

NELCSA Winter series 3  
The strength of the church is in its members  
Matthew 28, 16-20

*16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.*

*18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Dear sisters and brothers,  
Soccer cup final. The team is devastated. Just before halftime two goals were conceded and one of their players got a red card. Now they have to play the second half with one player less. The morale is low. The trainer says: We can do it! We can win. Some catch the excitement, but some start the second half with drooping shoulders. How can one win a match with such a team?

Believe it or not - that roughly is how the team of Jesus looked when he met with them there on the mountain in Galilee. They were still shell-shocked by the events that ended with the crucifixion of their master - a clear goal against them! All of them were very much aware of their failure and cowardice when Jesus was captured and tortured. It was like conceding yet another goal. And now they were only eleven, after losing Judas. The message that the Lord has risen should have fired them all up- but it did not. Some still doubted, even in his presence!

I admire this honesty of Matthew. He does not paint a glorious picture of a band of heroes of the faith, but shows the sad reality of weakness, doubt, failure.

And yet, this is the team that Jesus chooses to work with. When he says: "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" it is clear that he could have chosen whomever he wanted. He had the authority! And indeed, with all his authority, he chooses this weak team.

I find this immensely comforting - Jesus builds his church with people like you and me, people that have little faith, that break under pressure.

The way we tell history negates these weaknesses. All of the Apostles, except for Judas Iscariot, have received the title “Saint”, and in our thinking “Saint” means special, without blemish. The Catholic tradition has strict procedures to be followed before someone can be declared a saint, all pointing to outstanding features and faith. Purely based on the gospel stories, none of the apostles would qualify, because they were very much like me and you! We need to rid ourselves of this thinking that Christ surrounds himself with heroes and heroines of faith. Rather he appoints into his team the most ordinary, every day people like you and me!

With this in mind, let us now look at the rest of this well known text. The instruction that Jesus gives his team is broken down into sections:

**1. Make disciples** - the word used here refers to a way of teaching that leads to someone to discover Jesus Christ. Disciple making is not about getting people to join our congregation, our church. It is about people meeting Jesus and, like the disciples, learning to love and trust him. That is why the first theme of this Winter series was: Who is this Jesus? It was their meeting Jesus that changed the disciples, that made them follow.

The first priority of any congregation is not to promote itself, but to make Jesus known.

**2. Baptize them in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.**

This is not just a liturgical formula. These words show that a total change is happening. In Baptism I enter a new reality.

**Father:** God almighty becomes my Father, I am now part of his family. I am not merely a creature of the mighty Creator, but child of the Father!

**Jesus Christ** is the son who paved the way to the Father, he is the door for me into this family - and now I am his brother, his sister!

**The Holy Spirit** is the one who now guides and leads me in this life as a member of God’s family. Baptism is not just a one time event, but the start of a whole new way of living!

Out of baptism then flows the third part of the instruction:

**3. Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.**

I want to unpack this part from the back: The word “commanded” refers to an

instruction with a specific end in mind. During the covid lockdown there was a huge debate about some of the rules and regulations that made no sense at all, that had nothing to do with curbing the spread of the corona virus.

When we examine the rules and regulations of the church, we might realise that there too, are some that make no sense at all. They might have been meaningful at some stage, but now they are tradition and therefore we still follow them.

Jesus does not want that kind of obedience. He has a clear end in mind: his gospel must flow into the world. What he commands is not a dead set of laws, but a creative way of living that keeps the end in mind, that the Lord is glorified through us, no matter how the circumstances change!

We are not called to be “better than thou” people, nor people that are stuck in the past, but people that obey the living Christ, so that Christ becomes visible now, in our time.

These three parts create a “circular movement”: as Christ becomes visible through us, other people will become followers, in baptism they become part of the family, and start living this purposeful life as well, which leads to others meeting Christ ...

The growth of the church happens in this circle: Meeting Christ, becoming part of his family, and living out his teachings, which lead to others meeting Christ ...

For some reason, just as with the issue of “saints”, there is a wide spread false assumption that growth and life of the church depends on the clergy, starting with the apostles, then to the priests, pastors, bishops etc. Often congregations are referred to as “Pastor so-and-so’s congregation”. The picture galleries show the pastors. Our Church office shows the pictures of the bishops that led the church. Many a church chronicle is merely a long list of the pastors that served the congregation, and what they did. All this cements this misconception that the strength of the church lies in its clergy.

Good leadership is important. But the strength of the church lies in its members living out their faith! The task of us pastors is not to spoon-feed the congregation and keep them dependent on us, but to help the members to become mature Christians.

The Apostle Paul was an excellent example in this regard. He is called the greatest missionary of the early church. Why? Because he established congregations and then moved on. He did not bind them to himself, did not create a dependency, but rather led them to maturity. His letters were not

aimed to keep them attached to him, but to focus them on Christ. The church did not grow because Paul was such a big draw card. On the contrary, he seemed to have caused much tension. The church grew because of the “Locals”, the people that started living their faith. Paul had told them about Christ - and now they started to live the teachings, not of Paul, but of Christ. Martin Luther also, time and again, made it very clear that he dare not become the centre of a church. Christ is the centre. He had to show Christ to the world. When he wrote the small and large catechism, the purpose was so that people could grow in faith and live as mature Christians.

Many years ago we had a guest speaker from Germany (Bernd Schlotthoff) who worked with us on the theme of “Church growth”. At one of the meetings he asked: What is the aim of church growth? A participant said: “That we can make do without a pastor”. Everybody laughed. But actually, the person had hit the nail on it’s head: We pastors should help our congregation to maturity, so that they can fully function even when there is no pastor around!

The Covid19 Crisis forces us to re-think the way that church is done. The virtual world has created new possibilities. Let us not use these new possibilities to create more dependency on a pastor, but rather to lead more Christians to a mature faith.

Luther once said: The highest office in the Church is that of a baptised Christian. All other offices are there to help the Christian to maturity. (An den Christlichen Adel Deutscher Nation)

When Jesus gathered his disciples on the mountain in Galilee, it was a weak team. That was the team he chose. And he promised: I am with you always, till the end of time.

He will not give up on us - even when we doubt, even when we fail. Therefore I believe: Yes, his church will survive, because you, dear sister and brother, are committed to live out your being His family! You are an essential part of this circle of growth, of spreading the gospel!

Amen

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*A video of the sermon can be seen at [www.nelcsa.net](http://www.nelcsa.net)*