit. I'll love my neighbors but keep them at arm's length. I'll love the least of these but lock the car doors as I go through a bad part of town. I'll promise to tithe as soon as I get a little bit ahead, but then I never do.

When you think about it, isn't it interesting that the Great Commission, the culmination of Matthew's Gospel should have such an ambiguous phrase in it? They worshipped him and doubted. It is as if Jesus knew what the future would be. The church would be a place of both worship and doubt. Believers would be doubters, too. It is as if Jesus knew that the church would be a mixture of weeds and wheat, of grain and chaff, not just good and bad people but people who are, in themselves, both good and bad, weeds and wheat, inside. These were the people that Jesus knew would accept the Great Commission, the people to whom he would be committed, even to the end of the age.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, used to tell the story that even after being ordained, after serving as a missionary in Savannah, Georgia for three years, he returned to Oxford, bitter and disillusioned. Wesley wrote in his journal, "I who went to America to convert others was never myself converted to God." He tells of a conversation with a German preacher, who told him, "Preach faith until you have it, then, because you have it, you will preach

faith.” Now this was John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. You can imagine what a consolation that is to a neophyte preacher. Or maybe even to a neophyte believer.

Worship until your doubts recede a bit and then keep on worshipping. Or even better, worship when you have no doubts. But worship especially when you do. Why?

Remember, the opposite of faith is not doubt – the opposite of faith is certainty. Faith contains doubt, faith implies doubt or at least the possibility of doubt – certainty neither allows doubt nor requires faith. In this sense, I think, I’m happier to talk about faith, either mine or someone else’s, with people who have doubts than with people who are absolutely certain. People who admit doubts about their faith are, to my mind, more effective evangelists, because I can identify with them, I can sympathize with them. I can understand them.

I think that God’s control over the world is gentle, a caress rather than a jerk, a whisper rather than a shout, a word rather than a curse, letting us grow into stewardship rather than yanking us this way and that. That kind of control isn’t obvious – it’s subtle and easy to doubt. In the long haul, of course, in God’s good time, God will reclaim his world. But in any given moment, the ability to see God’s presence, God’s action is a matter of faith, indeed, sometimes a matter of faithful action by the believing community that will help advance God’s plan.

I would hope that as our faith grows, we begin to doubt not God in Christ but rather the world. That is, rather than accepting the world’s assurances about what is good and right and valuable and true, that we instead take more seriously God’s promises and God’s hopes for us. What does that mean? It might mean, for example, that rather than the newest car or the flashiest clothes that we begin to value things like honesty and charity and value. It might mean that rather than relying on force and violence that we

imagine what influence patience and love might exert in human affairs.

But, in the end, I think doubt is with us, part of the human condition, part of how we were raised, part of our experiences growing up, but ultimately part of God's gift of faith to us. Rather than wishing we had more faith, we should probably be grateful for the faith we do have, the capacity to rely on God as much as we do. I'm not sure that in this life we can increase our faith. I know that some of us are more able to rely on God than others and I'm grateful for their presence in my life. In any case, having doubts, being unable to trust God completely does not disqualify us from being and making disciples – in fact it may make us better at it. We worship and we doubt. May God be praised.

Amen.