



Jesus and Football

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Matthew 28:16-20

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The year is 1961. It's the first day of training camp for the Green Bay Packers. The last time this team was together, they had a heartbreaking loss to the Philadelphia Eagles for the NFL championship.

Coach Vince Lombardi begins his address to his assembled team with the memorable words, "Gentlemen, this is a football." Coach Lombardi wanted to start training camp with a message on fundamentals. Everything revolves around what you do with this football. How you catch it, kick it, run with it, and tackle those who carry it.

Lombardi wasn't going to take anything for granted in the '61 pre-season. He labored over the basics. At one point, Lombardi became so detailed that Max McGee, the Packers' All-Pro receiver, said, "Uh, coach, can you slow down a little. You're going too fast for us." Lombardi reportedly cracked a smile but kept right on going with the fundamentals of blocking and tackling, catching and throwing, running and kicking.

You know something? It worked. In the NFL championship game later in the year, the Packers crushed the New York Giants 37-0. This began something of a dynasty for the Lombardi teams. A total of five championships in the next seven years, a tribute to teams that mastered the fundamentals of football.

I titled this sermon, *Jesus and Football*. Granted, it's an odd title for a sermon. Our Scripture reading amounts to Jesus' "This is a football" speech. Jesus is about to leave his disciples. There is one last time to review the fundamentals with his disciples.

We have come to the end of Matthew's gospel. Jesus has arranged to meet his 11 disciples on a mountain in Galilee. Jerusalem was considered religion-central to the Jewish people. Galilee was well to the north. The Jewish people who lived there were treated like country cousins. It was also Gentile territory, people the Jews considered far from God. Perhaps Jesus arranged to meet his disciples there because it was racially diverse and he wanted his disciples to take his message to all people.

Mountains figure prominently in Matthew's gospel. Jesus reveals his identity to his disciples on a mountain. He preaches and teaches there. He takes time alone with God to pray on mountains. Mountains have a sacred quality to them.

When the disciples see Jesus, "They worship, but some doubt" (Matthew 20:17). After all these disciples have been through with Jesus, how is it that some of them still doubt? Someone asked a respected Biblical teacher, "How can someone worship and doubt at the same time? His answer rings true to me. He said, "You should come to my Lutheran church. We do it all the time."

Sometimes, we in the church treat faith as easy and doubt as ridiculous. Come on! Like the disciples, we can worship and doubt at the same time.

Doubt in the Greek is a word that literally translates as "twice" or "double." It means to think twice or to have second thoughts about something. Be honest. We all have second thoughts at times about following Jesus.

Jesus' final words to his disciples, what we call the Great Commission, begins, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (Matthew 20:18). Jesus exercises striking authority throughout his ministry. Authority to forgive sins. Authority to cast out demons. Authority to heal people.

One question has been running through Matthew's gospel, "Who is Jesus?" Answer: Jesus is the one to whom God has given all authority.

Jesus continues, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). This verse contains four verbs, one primary verb that is supported by three auxiliary verbs called *participles*. A participle is a verb that typically ends in "ing" and supports the main verb. Jesus transforms the noun "disciple" into an action—"making disciples." Disciples are people who make more disciples. Disciples replicate disciples.

Who is Jesus? The one to whom God has given all authority. What does he want his followers to do? Make more followers.

The first participle is "go," as in the verse, "Go and make disciples." It literally translates, "As you are going, make disciples." Make disciples as you are going about your jobs, raising families, and acting as good neighbors.

The second participle is "baptizing." Baptism was the standard rite of initiation into the early church. Adult converts to Christ were typically immersed in the Jordan

River to symbolize their new identity in Christ. Baptism was a tangible way for new believers to announce they were going all-in for Jesus.

Baptism is “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” *Name* is singular, not plural. We are not baptized the names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe in one God, whose name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The third participle is “teaching.” Catechetical instruction is critical to our growth in Christ. Jesus said to make disciples, not merely win converts. We are learning all our lives what it means to follow Jesus.

Who is Jesus? The one to whom God has given all authority. What does he want his followers to do? Make more followers. And how will we make more followers? By going, baptizing and teaching.

Jesus’ parting verse is a keeper, “And remember, I am with you all the days, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Matthew tells us at the beginning of his gospel that Jesus is our Emmanuel, meaning “God with us.” Matthew has come full circle in his gospel. Jesus says at the very end, “I am with you all your days,” meaning all the time.

Who is Jesus? The one to whom God has given all authority. What does he want his followers to do? Make more followers. How do we make more followers? By going, baptizing and teaching. And where is Jesus in all this? He is with us all our days.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have two applications for your consideration that mesh with Jesus' twin assurances in this passage.

Jesus' first assurance are the words, "All authority has been given to me." The cosmic significance of this passage is reflected in this little adjective "all." Jesus has been given **all** authority. To make disciples of **all** nations. To teach them **all** he has commanded you. By reminding them he is with them **all** their days. Jesus has been given **all** authority to instruct us to take his message to **all** people by means of **all** obedience knowing that he is with us **all** the time.

Now for the application. This is likely going to be a different kind of Thanksgiving this year. Big family gatherings are out the window. You'll likely have more time available to you. Why not read Matthew's gospel this week? It takes about two hours. Read it in intervals. If you want to learn what it really means to follow Jesus with your life, read the original sources.

Another suggestion: Make it a priority to join us for worship these next four Sundays of Advent. We're titling it, *What the World Needs Now*. We're focusing on four words: hope, peace, joy, and love. Tell me if this is not what the world needs now? COVID may be an ideal time for you to invite someone to virtual worship. People are more likely to join us online than they are in person.

Still another idea: During Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, we are offering *Advent for Everyone*. We are putting together five-minute videos Monday through Friday on a different Advent theme. Younger families will light a Christmas wreath on Monday.

Tuesday we will have Advent songs; Wednesday, Advent prayers; Thursday, Advent symbols; and Friday, Advent action plans.

Now for Jesus' second assurance, "I am with you always." I've had COVID on my mind this week as we enter month nine of this pandemic. The pandemic is getting personal now. It's messing with our Thanksgiving and Christmas plans.

I've been asking myself this week, since Jesus has all the authority and the power, why doesn't he shut down this pandemic down right now? I don't have a good answer. I don't pretend to know. I fall back on God's word to Isaiah, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways are higher than your ways" (Isaiah 55:9).

This much I know. This virus humbles me. It stops me dead in my tracks. I thought plagues were a thing of the past, and that science and technology would save us from threats like this. Sometimes it takes a crisis to bring me to my knees. I'm not in control after all. I recognize my limits and my finitude. I realize how dependent I am on other people.

This virus leads me to ask big questions, ones I don't ordinarily think about when I'm consumed with everyday life—questions about the meaning of life and my mortality. Most of the time I push them away. It's not as easy now. It may be a silver lining in this dark COVID cloud to ask questions about life's meaning and duration. Thinking about questions of ultimate concern reframe and reset how I live my life.

This virus awakens my desire for God. God has my attention now. I sense this desire for God in other people also. People outside of our church orbit are longing for God and looking for transcendent meaning, just as I am. It makes Jesus' mandate to "go and make disciples" all the more compelling.

Maybe it's time for you to begin a spiritual life in earnest. You don't like this COVID moment one little bit, yet it may be the ideal time to open your heart to Christ and begin to follow him. Or maybe it's time for you to reclaim a spiritual life from your past that has been lost to you or you have let slide.

Jesus promises to be with us all our days. Why not take him up on this offer? Not only on some days or on our best days, but all our days. "Remember," Jesus said, "I am with you all your days, even to the close of the age."