

Are We There Yet?

Dorothy L. Boulton

First Sunday After Pentecost

June 4, 2023

Scripture

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they 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."

Sermon

Alright. Truth time. Who has been in a car, on a long road trip, and has heard the question asked from the back seat: "Are we there yet?" Is anyone brave enough to admit that they're the one that asked it?

I'm feeling these words, Jesus's last words to his followers in the Gospel of Matthew, as a sending out on a very long journey. You may have heard it described as The Great Commission. The Gospel of Matthew has, in some ways, been written as a disciple training manual, and now that Jesus' friends have taken their road test—received their license, as it were—they're heading out, ready (though some doubting) to do what Jesus has sent them to do. "Go," he says, "make disciples... baptize and teach."

Make disciples – baptize and teach.

I'm sure it's because it's the season of commencement speeches, where all the graduates are commended for how far they've come, and are given pep talks and inspirational messages about where they're going next, that I'm hearing these words today as a moment for us, the followers of Jesus Christ at Catonsville Presbyterian Church, to ask about our own journey at the end of what we call "our program year." How are we doing on our own road trip? Go... make disciples... baptize and teach. Are we there yet?

I remember giving an update at our congregational meeting several months ago. This is a transitional year, I said. We've been coming out of peak COVID and we know that we are not going back to the way we've always traveled before. We are on a new road; an uncharted, unmapped road and we're trying new directions. Maybe we'll hit some dead ends, and sure, we may need to detour around the debris that is scattered along the roadway.

Looking back now, on how far we've come, I am happy to say that the journey has been a good one. We've planned well. We've got some fantastic traveling companions. We've all—mostly—embarked with a spirit of adventure and an openness to exploration. And yes, we've trusted that Jesus would be with us, that God's Spirit would empower us on the way.

I want to take a little time to share some of the highlights of our journey, particularly in our mutual teaching ministry – the ways we help one another grow in service and

understanding, in the way we have been especially mindful of the promises we’ve made in baptism: committing to help one another grow in knowledge and faith of Jesus Christ.

First, a shout-out to our map readers – our Triple A “trip tik” planners if you will – the members of the Adult Education Committee and the Christian Education Committee. They have been diligent in looking ahead on the path, seeking out routes and resources to guide both the congregation and the community.

So, what have we done? Where have we gone?

This year, now that we’ve been able to gather in person, we’ve had Adult Education on Sunday mornings every other week. We’ve been fortunate to have been guided by speakers like the late Bonnie Harry from Catonsville Emergency Assistance, Jennifer Bentzel from IMA World Heath, Rick Santos shared an update on refugee relief support, and Ken has never failed to lead excellent presentations that are challenging, thought-provoking, theologically cutting-edge.

And, taking a side road, I know that he, and participants in the Thursday morning Bible Study, are also grateful that they’ve been meeting in person (with others being able to participate by zoom) for studies from the book of Acts and the Gospel of Luke.

Back on our main highway, as we look at our ministries with our youngest Presbyterians, the Christian Education Committee—which is charged with the nurture and formation of children & youth—has been able to pick up the pace. We have been able to offer childcare on Sunday mornings for the first time since March 2020. We also expanded our Second Sunday ministries with not just multiage church school, but also with Cocoa & Conversations – a time and space for middle & senior high youth to learn and grow and share with one another.

It’s truly been a joy to see our youth gather again on Sunday evenings for a middle & senior high youth group each month. I must tell you that these youth are some of the most courageous travel companions one could ever find. They are walking down roads that no adults could have ever imagined, and their daily road is filled with challenges. Potholes and hazards abound. They deal with bullying, for example, that social media ramps up to a never-ending degree. With the aftermath of peak-COVID, with its online only schooling and limited inter-personal contact for months upon months not far behind in the rearview mirror, I am in awe of how our youth are coping in this uncharted world. They are on a bumpy road – their challenges are many, especially with youth mental health. This congregation can be proud of how they are addressing these roadblocks and construction zones. These youth can honor their own identities and abilities, and they continue to grow in compassion and their search for justice and affirmation of all God’s children.

I am also quite proud to say that despite the busyness of their lives and the pressures that surround them, that they are able not only to learn together, but to have fun together. For the first time in three long years, they were able to come to the church for a Lock In. They spent a Friday night through a Saturday morning playing games, watching movies, eating donuts, interacting with laughter, and forming a sense of loving community. We are grateful to Debbie and Mark Davis (who led our call to worship) who not only led Sunday morning’s Cocoa & Conversation but organized and spent the evening in sleeping bags as leaders of that long-awaited overnight event.

(It is here that I wish to also recognize Jenny Hutton and Laura Parkhurst who have been youth leaders this year. We need mature and caring people who can offer and provide loving, unconditional support. Laura and Jenny have excelled in that role. We are seeking

greater diversity of youth leadership so if you are sensing a call to that ministry – as a tour guide with our amazing youth – please let us know and we can start the conversation.)

I am proud to say that our teens have not only been students of our education ministry, but they have also taught and led us. They were leaders and readers in our Easter story walk; they served us a delicious soup & sandwich lunch to raise money to fund our Westside Shelter food ministry; they served refreshments at Cocoa & Carols; and they’ve participated in the Friday night food collections in the Frederick Road parking lot. (And if anyone wants to have a great time, please sign up to help with that. It’s every other Friday all summer. See me for info.)

Our ministry with infants, children, teens could not have been possible without dozens of volunteers. I have heard that many churches are struggling to find people who are willing to give of their time and talents to contribute to their education ministries, but this year especially, we had so many people step up to say they would keep those baptism promises, they’d fulfill that Great Commission. We had volunteers as Sunday morning care givers, church-school teachers, assistants, and organizers for events. We are so grateful for the time and dedication and love that you have shared. And yes, teens and children were leaders as well for many, if not most, of our ministries.

It is a mark of our mutual commitment to disciple and teach one another, regardless of age, here at CPC. We have been shaped by one another, led by one another, informed, and encouraged by one another. Though their names are not listed in today’s worship bulletin, we have been guided and nurtured on our journey, formed into more faithful discipleship, by the members of the Peace & Justice Committee, the Dismantling Racism Committee, the Creation Care Team, the Child Care Council, the Mission Committee, the Envision Board. Their roadmap extends throughout the community. I’m sure you’ll agree that one of our highlights on this year’s journey was the Interfaith Iftar Dinner with our Turkish Muslim neighbors. And I know that we are going to have a fantastic time next Saturday as we witness to God’s inclusive love at the Third Catonsville Pride Event right here in our pavilion and our beautiful, welcoming, hospitality-filled church grounds.

Thank you, thank you to all of our volunteers. As we look ahead to next fall, please know that we extend an invitation each of you. There is need for more leadership and participation. We certainly are willing to share the driving responsibilities on this congregational road trip. Please know that we encourage you to take a turn at the wheel.

Two more things to highlight....

Great news... we picked up some new traveling companions this year! We welcomed new members! Infants and children were baptized here at the font! For these young ones, we continue to pray for their families, to honor our commitment to teach and grow alongside them, and yes, we are still promising to vacuum up the Cheerios and to welcome the noise and the wiggles as they join us in making a joyful noise to God in worship.

And speaking of joyful noise, you know that a good road trip needs great tunes. We thank our choir and musicians for sharing their gifts with us. You’ve heard me say this before, but one learns the faith best through music, through singing, and we have enjoyed and appreciated the way that they have led us and inspired and formed us. Thank you to Greg and to Wendy for their talents and their kindness, their patience and their Christ-like love. As part of the Whole Family of God, we were privileged to have children contribute their musical gifts as a children’s choir sang for Christmas and joined together with the adult choir on Palm Sunday.

Good tunes need a good sound system, so one last thank you to Keith and Kathy and Andrew and Michael and all those who enable us to hear and see and share online as our sound & video production team.

It’s been a great journey this year. We’re looking ahead to fall. Parents – there’s a zoom meeting on Tuesday, June 20th (you can see the info in the bulletin) Please join us if you can so that we can begin to get out the compass and look ahead to where we can plan to go next.

To what fresh vistas does the Spirit call us?

Friends, no journey can be taken without stopping for nourishment. That’s why in a moment, we’re going to gather for our roadside picnic. We’re coming to the table as Christ’s invited guests—guests of all ages because we are companions together—learning as we receive the gifts of bread and cup that God is faithful, the Spirit is guiding us into a future filled with promise and hope, and that yes, Christ is indeed with us even to the end of the age.

We have been given the Great Commission. We are on the journey. Are we there yet? Heck no, we’ve got aways to go. Let us travel on with purpose and joy. Thanks be to God.



Image: Jan Richardson, “The Best Supper.”