August 28/29, 2021

Coming Together to Become More Like Him

Faithfully Forward Series

Matthew 28:18-20

Pastor Jeff Petersen

About 20 years ago, I read the story of Hank, and I have never forgotten it. I want to share it with you this morning.

> *Hank, as we'll call him, was a cranky guy. He did not smile easily and when he did, his smile often had a cruel edge to it. He had a knack for discovering islands of bad news in oceans of happiness. He'd always find a cloud where others saw a silver lining. Hank rarely affirmed anyone. His native tongue was complaint. He carried judgment and disapproval the way a prisoner carries a ball and chain, and although he went to church his whole life, he was never unshackled. A Deacon in the church asked him one day, "Hank, are you happy?" And he paused to reflect and then without smiling, replied, "Yeah." "Well, tell your face!" the Deacon said. But as far as anybody knows, Hanks's face never found out. Sometimes, Hanks's joylessness ended in comedy. But more often, it produced sadness.*
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> *His children did not know him. His son had a wonderful story about how he had met his wife at a dance, but he never told Hank, because Hank didn't approve of dancing. Hank could not effectively love his wife, or his children, or people outside of his family. He was easily irritated. He had little use for the poor, and a casual contempt for those whose accents or skin color differed from his own. Whatever capacity he once might have had for joy, or wonder, or gratitude, atrophied. He critiqued and judged and complained, and his soul got a little smaller each year. Hank was not changing. But even more troubling than this lack of change was the fact that nobody was surprised by it. It's as if everyone simply expected his soul would remain withered and sour year after year and decade after decade.*
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> *No one seemed bothered by the condition. It wasn't an anomaly that caused head scratching bewilderment. No church consultants were called in. No emergency meetings were held to probe the strange case of the person who followed the church's general guidelines for spiritual life, and yet was not transformed. The church staff did have some expectations. We expected that Hank would uphold certain religious beliefs. We expected that he'd attend services, read the Bible, support the church financially, pray regularly, and avoid certain sins. But here's what we didn't expect. We didn't expect that he would progressively become the way that Jesus would be, if Jesus were living in Hanks's place. We didn't assume that each year would find him a more compassionate, joyful, gracious, winsome personality. So we weren't shocked when it didn't happen. We would have been surprised if it did.*
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> ____From *The Life You've Always Wanted* by John Ortberg, Zondervan; Grand Rapids, MI, 1997, 2002

What is the purpose of the church? For decades, we have described it as an endeavor *to seek to glorify God by seeking to present every person complete in Christ*. That's our LBC mission statement. This last year, we've sought to bring more clarity through our vision statement, saying that we are *coming together to know Jesus, become more like Him, and help others do the same.* But whatever words you use, at the heart of it all, the purpose of the church is to make disciples. But what does it mean to make disciples? That's what we want to talk about today.

If you have a Bible with you, would you turn with me to Matthew, Chapter 28? We're in the middle of a four-week series that we've entitled *Faithfully Forward*. Two weeks ago, we talked about our leadership transition as Bryan stepped out of the Senior Pastor role and into another role at church. Then last week, Ryan led us in looking at this first aspect of our vision statement, *coming together to know Jesus*, as we seek together to be faithful as a people to whom we've always been as a church, but also to be looking to God to lead us to a new future that He has ahead. And now this morning, we want to talk about coming together *to become more like Him.*

At the end of Matthew, chapter 28, we find Jesus after His death, His burial, and His resurrection, and He is gathered together with His disciples, just before His ascension. And here we find Jesus giving these followers of His, who would become His church, His marching orders, His instructions for them. We pick it up in verse 18:

> **And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations,"**
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> (*NASB, Matthew 28:18-19a)

Those are the instructions that Jesus had for the church. **Go… make disciples of all the nations**. But notice that after the **go**, there's a **therefore**, and as we study Scripture, we've learned that when we see a "therefore," we should ask, "What's it there for?" And it is in the context of Jesus' authority that Jesus gives us His calling. He said, **"All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth."** What powerful and important statements! All authority has been given to Jesus! He is Lord of all! And notice the setting that He speaks of—all authority **in heaven and on earth,** which means there is nowhere and there is nothing that does not fall under the scope of Jesus' authority. Truly, He possesses all authority. And in that context, because of His conferred authority upon us in giving us His marching orders, that's why His instructions become, for us, a commission. In fact, we call it the *Great Commission*. Listen to what one dictionary says about what *commissioning* means. It says it's *the act of granting authority to someone*. To *commission* is to charge someone with a task, giving them the authority to do something in an official way. That means that the church has been given authority by God to make disciples. It's not our idea. It's not our program. It's not even our endeavor. It is our *commission*. We have been appointed by God. We have been given authority, by God, to accomplish His will on earth in making disciples. That's the instruction that God has given to us.

Notice, then, the context. "**All authority has been given to Me in heaven on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations."** The extent of the authority of the church to make disciples, as given by God, is to the very ends of the earth. And we've talked before about the word that's translated here, nations, is *ethne'*, in the original language, which actually speaks of people groups more than it does political nations as we would understand them to be. So, Jesus has given His church these marching orders, this commission, to make disciples literally to the ends of the earth.

And what a joy and privilege it is to be a part of a congregation that God is right now actively using to make disciples among more than 250 biblical nations on Earth—people groups—as God uses us to take His good news to the ends of the earth. So those are the orders, the instructions that Jesus has given to His church. *Make disciples of all nations in His authority!*

But how do we do that? Well, Jesus gives us, right here, two foundational pieces that are important to understand. He says,

> **"…baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you**;" (Vs.19b-20a)

First, He speaks of us standing into who He is, and then we're going to get to talk about the amazing thing of who we get to become. This is what Jesus has given as an instruction—and this very morning we have the privilege of having several people be baptized right here on this platform this morning. And what is *baptism*? Baptism is *an outward symbol of an inward reality.* It is where we identify with the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I love how Romans 6 speaks of what happens in us when we come to Christ, using the imagery of baptism. I encourage you this week sometime to read through it. I want to highlight just a couple of things that Romans 6 points out about the inner reality symbolized by baptism. Verses 3 and 4 tell us that as we're **baptized into Jesus' death**. We are **buried with Him, so that as Christ was raised from the dead, through the glory of the Father, we, too, might walk in newness of life.** Verse 5 tells us that we're **united with Christ, in a likeness of His death, and in the likeness of His resurrection.** Verse 6 says, **we have been crucified with Christ, that the body of sin might be done away with so that we are no longer slaves to sin**. Verse 7 says, **we have been set free.** Verse 8 says, we're **dead with Christ, and then alive with Him**. And verse 11, says, **we're dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus**. What an amazing thing that takes place when we come to faith in Jesus Christ! And, in baptism, we have this outward symbol of this inner change that God has brought about for us.

But isn't it interesting in Matthew 28, Jesus says, "**baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit**."? Is that just kind of some sort of blessing that we say over someone as we dunk them in the tank? "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit?" Not at all! It is Jesus, underscoring the significance of how we have the opportunity to step into relationship with the Triune God. Because of the finished work of Jesus on the cross, we have right-standing before the Father, and we can come boldly before the throne of grace. And we become indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and as we choose to live under the rule and reign of Christ, we can be directed and empowered by that Holy Spirit to live completely, progressively different lives. That's what baptism is all about. It's standing into who He is.

And then the Great Commission speaks of the wonder of who we can become. Baptizing them and **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you**. Here we come to this part where we talk about coming together to actually become more like Jesus. And notice in Verse 20, that Jesus said **teaching them to observe**, (to follow, to obey) **all that I have commanded you**, which means being a Christian is about more than receiving Jesus and His forgiveness. It is about a lifelong

pursuit and journey of actually becoming more like Him, learning to observe all that He did, all that He is, all that He says, that we might actually live out His character in a lost and dying world.

I love how the late Dallas Willard puts it. He says, "If he could put a statement of purpose on a church sign, it would simply be, '*We teach people how to do everything Jesus said*.'" Isn't that great! We teach people how to do everything Jesus said. He went on to say about his own ministry, "*My intention is to get us, each of us, to a place where we could look at a teaching, any teaching that Jesus has given, and say, 'I know how to teach someone to the point where they would do that. They would do it easily. They would do it routinely, because it would drop off of them like fruit drops off of a tree.'"*

But for many of us—even many of us who have known Christ for decades—I think if we were being honest, we'd have to say we know more about what Jesus commands, than we do about how to become a kind of person who actually lives life like Jesus would live it if He were living in our shoes. For example, Jesus says to us, He commands us, **"Do not be anxious**," but we live in a world that is filled with unsettling and difficult things coming at us every single day. Do we know and understand how we can be people who are living with hearts that are actually governed by peace and rest, rather than by stress and anxiety, no matter what is happening in the world around us? Do we even realize that is Jesus' vision for us?

You know the 10 commandments told us, "**Do not murder**," but Jesus took it to a whole other level, didn't He? He said, "It's the anger in our hearts that is actually the true source of deadly division." Man, we live in an angry moment right now. But do we, as the church, realize that as His disciples, we can become people who have hearts that are filled with kindness and genuine love, not anger, division, and strife? Do we know how to become those kinds of people? Jesus goes so far as to say, **"Love your enemy**." He tells us to, **"Bless those who curse you**." It doesn't take but about five minutes on social media to see there's not a whole lot of loving, blessing, coming back to the cursing, is there? We live in a world that is desperately in need of people who will somehow be the kind of people who will show up as Jesus would, if He were in that situation. And what it means to be a disciple, is to be a learner, to be people who are learning how to become those kinds of people. That's why Jesus says that primary to the calling of the church is **teaching**.

The word **disciple** means *learning*. So, it's all about teaching and learning what God has called us to. Which brings us back to Hank, the guy who never changed. And a critical question that I need us all to ask ourselves this morning is, "Am I Hank?" Now we would all be like, "No, man. There are a lot of people who are more like Hank than I am. I'm not like that." But how do we really know? I think we can discover more by turning the question upside down and asking it this way. "Are you a different kind of person than you were six months ago? A year ago? Five years ago? Are you becoming a different kind of person? Is your character becoming more like Jesus? Are you becoming more able to easily and routinely show up as Jesus would if He were living your life?"

Now, if the answer is yes, then the next question is, "How, specifically? How specifically are you different now than you were a year ago? Or two years ago?" Do we even realize that that is God's desire, that is God's vision for our lives? God longs for us to learn how to routinely and easily become the kind of people who are increasingly becoming more like Him. As a church, we long

for all of us to have a vision for our lives, for us to believe that our God wants to produce beautiful and magnificent transformation in each of us as we journey through this life with Him, not believing that the Christian life is simply about a ticket to heaven and holding on until eternity, but understanding that God literally wants to deploy all of us as the sweet aroma of Christ in a rotting and dying world. But it only happens as we learn how to become more like Him.

You know, two weeks ago, I said that churches almost never measure progress in ministry. That's why one of the things we're excited about as we look to move faithfully forward, is to try to figure out some tools and some methods that we can put in your hands to help you prayerfully assess your progress as a follower of Christ, that we all might be asking Jesus, "How are we doing in this journey of transformation?" We're looking forward to exploring more of that in the days to come.

You know, one of the hallmarks of this church, by God's grace, has been an extraordinary teaching ministry. We are so thankful to be a part of a church where the Word of God is so well taught. And it teaches us how to know God and what He is like and what He is about. And we have been inspired to be a people who are seeking to become more like Christ. That has been a hallmark of who we have been. We want that to continue to be a hallmark of who we are. That is important to us as leaders. We know it's very important to you as well.

But can I ask you another question? And can I, again, just ask you to be honest just with yourself? "Is it enough?" I mean, "Is coming here once a week, or maybe for some of us, once or twice a month, or maybe watching online enough? Is that enough to produce the kind of life that we long for in our souls? Is a 40-minute message once a week enough to help us understand how to become the kind of people that Jesus speaks of?" I don't think any of us would say it's enough. That's why we are continuing, as we move faithfully forward, to talk about other ways to help us, in addition to what we're doing here on the weekend. And one of those things we've been talking about quite a bit this past year is *Life Groups*. We believe those are valuable, because they give us a context to come together with a small group of people, to dig further into the Word and the message, and specifically, its application to our lives—that we might learn how to become more like Christ. Well, we're getting ready to launch another session, and we want to focus on that again. I want to ask Matt Meyer, who is our Life Groups Pastor, if he would just come on up here and tell us a little bit about that.

Matt Meyer: Thanks, Jeff. You know, one of the reasons that we're so committed to gathering together in Life Groups, is that we think it's almost impossible to grow spiritually, without being connected with some others relationally. Even if that's just your family, you've got to be connected relationally in some way. We're relational people, right? We need people to pray for us. We need people to encourage us at times. And, yes, we even need people to challenge us at times. Sometimes we don't see ourselves correctly, and it's helpful to have somebody come along and maybe hold up a mirror for you a little bit and say, "Are you sure that's what you look like? Because that's not what you look like to me." And hopefully, that's done in a gentle way. I think you'll see that there are ways that that can be done.

But we also need others in our lives in order for us to grow in patience, and for us to grow in love. I used to say to college students all the time, when I was working with them, that it's pretty hard to grow in your love for other people if you're just sitting in your dorm room by yourself. You can

read about love; you can pray; you can ask God, "Make me more loving," but if you're not out amongst people, connecting with people—sometimes people who are hard to love at times—you're not going to grow in love. It's almost impossible to grow in forgiveness if you're not interacting with people that you have to forgive from time to time. So, as a church, we are committed to Life Groups as a place for us to come together and connect relationally, and where we can share our lives authentically.

I want to read you just a couple of stories. We asked some people who were involved in Life Group this last year, "How did God use it to transform you? How did God use it to grow you, to change your life?" So, these are their words on these cards that I have up here. Here's the first one.

It says "The group that I was in encouraged me to trust God again. They held space for me to talk and be open about my doubts about God—and they didn't make me feel bad about it. They actually said they had also had doubts at times, and that it's normal and okay, and God understands. By being able to talk about this and let go of the shame, I felt closer to God." What a beautiful thing is going on in this person's life as they were authentic, as they were real, as they shared their struggles, as they shared their doubts, and the love and the encouragement that they received. It's not possible outside of a place where they're connected relationally with other people.

You know, one of the other reasons we gather together is to talk about the sermon again, to talk about the Scriptures again, in a place where we can grow and hear and figure out, "How do we live this out? How do we become the people Jeff is describing?" So, listen to what this person had to say about how that worked in their life. They said this, "I began sharing my faith so much more frequently, thinking about the conversations we've been having in Life Group, and more easily recognizing the opportunities the Lord was presenting to me. When regularly talking about my faith, and knowing it needs to be shared with everyone, I have been taking the steps to grow in His kingdom in a way I would not have without having those real conversations with fellow believers."

We had a lot of people who wrote in and said this, over the course of this last year. They said, "I've become more bold in my faith." "I began to share my faith." "I talked with someone at my job about my faith." And I think that's a direct result of our study in Acts, because the emphasis is on sharing the good news of Jesus. But I also want you to notice, "What did this person say?" They said, "I don't think I would have taken that step, if I hadn't been having these conversations. I don't think I would have taken it, if all I was doing was listening to the sermon in Acts." They needed a relationship. They needed somebody to encourage them, to challenge them.

Here's another one. This guy says, "I feel like there are a ton of little ways being in a group has changed me. But one that stands out to me is, I used to be very quick to anger and yelling, and just throughout the years I've been in a group, both the discussions and watching and learning from the other dads has made me a much more patient father. I feel like if this hadn't happened, I would end up not having a good relationship later in life with my kids. And I'm so grateful for getting to learn and grow and to start being a better husband, a better father, and a better person." And what an amazing thing happened in this guy's life! He's becoming a better father; he's becoming a better husband because he sat in a space; he was able to be authentic. He was able to open up his life. He could look at other people's lives—other dads and how they did it—and when he could get advice, he began to grow.

You know, God does amazing things in our lives when we come together and engage with the Scriptures in a place that allows us to connect relationally. And if you're still not convinced that you should join a Life Group, I want to read you one more from a person who joined a Life Group for the first-time last year. Here's what they said. "This is the first time that I've started to study the Bible instead of just passively listening to a sermon. It's the first time I've been involved in a prayer group, praying for others. It's been a very good step for me and it made me think about my relationship with Christ on a different level than just attending church weekly." I can't say it better than that. If you want to take your relationship with God to another level, join a Life Group. Go on the journey with some people. Open up your life. Trust God and see what He might do for you. See what He might do in your life as you do that, as you journey with those people.

Jeff mentioned that we're getting ready to launch. We actually opened up signups this weekend. They're open now. I'd encourage you, that if you're not in a Life Group, and you'd like to sign up for one, go online after the service. Don't do it now. Don't get on your phone now. Go on after the service. If you want to talk with somebody about Life Groups, or you're not sure how to navigate the website, or you have some questions, we'll be at the Spotlight Booth after the service. There'll be people in the upstairs hallway as well. Anybody that has one of these shirts on would love to visit with you about a Life Group. They're all Life Group leaders. They also have a gift to give you, to offer you, to join a Life Group and to encourage you to grow.

Jeff Petersen: Thank you, Matt. Also, some of you may be at a point in your journey, where a next step for you would be to help lead a Life Group. And as we continue to call the body to come together in this way, we need people to step up and lead. If you sense that might be you, I encourage you to talk to Matt. I want to also tell you, as we move faithfully forward, briefly about two other things we're excited to start in the coming days.

One is what we're calling a *School of Discipleship.* This will be a curriculum and a context of a relationship to help people go deeper in their faith. For those who want more than attending the weekend service and being in a Life Group, who want to dig deeper. Pray for us. We're hoping to be able to start launching elements of that next summer or next fall.

We also are looking to start a *Ministry Residency Program* for young leaders, perhaps recent college graduates. It'll be a full-time, two-year program, where they will study the Bible and come away with an accredited theological degree. They'll be mentored by another leader and grow in their relationship with Christ, and they will serve here at Lincoln Berean, being exposed to all the major facets of church ministry. We're excited for that to begin as well.

We look forward to continuing to figure out: How do we effectively come together to become more like Him? And the most exciting thing about it all, is that we get to do it all with Him! In fact, Jesus ends the *Great Commission* by giving us the means of: How do we accomplish this work, and the means also happens to be the end—Jesus Himself! He says:

> …**teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.**

We cannot accomplish anything for the glory of God and the good of the world, apart from Christ, and His empowering work in and through us. And, ultimately, He Himself is our highest aim and our greatest good! True life is found in Jesus—*in* Him, *with* Him, *through* Him. He is God! He is good. He is our joy. He is our strength. He is our hope. And that's why there are very few things that are more worth celebrating than people coming to faith in Christ and taking a step to identify themselves with Christ through baptism. So, join with us now as we celebrate that this morning, and think as you do, about how you personally might be moving toward becoming more like Christ. Let's pray.

> *Father, we just want to thank You so much for Your goodness. Thank You that You have given us Your authority and Your presence to accomplish Your mission. Thank You, God, that You are changing lives. Thank You that a relationship with You is not just about forgiveness of sin, but also about becoming an entirely different kind of person, a person who is actually like You, and showing up as You would if You were living our lives in our world today. Oh, this morning, Lord, we celebrate Amy and Samantha and Blake and Eric and Bea and Owen. God, we thank You for the work that You have done in each of their lives. May we celebrate that, together, as we give all the glory to You! In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

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