A Limping Church

Sermon for Matthew 28:16-20, Trinity Sunday, June 15, 2014, New International Version (NIV), World English Bible (WEB)

Sermon In A Sentence: Christ has entrusted the treasure of the Gospel to an “elevenish” imperfect church – and has empowered it to succeed in its mission.

“The eleven disciples went into Galilee” (v. 16). How many disciples were there supposed to be? Twelve! Everyone knows that. But Matthew tells us that eleven went to Galilee. What he is doing, of course, is reminding us of Judas without mentioning Judas’ name. Only eleven disciples went to Galilee, because the twelfth had betrayed Jesus and had then died by his own hand.

Eleven disciples went to Galilee. Dale Bruner, who wrote a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, says, “The number eleven limps.” That’s a good line, isn’t it! “The number eleven limps.”

What does that mean? In the scriptures, we usually hear the number twelve. There were twelve sons of Jacob – who became the twelve tribes of Israel. There were twelve apostles – who were sometimes known simply as “The Twelve.” We expect to hear the number twelve. In the New Testament, the number eleven is used only – only – to refer to the eleven apostles who remained after Judas died. “The number eleven limps.” It’s incomplete. It reminds us of a church wounded by one of its own.

“The number eleven limps.” But Bruner goes on to say, “The church that Jesus sends into the world is fallible, ‘elevenish,’ imperfect.” That corresponds to our experience, doesn’t it! The church is made up mostly of very ordinary people. Most of the church’s work gets done by very ordinary people. Most of the church’s offerings come from people of very ordinary means.

Bruner says, “The church that Jesus sends into the world is fallible, ‘elevenish,’ imperfect.” Yes! But then he goes on to say – listen carefully, because this is important – Bruner goes on to say, “Yet Jesus uses exactly such a church to do his perfect work…. Jesus takes this imperfect number and gives it a perfect vocation.” Yes! That’s also true. Jesus takes these ordinary Christians and uses them to do extraordinary things!

I would like to tell you all of the beautiful things the church is doing today – but I don’t have time – it would take forever. If I were to start listing all the beautiful things the church is doing today, I could never stop – because the church never stops working. The church around the world is doing beautiful things faster than I could list them. It’s feeding the hungry. It’s clothing the naked. It’s teaching people to read. It’s providing water and blankets in the midst of disasters. It’s delivering people from superstition. It’s teaching children about Jesus.

So you’re safe. You don’t have to squirm in your pews. I can’t tell you about all the beautiful things the church is doing today, because I don’t know about most of them. Most of the beautiful things that the church is doing today are being done quietly – without fanfare. A cup of cold water here. A bowl of soup there. A helping hand somewhere else. A visit to a hospital room.
Prayers for the sick. A simple meal enjoyed by friends gathered around a table. That’s the church.

It doesn’t sound like much. Those little things seem like a drop in the bucket here and another drop somewhere else. They don’t seem to count for much. But they are like a gentle rainfall – a steady procession of raindrops. No single drop amounts to much – but together those drops slake the earth’s thirst – cause things to grow – turn the hills green – make it possible for us to live.

Some people don’t want to hear it. They tell us that the church has failed to live up to its promise. They remind us of scandals – of fallen televangelists – of rogue priests. They tell us that the church has done more harm than good.

Some of the critics are Christians. That’s appropriate. We who love the church should examine it carefully – just as a physician examines a patient – with an eye to finding and healing illness – cutting away the cancer to spare the life.

But some Christians approach it differently. They claim to love Jesus – but they hate the church. I don’t know how they can do that. The Bible says that the church is the body of Christ. How can you love Christ and hate his body?

But even those of us who love the church admit it does have problems. We can trace them back to the beginning. Eleven disciples went to Galilee – not twelve! As Bruner says, “The number ‘eleven’ limps.” It reminds us of Judas – of treachery – of betrayal.

BUT Bruner also reminds us, “The church that Jesus sends into the world is fallible, ‘elevenish,’ imperfect. Yet Jesus uses exactly such a church to do his perfect work…. Jesus takes this imperfect number and gives it a perfect vocation.”

That’s not only true, but it should make us feel good. Jesus took eleven men whose names we cannot even remember and used them to transform the world. Eleven ordinary men! We should feel good about that, because we are ordinary too. We think, “If only I had something to use for the Lord! If only I had a good voice! If only I had the gift of preaching! If only I had lots of money! If only I had more time! If only …!”

But the church got its start with eleven people as ordinary as you and me. Eleven – not twelve! Imperfect! Incomplete! Limping along! Just think what Jesus did with those eleven ordinary people. It will give you an idea what he can do with you – ordinary as you might be.

To those eleven ordinary people, Jesus said:

“All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.

Go, and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father

and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you.”
Some critics would have said, “That’s silly!” Their favorite expression when someone says something foolish – “That’s silly!” They mean it was stupid – unrealistic.

“Go and make disciples of all nations.” How realistic was that! Eleven ordinary people without two nickels to rub together! How could they go to all nations! Half of the world would not even be discovered for another 1500 years! Jesus was asking the impossible!

“Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” How realistic was that!

Before they could baptize them, they must persuade them!

Before they could persuade them, they must go to them!

Before they could go to them, they must raise funds – stockpile canned goods – rent ships – learn foreign languages.

Jesus was ignoring the problems – obvious problems – insurmountable problems!

“Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.” How realistic was that! Jesus chose twelve apostles. One turned out to be a renegade, and the other eleven were no bargain. How could eleven imperfect people teach the whole world everything that Jesus had taught!

Jesus was being completely unrealistic! Wasn’t he!

But then Jesus concluded, “Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (v. 20). Never forget that! “Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” That’s the key to the whole enterprise. Christ is with us! The church is Christ-powered and Holy Spirit powered! That’s the only explanation for what happened over the past two thousand years! Those eleven ordinary people – and the ordinary people who came after them – have, indeed, gone to all nations – and made disciples – and baptized – and taught. They have done everything that Jesus sent them to do. They were able to do it because they were Christ-powered – Holy Spirit powered!

The church today is Christ-powered – Holy Spirit powered! Our congregation is Christ-powered – Holy Spirit powered! Each of us individually is Christ-powered – Holy Spirit powered!

Jesus promised to be with us forever and ever – through good times and bad – through life and death – even to the end of the age. And, as Paul said, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31). In other words, if God is for us, it doesn’t matter who is against us? The Christ who overcame the tomb is at work in our world – and in the church – and in our congregation – and in each of our lives. We are Christ-powered – Holy Spirit powered.

Those eleven disciples did not go to all the world. They went where they could. They did what they could. They planted seeds. God caused the seeds to grow. The eleven saw the beginnings, but they could not even begin to imagine the harvest that God would raise. They could not even
imagine that Christians would spread the Gospel from one end of the world to the other – from tropical climes to the Arctic – from East to West.

Keep that in mind as you go about your work as a Christian. Give a cup of cold water in Jesus’ name. Say a kind word in Jesus’ name. Tell a child a Bible story. Visit a prisoner. Wash a few dishes in a soup kitchen. Invite someone you know to come to church with you. Break bread with a friend.

None of it will amount to much – until Christ gets hold of it – until the Holy Spirit blesses it. And then who knows!

God knows!

Peace friends,

Chuck