

## **FOLLOWING ORDERS**

**Matthew 28: 16-20**

**Sunday, June 7, 2020 – Pollocksville**

**I don't know if you've noticed it or not, but these are unusual times around Pollocksville Presbyterian Church. Our church, our town, our state, our nation, and our world are dealing with the effects of the COVID-19 virus. We wear masks, we wash our hands, we practice social distancing. We stay at home –at least more than in the past. There are executive orders from the Governor limiting our abilities to eat out, to shop, and to gather with more than just a handful of people. It has been – and according to health officials – will continue to be a challenging time for all of us as we first try to define and then try to adjust to “the new normal.”**

**Times such as these provide a good incentive for reflection, for creative dreaming as well, days that the church needs every so often if we understand ourselves as people with a mission. Remember, the work – the mission of the church – is not defined by the building in which we meet, or whether we meet in a building at all. The church is never closed!! I feel confident that the Holy Spirit was at work in suggesting our passage this morning as one of the lectionary scriptures for this Trinity Sunday. As we all struggle with how to move forward as the church during these uncertain times, there is perhaps no better passage than Matthew 28: 16-20, for it not only explains our task over the past 151 years here at Pollocksville Presbyterian but affirms our calling for days ahead. GO, MAKE DISCIPLES, BAPTIZE, TEACH. These are our heavenly**

**commander's marching orders – and make no mistake, these are ORDERS, not suggestions – for soldiers of the cross.**

**I think we would all admit that our society does not like orders and that folks will often do whatever is necessary to avoid obedience. I read a story of a water shortage a few years ago in Kodiak, Alaska. An order came from the commanding general there that passes and liberty would be cancelled until the water supply was back to normal. All the armed forces complied except a small outpost of Seabees, about 30 in number, under the command of a rough-and-ready warrant officer. Saturday evening came and the Seabees stormed the nearly abandoned city only to be rounded up by the MPs and returned to the base. The Chief Warrant Officer was brought before the provost marshal and asked if he had received the general's order. "Yes, Sir." "Then why didn't you comply?" roared the provost marshal? "Well, sir, I didn't think it applied to us." "And why not?" "Because, sir, when my men to into town, they don't drink no water."**

**Sounds like the conversations over the past 10 weeks – who is and isn't essential, the order doesn't really apply to us, and the list goes on. Fortunately, those men who first heard the Lord's orders did not look for ways to get around them, but did what they were told. And there is comfort in that, isn't there? After all, these disciples were not super-human in their capacity for faithfulness. Just a few days ago, when they had seen their master dragged before the court of Pontius Pilate, condemned to death and crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem on a hill overlooking the town dump, they fell apart in**

**disappointment. Now, even though Jesus had returned from the grave and they were seeing him in the flesh once again, as the lesson says, "...but some doubted."**

**Why would that be a comfort? Good company, that is why. Have you ever had doubts about your relationship to Jesus Christ? Have those doubts bothered you? Do those doubts at times make you feel unworthy? I can certainly answer YES to all these questions and I bet you can too. And yet, when we read these words "some doubted", and realize that the "some" are some of the Apostles, then we find that we are not the only ones. Even Jesus's most intimate friends had some doubts about what was going on. What makes them special was that they did not let their doubts keep them from following orders. If we can manage that, we are doing as we ought. And that one little sentence fragment – "but some doubted" – gives US the grace to do our best to fulfill the risen Christ's commission even when we feel weary or disheartened, overwhelmed and unsure.**

**Think of the orders those Christian soldiers got that day in Galilee. There was a preface that made plain the chain of command. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Jesus." It is good to know that if you are about to get some orders to follow, that they come from someone who has the power to give them. Jesus made it plain that there was no greater power in the entire universe to give orders – reason enough to make sure that the orders were followed to the letter.**

Then he says, "Go therefore... Anytime you see the word "therefore" in scripture, ask yourself what it is "THERE FOR?" In this case, "therefore" gives the rationale for doing what Jesus is about to say to do. BECAUSE I have all authority – or all POWER as the old KJV version has it), BECAUSE I have overcome your most powerful enemies – sin and death; BECAUSE I am in TOTAL CONTROL, and BECAUSE that news needs to get out, "THEREFORE..." here is the plan.

Have you ever been given orders for which you could get no reason? I suspect everyone of us, at some time, were told by Mom or Dad to DO something, and we asked "Why", and got the response, "Because I said so!" We followed those orders because we had no choice in the matter. The one who gave the orders had the power to back them up. One fellow, on getting out of the military, filled out an application for some insurance. When he came to the question, "What did you do in the service," he wrote in large letters, "AS TOLD!" We really prefer to have reasons for responding to orders. At least Jesus gave his troops a reason before he told them what their orders were.

The first instruction he gave was to GO – not an unusual order for soldiers. There is a war to be fought, a battle to be joined, and victory is only possible if the troops will get themselves to the front. Nothing is accomplished by soldiers who are content to remain right where they are. Sad to say, the commitment to GO on the part of contemporary Christian soldiers has flagged considerably in recent years. There is far less desire for world mission than there once was. There is less desire for mission down the street than there once was.

Evangelism is something that a few revival preachers do, not the task of everyone of us. Is it because our orders have changed? Hardly!!! To put it in the military terms we have been using, we have stopped following orders. And anyone who knows anything about troops in combat knows that refusing to follow orders is a capital offense. It is a good thing that we Christians have a merciful commander.

The next thing Jesus said was “to make disciples of all nations.” In the King James Version with which many of us grew up, the rendering is “TEACH all nations. A more literal translation of the Greek would be “MAKE LEARNERS of all nations.” I don’t want to get into a Greek language lesson, but suffice it to say that one of the commentators writes that the important part of this instruction involves helping the world to LEARN...to LEARN about Jesus. Going is assumed of a loyal soldier. BAPTIZING and TEACHING – which we will get to – will be the result of the LEARNING that Christ considers so critical. This is one of the reasons you always hear Presbyterians put such an emphasis on the educational ministry of the church. Yes, we are a worshipping community, but we can only worship properly when we learn WHO this commanding general of the universe is and WHAT it is he would have us do. Making LEARNERS takes more than one hour a week on Sunday morning.

What about this phrase, “all nations?” For modern Christians, we have no problem understanding that: it means missionaries are to be sent around the world. Yes, it does, but it means something even more striking than that when we consider those men of Galilee who were the first to hear these words. To

those men, all Jews, it meant that there were some people whom they would never have considered as likely recipients of the good news of Jesus Christ. They were UNCLEAN – they did not keep the Sabbath; they obeyed no dietary laws; they worshipped other gods. In the eyes of a good Jew, those other people were SCUM, and everybody knows that “good people” do not associate with SCUM, much less try to teach them anything. But now Jesus has said, “TEACH the SCUM. My gospel is not limited to just the people who are like you. I recognize no barriers. The good news of victory and liberation is for all.” Fortunately, those men of the first century followed orders. They DID take the message to ALL, and it is a good thing for us, because we are some of that SCUM they would have avoided at all costs unless they had been instructed otherwise. The message to modern Christians is clear: Yes, send missionaries around the world, but don’t forget the ones we might think of as SCUM right in our own backyard. Jesus died for them as well as for you and me.

The next instruction – BAPTIZE. Did that mean Jesus wanted his troops to make sure to wage all their battles near some water so these new learners could undergo some magical rite as the climax of their training? Did he mean that learning would not be sufficient without this ritual? Not at all. If baptism is rightly understood, it is seen as a ceremony of initiation into Christ’s church. It is symbolic of a new relationship that finds its fullest expression in the life of the fellowship. And Jesus includes this as part of his marching orders simply because all of the learning in the world about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and what God continues to do through the Holy Spirit only makes an impact on us within community. Without the support of other believers,

without someone around to help fan the flame that is within us, we soon die down to nothing more than Christian “embers” – not much good for anything unless we are pressed. How often has it happened that someone has made a profession of faith, become active in the work of the church, lived a life of positive witness to the power of the Gospel, and then for some reason, ceased to give any evidence of their faith at all? It happens when people begin to think that they no longer need the church. If you take a coal from the furnace, it will remain hot and glowing for a while, but eventually it will die out. The same thing happens to Christian disciples who are removed from the fellowship of the church. No wonder Jesus gave this instruction: **BAPTIZE** – get them into the church – or they will not be much good as my troops for very long.

What about the final instruction – “**TEACHING** them to observe all that I have commanded you?” There are standards. Being a follower of Christ should make a difference in the way we live. After all, the same Bible that says **BELIEVE** also says **BEHAVE!!** There **ARE** standards that we are called to uphold – not to earn our salvation because that would be impossible. No, we live lives that are pleasing to our heavenly commander in gratitude for his rich grace. Notice something here: the instruction concerning teaching obedience comes **AFTER** people have been made disciples; **AFTER** they have made a commitment of faith; **AFTER** they have become a part of Christ’s church. The way Jesus describes it, obedience is a response to something that has already taken place. Soldiers are expected to maintain certain standards, certain **DISCIPLINE**. **CHRISTIAN** soldiers do it out of love, they need to be taught what that discipline

**involves to manage it effectively, and that is why the Lord included it as a part of his orders to the troops.**

**Will it require any sacrifice – of course it will!!! Any soldier knows going into battle that the price of following orders can be terribly high. Tradition tells us that of those eleven who gathered there on that Galilean hillside, only one ever died a natural death; all the rest were martyred in the course of their following orders. For us in 21<sup>st</sup> Century American, the sacrifice is rarely that dramatic – some ridicule or some abuse; perhaps the expenditure of time or effort or money – but rarely much more than that. But if we realize that of the almost 2.6 billion people in the world who call themselves “Christian”, a large majority of them live in nations where Christianity is a persecuted faith, we know that sacrifice is still the order of the day.**

**Fortunately, Christian soldiers have one tremendous piece of assurance about our task. We have a promise from the commander, “...and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” We have the abiding presence of Jesus who has promised that he will never leave us nor forsake us. Because of that, we can follow his marching orders with the full confidence of every bit of support we need.**

**Remember our orders: GO, MAKE LEARNERS or DISCIPLES, BRING PEOPLE INTO THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCH, TEACH THE STANDARDS OF DISCIPLINED CHRISTIAN LIVING. And all the while realize that we are not alone as we carry those orders out. AMEN**