

The Intrepid Mr. Jackson

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 some 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.”

Sheldon Jackson had ambitions. As a student at Princeton Theological Seminary in the late 1850s, Jackson aspired to be a foreign missionary. After graduation and ordination as a Presbyterian minister, however, the foreign missions board of the Presbyterian Church deemed him too frail for a foreign posting. Jackson turned his sights on the American West. He served for a time at Spencer Academy, a boarding school for the Choctaw Indians in what is now Oklahoma, then known simply as Indian Territory. As if to prove the mission board correct, however, Jackson fell victim to malaria, and once again his ambitions were thwarted.

Jackson headed north to Minnesota, where he won a commission from the Presbyterian Board of Domestic Missions. Over the course of the ensuing decade, he organized twenty-three churches, recruited pastors, and raised money for their financial support.

Then Jackson began to dream even bigger. On April 29, 1869, Jackson and two associates, Thomas H. Cleland and John C. Elliott, conducted a prayer meeting on a bluff in Sioux City, Iowa, overlooking the Missouri River. Facing west, they dedicated themselves to the task of preaching the gospel in the American West.

Today's Gospel calls to mind that scene overlooking the Missouri River. Matthew tells us that the disciples went to the mountain in Galilee, and it is here that Jesus meets the disciples and issues what has come to be known as the Great Commission: "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." Then Jesus concludes with a promise: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

What are we to make of this passage? The most obvious reading is that anyone who considers herself a follower of Jesus is charged with the task of making disciples. And remember that the injunction is to "make disciples of all nations," so that implies that we are to travel the world in order to bring others to Christ.

And, indeed, generations of Christians throughout church history have attempted to do exactly that. Missionary journeys began in the first century, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. St. Paul traveled extensively, bringing Christianity throughout Asia Minor. Missionaries over the centuries have taken it upon themselves to preach in China and Africa and India and Latin America. St. Patrick brought the faith to Ireland in the fifth century. At least in part, the impulse to convert Native Americans lay behind the European settlement of North America.

I worry, however, that the inspiring, often heroic, tales of missionary adventures, which were especially popular in the nineteenth century, have given rise to the impression that the task of making disciples is only for those who are titans of the faith. Add to that the tendency in the twentieth century for the professionalization of ministry – pastors, priests, missionaries – and it’s not difficult to get the sense that the Great Commission was really directed toward someone else, not us.

But look again at today’s Gospel. Matthew tells us that when the disciples gathered with Jesus on the mountain, “they worshiped him; but some doubted.” Even among Jesus’ closest followers, some doubted. These were not titans of the faith; they were ordinary people, like you and me – ordinary people who took it upon themselves to obey the command of Jesus and preach the gospel.

What does that mean for us, right here in Middle Haddam, right here in central Connecticut? Not every follower of Jesus must make disciples in distant places or alien time zones. We fulfill the terms of the Great Commission by preaching the gospel in everyday life, by showing kindness and compassion, by inquiring about the lives of the person behind the counter at the hardware store or the supermarket. By talking about Jesus. Most of all by living the radical ethic of love that he taught us.

In the words of St. Francis, “Preach the gospel always and everywhere. If necessary, use words.” This is one of the ways we move from the mountain in Galilee – or from the bluff in Sioux City, Iowa – to fulfill the terms of the Great Commission to make disciples. And all of this lies within the powers of ordinary people like you and me.

Which brings me back to Sheldon Jackson, the sickly Presbyterian minister who was rejected for service as a foreign missionary. After that prayer meeting in Sioux City, Iowa, Jackson headed West, having been commissioned as “superintendent of missions for Western Iowa, Nebraska,

Dakota, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Utah, or as far as our jurisdiction extends.”

Crisscrossing the West, Jackson established churches, many of them in mining camps, initiated mission work among Native Americans, founded the *Rocky Mountain Presbyterian* newspaper, and even challenged the Mormon empire by organizing Westminster College, which is still in existence in Salt Lake City. In 1877, ten years after the United States purchased Alaska from Russia, Jackson started Presbyterian churches in the new territory. On his trips back east, he raised money from the churches and lobbied Congress for money to establish schools for the native population. Jackson accepted a civil appointment as general agent for education in Alaska in 1885, using his position to establish schools in villages throughout the territory, all the while maintaining his missionary responsibilities.

Recognizing the need for a stable food source for Native Americans in Alaska, Jackson arranged for the importation of reindeer from Lapland and Siberia. Those herds, which arrived by ship in 1892, still provide sustenance for native peoples. Jackson also founded the Sitka, Alaska, newspaper. A year after his death in 1909, the Sitka Industrial and Training School was renamed Sheldon Jackson College in his honor.

Historians estimate that Sheldon Jackson, nicknamed “the bishop of all beyond,” traveled close to a million miles over the course of his career and established approximately one hundred missions and churches. Not bad for someone judged physically unable to be a foreign missionary. Not bad for an ordinary follower of Jesus, like you and me.

Go and make disciples, Jesus says. To India or China or Argentina or Sioux City, Iowa, or Sitka, Alaska. Or East Hampton or Middle Haddam.

Preach the gospel. If necessary, use words.

Trinity Sunday

June 19, 2011
Christ Church
Middle Haddam, Connecticut