

SERMON

STARTERS

John Gooch

May 22, 2005

Trinity Sunday

Matthew 28:16-20

In this “ordinary time,” the texts suggest a theme of discipleship. Disciples are people who aren’t always sure. Even in the excitement of the resurrection, Matthew says, “some doubted.” This expresses Matthew’s theological understanding of who a disciple is. He doesn’t see disciples as people brimming over with faith, people who “have it made” in their relationship with God. Rather, he sees them (and us) as people who have some faith, some doubt, and keep on going.

The morning after the charge conference voted my license to preach (I was 16) a member of the church said, “It must be nice to know that you’ll never have any more problems.” I’ve always been a disciple who had questions, who wasn’t always sure about the next steps I ought to be taking, who wondered which choice was the best one. That’s the kind of doubt Matthew is talking about. It has nothing to do with skepticism, and everything to do with being honest with ourselves about our uncertainty about choices. Is Jesus Christ the person to whom we want to commit our loyalty? If we raise this question with our people, and deal with it honestly, we will help them grow in discipleship.

May 29, 2005

**2nd Sunday
After Pentecost**

Matthew 7:21-29

Christian discipleship means choosing to live the will of God. Matthew represents a strain in early Christian life that says there are two

ways—good and evil. We can choose to follow Jesus Christ and live for him, or we can choose to follow something else. But we have to choose. The choice involves action as well as words. Simply believing the right doctrine doesn’t count in the long run (though right doctrine is important). What really counts is whether or not we live our commitment to God’s way in the world.

There is a wonderful story about a bird hopping along a branch. Soon he came to a fork in the branch. He tried to continue on both forks, one little claw on each branch. As the branches got farther and farther apart, the little bird stretched and strained to keep a claw on each one. Finally, they got far enough apart, he could no longer keep it up, and fell to the ground. Matthew reminds us that we can’t have it both ways in life. Either we follow God, and build the house of our faith on solid rock, or we follow something else, and build our faith house on sand that washes away in the first hard rain.

June 5, 2005

**3rd Sunday
After Pentecost**

Genesis 12:1-9

The senior high class met in my study. They often left posters on the wall, and I looked forward to going in on Monday to see what they had talked about. One week, there was a magnificent poster with the words, “The sign of God is that you will be led where you did not plan to go.” That is a statement about discipleship! God calls Abraham to leave everything and go to an unknown land. God also makes great promises to Abraham. Both the call and the promises are important for discipleship.

Abraham goes. His very going helps to shape the future God has promised. What if he hadn’t gone? What if he’d made excuses and stayed home in Ur? But he went, and as he went, he built altars and worshiped God. Worship was a key part of Abraham’s life – and of the life of any disciple. He gives thanks for God’s promises—even when those promises are not fulfilled!

Because he “went,” Abraham’s future was shaped by God’s promise. Always he could remember the promise and say, “the future looks like *this*.” Because he went, he was changed. And God is also changed in mysterious ways. God is now committed to the future God has defined in the call to Abraham. In the same way, when we make commitments to discipleship, we are different people. Our future now is defined in a new way. God is also committed to us.

June 12, 2005

**4th Sunday
After Pentecost**

Genesis 18:1-15

Discipleship involves hospitality, in two different ways. First, there is hospitality to the stranger. Hospitality is a spiritual matter—we are called to be open to God. Hospitality is also a response of our whole selves in “ordinary time,” when there is no great excitement about anything. Hospitality can be a blessing. Hospitality is also risky. Anyone who has ever offered hospitality at a homeless shelter or a soup kitchen knows the both the risk and the blessing involved in approaching strangers who are uncertain about our motives.

Hospitality to the stranger is also critical in the life of worship. One of the great concerns a person visiting a church feels is “will anyone notice I’m here and welcome

me?" "Open Hands, Open Hearts, Open Doors" suggests we are willing to offer hospitality (from deep within us) to anyone who visits our worship service.

Second, there is in this story hospitality to the word of God. Both Abraham and Sarah have concerns about the reality of God's promise. Sarah usually gets the big blame here, because she laughs. Yet God does not scold her for the laugh, but invites her to talk more. God is open to conversation about the doubts and concerns. How are we – and those to whom we preach – hospitable to the word, the promises of God?

June 19, 2005

**5th Sunday
After Pentecost**

Romans 6:1-11

What's your story? We all have one. Personal stories define who we are and how we live.

A young lady in our congregation recently began talking about her story by saying, "I am a Methodist. I can't help it; my mother was a Methodist and that's how I was raised." That defines who she is, how she relates to the church, and how she lives out her faith in the world. What's your story?

Christian disciples are also defined by a particular story. Our story has its roots in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The story takes shape in our lives in our baptism. There we are initiated into the church, made a part of God's acts of salvation in history, and receive a new name (identity): Christian.

Dying and rising with Christ is not the only metaphor for baptism in the New Testament, though it is perhaps the most familiar one. It reminds us that our story is based on God's act of salvation in Jesus Christ. It reminds us that we became part of a story in our baptism, and that God calls us through that baptism to be faithful disciples.

June 26, 2005

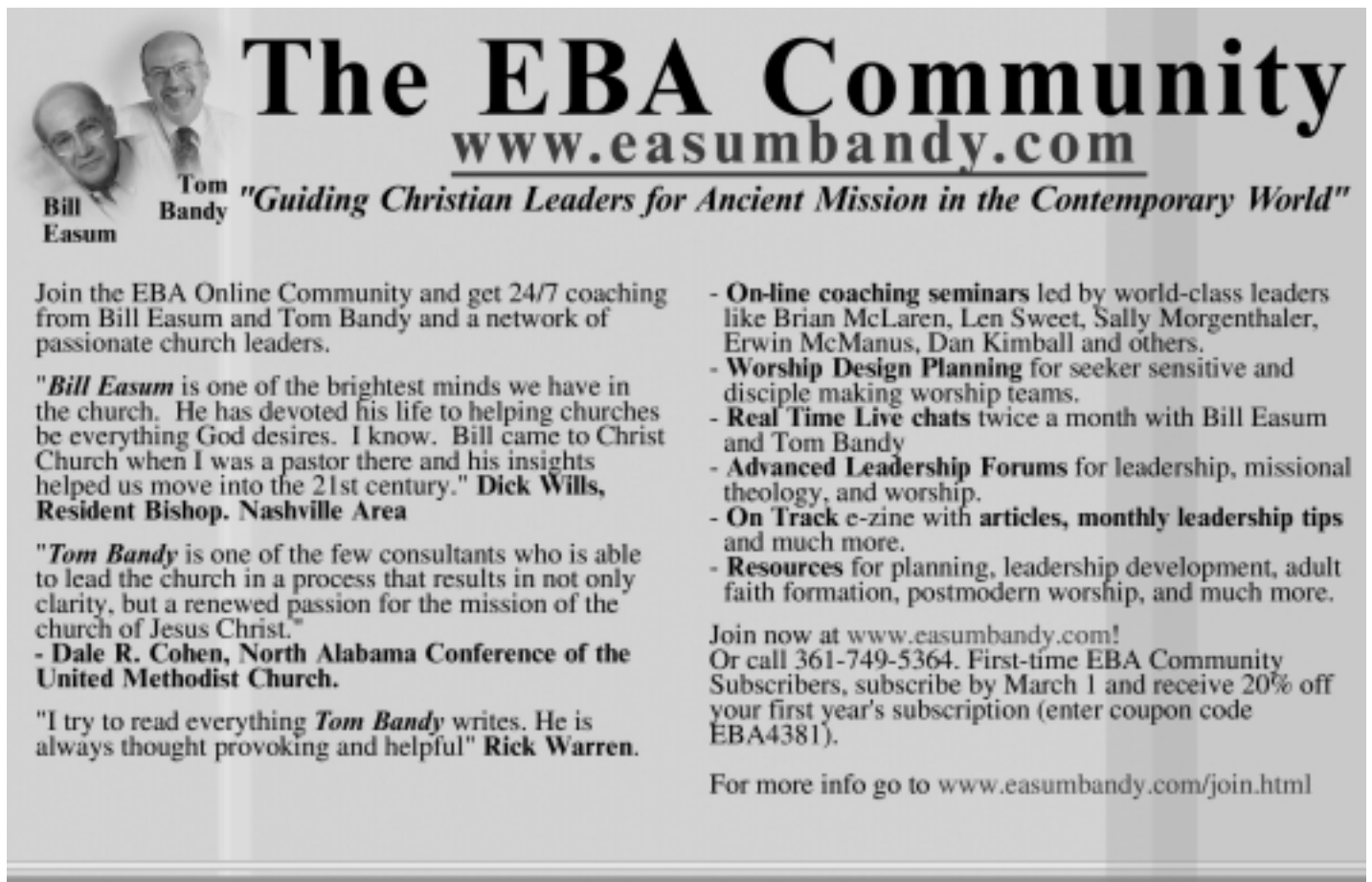
**6th Sunday
After Pentecost**

Genesis 22:1-14

How in the world do we preach on this text in the context of child abuse scandals and the emphasis on "safe sanctuary" for children and youth? And what does the story have to do with our theme of discipleship?

One clue may be to look behind the immediate story to see what's happening in the lives of Abraham and Isaac. Both of them trust in God and in each other. In mature relationships, there is a trust level where faithful responses are second nature. But, even in relationships of deep trust, testing comes. Abraham tells Isaac that "God will provide the sacrifice." This is not so much a matter of blind trust or pious talk as it is an awareness that God is present even in times of testing and challenge.

The story also reminds us that redemp-



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tion always comes at a price. It seemed that the price was too high – that God was putting at risk the entire covenant promise, the future to which God had bound Godself, as well as Abraham. It had taken decades for the promises God made back there in Ur to begin to come true. And now Abraham's very obedience to God was almost like a betrayal of the promise and the future. Abraham obeyed God's call because he trusted God.

And what does the story say to us about discipleship? Disciples trust God even in times of testing and challenge.

July 3, 2005

**7th Sunday
After Pentecost
Romans 7:15-25a**

When we read today's headlines, we see how many leaders in business and government take

the easy way and choose the wrong, benefiting themselves at the expense of many who trusted in them. We wonder, whatever happened to old-fashioned integrity?

Paul reminds us that this is an age-old paradox. We can see the right thing, recognize that it's right, and go right on doing the wrong thing. We do the wrong thing out of ignorance; we do the wrong thing unwillingly; and, sometimes, we do the wrong thing out of sheer cussedness.

And what does that have to do with discipleship? Paul was writing to Christians – we are preaching to Christians. In both cases, disciples need to be reminded that we act out of mixed motives, we sin, we don't live up to the ideals we set before us. In a social and political climate where "values" is a high priority for most of us, we continue to watch television programs that are antithetical to Christian values. We continue to support social, economic, and political systems that deny Christian values for personal and corporate gain.

A part of being a disciple of Christ is admitting our sinfulness, and throwing ourselves on the grace of God.



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