When I was a boy, we were given Bible verses to memorize each week in Sunday School. Sometimes we’d have contests to see who could memorize the most. I enjoyed the mental competition, the sparring of Bible verses back and forth, reciting one that none of my peers had memorized, the keen thrill of jousting with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It made up for being lousy at sports. The end of today’s Bible story were two verses that I memorized, “Go 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, even to the end of the age.”

We had a name for those two verses: The Great Commission.

These are the last words after Easter that Jesus says to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew. And Jesus says go! In fact, that’s one of the most common things that the disciples hear after Easter: Go! Get moving! Get out of here!

Christians in every generation have tried to understand what the Great Commission means for our lives: early Christians, modern Christians, liberals, conservatives, Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, mainline, evangelical. All of us who have been touched by the life of Jesus, we know deep within us that we want to pass that life along in our world in some real way. But how do we do that? What does that mean?

The Bible verses that I was given to memorize as a boy were often meant to advance my church’s understanding of the Great Commission.

Oddly enough, most of the verses I memorized were not any of the teachings of Jesus. The majority were verses that had been ripped out of context from the writings of the apostle Paul. We were evangelicals, and for us, the Great Commission of Jesus meant to go out and save souls from hell. We would string together our
Bible verses like symbols in a math equation, \( A + B + C = \) you’ll receive Jesus Christ as your personal savior, and rather than end up in hell, you’ll go to heaven when you die. That’s a huge oversimplification, that was the gist of it.

We even sang songs about that understanding of the Great Commission. One of them went like this: “Untold millions are still untold. Untold millions are outside the fold. Who will tell them of Jesus’ love and of heavenly mansions awaiting above?”

As a boy, that song frightened me. Untold millions are going to hell! And it’s up to me to save them!

In order to tell a few of those untold millions, every year our church would have what we called “Special Meetings.” Special Meetings meant that we had a church service every night for a whole week long. Guest speakers – evangelists - would be brought in and the whole congregation was asked to come to church every night – take a sort of “Special Meeting Challenge.” And we were supposed to invite our untold friends to come and hear the message of salvation. The evangelists were always entertaining and there was a great deal of theater involved, the only live theater I ever knew as a boy.

My favorite evangelists were a pair of brothers – the Lindquists, with the wonderfully improbable first names of Royall and Edsel. They toured evangelical Scandinavian churches of the Upper Midwest, and, along with the message of salvation, they brought banjos, guitars, and accordions, and the best thing I had ever heard - the musical saw.

There would be a sermon, of course, explaining the way of salvation. But the most dramatic part came at the end of each service. Any of those untold millions who were present, those whose hearts had been touched by the message, would be given an opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior.

Now, we were Midwestern Swedes, so there was no altar call, no weeping and wailing. That would have been far too embarrassing for everyone present. So, while Royall softly played on his musical saw, Edsel would say, “I want to ask everyone to bow their heads and close their eyes. Have you been touched by tonight’s message? Would you like to receive Jesus as your personal savior? With every head bowed and every eye closed, with no one looking around, just lift up your hand. No one will see you, just God and me. Yes. Thank you. I see that hand. With every head bowed and every eye closed, no one looking around. Yes, there’s another. Thank you. God bless you. I see that hand.”

I can’t tell you how difficult it was as a nine-year-old boy to keep my head bowed and my eyes closed and not look around. I wanted to know. Who raised their hand? Was it one of my friends? Someone I knew? Did anyone actually raise their hand at all, or was Edsel just trying to prime the pump? The temptation to peek was excruciating. Finally, I could stand it no more and with my hands partially covering
my eyes I lifted up my bowed head, only to find Edsel Linquist staring right at me:
“With no one looking around!”

Growing up, that’s how I understood the Great Commission. I know that the Lindquist brothers, my parents, and the people at my church were good people with good intentions. They knew Jesus and wanted to share their good news, and some of the untold millions apparently did meet Jesus that way, by raising their hands in a room full of shut eyes. But I never felt comfortable with it. It felt mechanical and somewhat manipulative. I never felt like I really met Jesus at all in a Special Meeting. All I met was a religious math equation.

Listen again to what Jesus says in that Great Commission: “Go! 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.”

There are four verbs in that sentence: Go. Make Disciples. Baptize. Teach.

He doesn’t say: Go! And scare the hell out of people. He says: make disciples.

I want to focus in on that phrase “make disciples.” It’s only one word in New Testament Greek, a verb: To disciple. One person disciples another person. It simply means to teach. To instruct.

How did Jesus disciple his disciples? He lived with them. He ate with them. He talked with them and listened to them. He embodied and modeled in his own life the very message that he taught. He showed them the Jesus way of life. Disciple isn’t a math equation. Disciple is a slow word. It takes time. It takes relationships – close relationships. It implies deep love and commitment.

So when Jesus tells his disciples to go and disciple, he’s telling us to embody within our own lives the life that he has given to us. In the language of our baptism liturgy, he is saying, “Show the world with your lives how Christians live.”

Last week you may have heard a former political candidate who is now one of our nation’s professional political entertainers giving a speech in which she used one of the words from the Great Commission – baptize. She said that if she were in charge, our enemies would know that waterboarding is how we baptize terrorists. Of course, she’s not the first Christian in history to believe that the Great Commission could be connected to our violence. Yet our Lord taught us to love our enemies, to bless them and pray for them. So, the Great Commission must at least mean, as difficult as it may be, that we will pray that even terrorists will be baptized and immersed into the love of the strange God we meet in Jesus.
I enjoy reading the works of the Apostolic Fathers. These are the earliest Christian writings that we have outside of the New Testament. One of them is Ignatius of Antioch. We don’t know much about Ignatius. The only writings of his that we have come from the very last days of his life. Ignatius was the bishop of the church in Antioch, Syria. Around AD 110, he was arrested by the Roman authorities. Ten soldiers brought him under guard from Syria to Rome, where he’d be torn apart and eaten by wild beasts in the arena. (Reading Ignatius of Antioch is a great way to put your own troubles in perspective.)

While Ignatius was being brought to Rome, he wrote seven letters to seven churches to encourage them to keep the faith in that time of great crisis.

Ignatius would have known the Great Commission very well. The Gospel of Matthew, in which we find it, was likely written in Antioch 20 years earlier and he often quotes Matthew in his letters. He tells the Christians of his time how to follow the Great Commission, how to behave toward their pagan neighbors in the Roman Empire.

This is what he says: “Pray continually for them; allow them to be instructed by you, at least by your deeds. In response to anger, be gentle; in response to their boasts, be humble; in response to their slander, offer prayers; in response to their cruelty, be gentle – let us show ourselves to be their brothers by our patience, and let us be eager imitators of the Lord.”

Eager imitators of the Lord. In other words: let your life look like the life of Jesus. Live as people who have been steeped in the healing, enemy-loving, forgiving life of the Risen Christ. It wasn’t a math equation that spread the story of Jesus across the Roman Empire like a breath of fresh air. It was a group of people just like us, who, after Easter, took the risk of embodying the story of Jesus with their own lives, because they knew it was true and it was something worth even dying for.

Last week my old friend Rob was in town for a visit. We met for lunch in the Loop, and then Rob wanted to go look for something at Macy’s. We walked up State Street and when we got to the Gap store at Washington, we saw the man who is out there every day spouting his own version of the Great Commission: the State Street Preacher. He’s got a microphone in his hand and is proclaiming damnation, especially against the gays. “You’re all going to hell!” (I think he’d do much better with a musical saw.) Whenever I hear him he gets me riled up, but when I walked past him last week something distracted me from what he was saying.

What caught my attention was this strange smell in the air. Instead of the usual smells of State Street, that concoction of exhaust, garbage, and urine, there was this heavy, sweet perfume in the air. It immediately carried me back to the month I spent in Thailand and the smell of jasmine that was always wafting through the streets from Buddhist temples. I totally forgot to be annoyed with the street preacher because I was so entranced by that mysterious aroma.
We went to Macy’s. My friend couldn’t find what he was looking for, so we headed back home. When we crossed back over Washington, the Preacher was still at it. Again, I was hit with the spicy, smoky fragrance of jasmine in the air, and it totally distracted me from his words. Then I looked up and saw where it was coming from. Up the street, near the curb, a young man was standing facing the Preacher, several feet away from him. He wasn’t saying a word. He was simply holding up a thick bunch of incense sticks and waving them in the air. He must have cleaned out a store in Chinatown, because there were bundles of incense on the ground by his feet. The smoke of the incense was wafting down the street right in front of the preacher. It was as if the passersby on sidewalk, instead of being assaulted by words of hate, were being overcome with the sweet aroma of prayer.

That’s what it looks like to make disciples. That’s what it feels like. That’s what it smells like. You leave behind the fragrance of Jesus in the air.

When someone sees the way you live – your love, your generosity, your forgiveness, your kindness, your compassion – and they want to ask, “What is that fragrance you’re wearing? It smells so good. Where can I get some of that?” Then you are living the Great Commission. It’s the aroma of life, the sweet, fresh smell of Easter lingering in the air.