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Title: Green Light

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Scripture: [Ephesians 3:1-6](#)

Text: [Matthew 28:16-20](#)

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Show of hands – how many people have ever played or are familiar with the children’s game RED LIGHT, GREEN LIGHT? Being an almost only child – I have a brother who is 14 years my elder – I had to rely on cousins two teach me the cool kid games. Red light, green light was one of those games. The way my cousins taught me to play it was that the person who was “it” stood out ahead of the rest of a line of kids. When everyone was ready, the person who was “it” would shout “GREEN LIGHT” and the entire line would move forward toward the person who was “it” until that person would suddenly turn around and yell “RED LIGHT.” The entire group would stop but if someone was caught taking even a step or two after the STOP signal, they would be sent back to the start line. I loved being “it” perhaps because I had so much control over my cousins telling them when to “go” and when to “stop” and sending them back to the starting line with no chance for appeal.

Traffic lights have always amazed me for the same reason – they have nearly full control over our movements. Even though there are no physical barriers to keep us from going across an intersection, almost everyone, even the most lawless among us, will stop at a red light. Just a colored light dangling from a cord over the street has great power to control our actions. The colors mean something. Red is a universal sign of danger and we know that if we do not stop at a red light, the consequences could be dire. You may not have known that the colors of traffic lights date back to the early railroad days. Red has always meant “stop,” and universally implies danger. But, in those early days of the railroad, “WHITE” lanterns meant “GO” while “GREEN” was the color for “CAUTION.” That was fine until a 1914 incident when the red STOP lens fell out of the lantern leaving the white GO light exposed. From then on, green meant “GO.”¹

Our gospel reading today from Matthew 28 is both famous and familiar. It is ultimately a story of Jesus giving his disciples a GREEN LIGHT when they were prone to either proceed with caution or stop altogether. Most of us have heard it many times. It is Jesus' "Great Commission" to the eleven disciples shortly after his resurrection. The disciples go to the mountaintop and the risen Christ comes to them in the midst of their doubt and speaks those amazing words: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given

to me." What an incredible claim! What I am about to tell you you should not take lightly. Listen up!

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." Gather more followers, call more people to faith -- people of every class and background, of every land and race -- for Jesus is the Lord of the whole world. "Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." That is, join them to Christ by washing away their sins and calling them to repentance and faith and to unity with all believers in Christ's body, the church. "Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." To be a disciple, to be a baptized member of Christ's body, is to follow Jesus, to live by his teachings, to serve in his mission, to pray for his kingdom. This is a radically new way of life, for us as it once was for those first disciples. People have to be taught, shown, led, and encouraged if they are to be disciples. This is an integral part of the Christian mission.

Then comes the conclusion, the powerful promise that undergirds the receiving of this Great Commission. "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." That's the key -- for us as for those first disciples. Not only does Jesus have all authority; not only does he send his followers out; but, above all, he promises always to be present. Nothing in the Christian mission would work without Christ's presence.

A high school friend of mine wrote these words this week that resonated with me -- "Discerning how God wants us to tell his story is a tough subject! It seems that most Christians see themselves at a red light waiting for a green but the better way may be just the opposite. What if we would see ourselves as having a green light watching for a red? This makes a lot of sense to me. Many are waiting for a burning bush or a voice from the clouds when God has already spoken deep into our hearts, which, by the way, is God's most common way of communication."

I think my friend is right. Anytime we are given a new assignment, there is caution and we proceed as if we have at least a yellow light in front of us if not a red. It may be something new at work, a new phase of life. There are many in this season that are graduating and moving into just such a new phase. Anytime we are asked to follow God into a new place, all we can see is red or maybe yellow at best. But in each new venture, it may be helpful to see it as a "commission" which by definition is a GREEN light to move forward. What does it mean to have or be given a "commission?" When the word is broken into its parts it is a mission or a task and the "co" implies that it is done in partnership with another person or entity -- like copilot or co-creator.

Throughout history, we can think of many examples of persons being given exciting commissions in their lifetimes. There was Michelangelo's commission to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Sir Christopher Wren's commission to build St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and Walter Reed's assignment to stop yellow fever at the so called "Big Ditch" in Panama. This week we learned that Butler University basketball coach Chris Holtmann was hired away by Ohio State University. Holtmann has a commission at Ohio State just as he had at Butler – win basketball games. In each instance, these people worked with others to achieve their goals or end product.

The most frightening commission of my life was when a friend asked me to design a house for their family. I was 19 years old and a freshmen in architectural school. Those were all of my credentials. I agreed under one condition – that my friend would get input from a real structural engineer to make sure that what we designed together could actually be built. It was an energy saving underground house built into the side of a hill. There were many nights of consultation about what rooms should go where and thanks to the gifts of many, it turned out well.

Our commission from scripture is the same in many ways but it is different and that difference is why it has earned the moniker of "GREAT" Commission. The risen Christ looks at his disciples and at each person since and asks them and us to work side by side with him on his greatest and most important project. When the most important thing some of us have been asked to do all week is to wash the dishes or take out the trash, this might come as quite a jolt! It turns the farm, the assembly line, the office, the kitchen, the mill, the classroom, the truck, and the retail store into a studio where we may fairly affirm, "I'm here on an assignment with God. My talent and time and money are needed. God has personally called me here to be his representative."

It's interesting that the great commission, written originally in the Greek, actually says, "As you go into all the world, make disciples." It has almost a casual or spontaneous air about it. And sure enough, search the scriptures as you might, you'll not find the disciples forming a committee to study on how we might make disciples. Mostly the disciples went about their great commission with spontaneous and breathless excitement. And considering the dimensions of the great commission, we can discover more of this breathless excitement in our own lives as well.

Notice as well that it does not say, "make converts" or "get people to accept Christ." The word "disciple" means above all "learner" or "pupil." So the idea is to "make learners." A disciple is not simply one who has been taught but

one who continues to learn. As soon as you say "yes" to Christ, you are His disciple – you are His learner.

A friend of Ruth's once said that our denomination – the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has the best name of any denomination. We are disciples of Christ. But we often have more red lights than green lights just to make that step to become a learner. I teach a Bible study through the school year and sometimes when I invite someone to join the group, they'll respond that they don't know enough to come to a Bible study. I want to respond with – you're kidding me right? That's what disciple means. It means you are a learner and you invite others to join you on the journey.

D. T. Niles, a great missionary, said, "The Church exists for mission as a candle exists for burning." That is to say, there is only one reason for our being here, only one reason for our existence, and that is to be in mission. Kagawa, the great Japanese Christian, the product of missionaries, said, "Let us not say we are too weak to be missionary. Let us say that we are not missionary enough to be strong." That's it. The nature of the Church is mission. That is why we are here. And when we are in mission, we are strong and healthy. And when we are not, we are weak.²

There is another important fact about the Church. Not only does the Church have a mission to perform in this world, but everybody in the Church is supposed to have a part in performing that mission. That is why Paul tells the Ephesians that they likely have already heard about his commission from God and, if they haven't he tells them that the Gentiles (that's us) have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus.

When you joined the Church, you vowed that you would support the mission of the Church with your gifts, with your talent, so that the mission of the Church would become a reality in this world. For much of my life, I made a distinction between what we do here in this place and what happens out in the world. Probably just by the use of the word "missionary," I thought that God's mission, God's work, was done someplace else by other people. Just by definition, the Great Commission, ministering to all nations, making disciples of all nations, meant other nations someplace else. Christians went faithfully over there to carry out a mission. That isn't the whole story. Every Christians, from the moment of baptism, accepted an assignment to have a co-mission with Christ and with other members of the body of Christ – to make learners – disciples of others, even in this place and this community.

It happens in rich and wonderful ways in every place that you allow it to happen with the gifts that you already possess. I read an article this week in

a West Virginia newspaper about a pastor that I met over 20 years ago while working with his church in Colorado. He had moved to West Virginia to pastor a church and the article was to recognize his upcoming retirement. He was quoted about the nature of the church as he looked back on his ministry.

"There are many problems in our world that, if we take as Christians, our cue from Jesus, need our attention. We are not a Holy society, we aren't a withdrawn group in the fortress."

He continues, "The church ought to be a bridge which helps organizations get together and reach out together and bring their resources together. There is one thing about a bridge... it has to touch both sides, or it doesn't connect. We are about connecting, bringing people together."

He uses the structure of a church building as the example of how people should live their faith. "The sanctuary is where the people are during worship. At the other end, is the narthex. That is the gathering room between the church and the world. That is where people come into the church and people leave the church, to go out into the world. It's the meeting place of world and church."³ I think we should spend more of our time in the narthex, or in our case, the Great Hall.

And this brings us to the last part of the passage, "and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." It's just like Jesus to leave us with a promise. It is the heart of the matter of this Sunday that is called Trinity Sunday in the life of the church. Coming off of Pentecost last week when we became aware of the Spirit, this is the Sunday on which we focus on the total reality of God -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The triune God is the one in whose name we are baptized and in whose name we gather for worship and on whose mission Christ sends us and on whose being Christ's promise to be always present depends.

Someone has helpfully said that our God is best thought of as a God who is "deep in the flesh." That's what the doctrine of the Trinity is about: God deep in the flesh. That's why on this Trinity Sunday we worship God by listening to the words of the one in whom God became flesh, Jesus Christ. Here we have a picture of God as anything but remote or irrelevant. Here we have God deep in the flesh of history and matter, of life and death, of grief and joy. We have a God that is with us to turn our daily encounters into opportunities for mission. And our response to those opportunities that God puts in our path? GREEN LIGHT!

¹ History of colors or traffic lights from history section of Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD), www.mutcd.fhwa.dot.gov

² From Wikipedia biography article under Toyohiko Kagawa.

³ From Wetzel (West Virginia) Chronicle, "Local Pastor Retires After Decades in Ministry," www.wetzelchronicle.com, June 7, 2017.