We are focusing on the Great Commission in the Gospel of Matthew these weeks of January. – “All authority has been given to me, go therefore, and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you and I am with you always to the close of the age.”

Last week we talked about the authority given to Jesus, to the church and this week I want to talk about his instruction to make disciples of all nations.

Without any context at all ‘making disciples of all nations’ has a certain imperialistic ring. That approach could have worked in the 19th or early 20th centuries when Protestant mission had a world reach and colonial cast or even from the 10th to the 13th centuries during the Crusades; but we live in a much smaller, more interdependent, pluralistic time. Conquering the world for Jesus sounds a bit passé today.

Nor am I proposing we just make of these biblical words whatever we want. Rather, I’d like to look at them in the context in which they were spoken, in the context of Jewish biblical history to see what they might mean for a mainline congregation.

The relevance of the phrase – ‘make disciples of all nations’ – from the bible, from the lips of Jesus is more than academic. Self-interest alone would suggest if we don’t make disciples, we won’t have a church.

So the question hits home rather quickly: what motivates us to reach out to make disciples, to welcome new members? My hunch is mere institutional self-preservation is not what Jesus had in mind. Nor do I think most of us would find institutional survival alone a satisfactory motivation or reason for outreach.

What I’m suggesting is we need look no farther than our own willingness to invite another person here for worship to find meaning in Jesus’ instruction to make disciples. The question is what would motivate us to do that. The clearer we can get answering that question, the closer we’ll get to inviting our friends and neighbors to come here and in the process fulfill Jesus’ commission.

If it starts anywhere, making disciples starts where we live, not sending missionaries to the far corners of the earth; before that happens we have to understand and experience why making disciples here is a good thing.

Both of today’s lessons offer significant insight into what ‘making disciples of all nations’ means. Something important to remember: we’re talking about making disciples of Jesus Christ not of Westminster or its pastor or the Presbyterian Church and its doctrine.

An effective messenger always has a shaping influence on new disciples. I remember following certain professors around in Divinity School as if they were the Messiah himself; or preaching my first sermon emulating William Sloane Coffin to the best of my ability and the chagrin of that patient congregation.

But we’re talking about making disciples of the Son of God; the incarnation of the Holy One of Israel. Why and how to do that is the question.
What we learn from Isaiah today is that the vision of taking the good news of God to all nations originated long before the risen Christ gave those instructions to his followers. It actually surfaces for the first time in Genesis, in the call to Abraham when God said he would bless Abraham and Sarah so that they could be a blessing to the nations.

This pledge of blessing follows the rejection of the world to God’s sovereignty in Genesis 1-11: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Tower of Babel, the Flood. So God decides by the 12th chapter of Genesis to enlist Abraham and Sarah’s help.

As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says, “Israel [was given] an agenda other than its own well-being: namely the life of the world.

This agenda for the world also appears in Exodus 19 when God’s people are wandering in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, before they inherit the Promised Land. Yahweh tells them ‘the whole earth is mine, but you shall be my priestly kingdom; a holy nation.’ If Israel is a priestly kingdom the question is who does she serve? To which God answers ‘the nations of the world’ – to bring order and healing as is proper to the priestly function.

The call of Israel, in Genesis and Exodus, to serve the world is set against the crisis of the world where nations have not accepted the sovereignty of God.

By the time Israel is in exile, in the time of Isaiah, well after the Genesis and Exodus accounts, we see the continuation of Israel’s agenda for the world: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

What is striking about this passage from Isaiah is that when Israel was most vulnerable; nearly non-existent; held in exile with only a faithful remnant to sustain her memories and stories and rituals – the message we have is not one of self preservation but preservation of the human family. To save Israel alone is too “light,” too insignificant, too small a thing.

What keeps her going is not serving and saving herself but serving and saving the world. Just as today we celebrate a leader Martin Luther King, Jr. who realized at a critical juncture in his dangerous mission that he could not limit his vision to the civil rights of blacks in the United States, important as that was and is, and so he chose and was criticized by many for addressing the Vietnam War.

King knew that the question of rights is a humanity-embracing question and cannot be limited by the self-interest of any single institution or people no matter how justified their cause.

This is an important message for many mainline churches that are ‘on the ropes of survival’ so to speak because of some exile or wilderness of dwindling money and members. Many forget their true mission – to serve and save the world – and so shrink their vision and sharpen their pencils to find ways only of keeping themselves going.

But what Jesus said is true for individuals and congregations: we find our lives by giving them away.

Contrary to being a strategy for self-preservation, being a light to the nations, making disciples of all nations is grounded in the act of giving ourselves away.
Today’s second lesson from the Gospel of John is the story of Jesus calling or making his own disciples – a good place to find out what ‘making disciples’ might mean. The setting is classic John, a touch surreal and a bit symbolic: two followers of John the Baptist follow Jesus and ask him where he is staying and Jesus responds ‘come and see.’

One commentator suggests that the question ‘where are you staying’ could mean many things as for example, ‘where are you from’ like ‘where’s your hometown’. There used to be a time in the United States and still is to some extent that if you know where a person is from you know all you needed to know about that person; he’s from New England or she’s from the Big Apple or they come from the deep south – each describes particular character traits.

But other commentators suggest the phrase ‘where are you from’ has a much broader and more abstract meaning like ‘what is your source of life’ ‘what keeps you going’ ‘where do you live mentally, emotionally, spiritually?’ To which we might get ‘I’m a vegan or existentialist or Tea Party member.’

You see, what the followers of John want to know is what makes Jesus tick; where does he get his strength, his vision, his lens through which he sees the world. If he can tell them that then they’ll have the answer for successful living or a clue for finding happiness.

Yet, rather than lead them to some physical place or provide them some formula for a balanced life he says simply, “Come and see.” And they do; they follow him; they pick up and go where he leads even before they know much at all about him. We know also that every time Jesus extended that invitation did not result in a new follower; sometimes they went away from him.

We might conclude from this little story that our role in making disciples is making introductions, introducing others to Jesus, bringing them into his presence, letting them see for themselves Jesus at work in the world; Jesus addressing the powers and principalities; Jesus with his friends; Jesus alone when the pressures were exceeding his energies.

How do others meet Jesus in such settings and circumstances? They do it by watching you and me in the course of daily life.

But we’re not Jesus you might be saying; yet I would respond we are at our best, as our name implies, “Christ-like.” The extent to which we follow Jesus is the extent to which others will see him in us. The extent to which this church is the body of Christ in the world, the hands and feet and eyes and ears of Jesus, others will find him here.

So let me sum up what I’m saying. I’m saying first that making disciples of all nations starts at home; not as an institution-saving but a world-saving strategy. It is an ever expanding agenda for the health and well-being of the human family.

And second, making disciples begins with the relationship of the disciple to Jesus where others see him in his followers’ lives – how he shapes and influences their smallest and biggest decisions.

There’s more that could be said but that’s enough for one sermon.
Let me come back to where we started. In a pluralistic world with many other faith traditions shaping human lives, there is nothing necessarily exclusivistic about Jesus’ commission to make disciples.

In his time, like ours, there were many religions and cults; he didn’t say practice one at the expense of the others; those exclusivistic claims came later when Christianity became an institution competing for adherents and resources and protecting its life. Jesus was simply interested in helping others find a way to abundant living.

But if we’re serious about doing just that, helping others find a way to abundant living, then there are some real implications.

First and foremost is the question ‘can others see Christ in my thoughts and actions?’

This is not a question we can demure or shy away from; or say is the job of the Pastor or Elders and Deacons or the Membership Coordinator. Seeing Christ in one another is something we aspire to not only when we are here but when we are out there – where the stakes are higher and being Christ-like is harder.

And we do it whether we know it or not as visitors to this place observe how we act and interact with each other.

What I’m saying is being Christ-like is the lens through which we’re called to see life. It is the measure for everything we say and do. It starts by asking ourselves what we’re here for: self preservation or to save the world? How risk-taking, humanity-embracing is our mission, the way we spend our time and talent and treasure?

Those are some tough questions. I suggest we take some time this winter to mull them over, pray about them and see where they lead.

It'll mean we’ll have more than a few things to celebrate because I believe Christ is visible in much of our life together; but more importantly it could mean we have some refinements if not deep change to make at home and here at church. Amen.