

Most of us spend more time *sitting* in chairs than *thinking* about chairs, but perhaps we devote even more time to *hunting* for the perfect chair. There's even a whole book about that pursuit. It's titled *Now I Sit Me Down* and it's written by architect Witold Rybczynski (Rib-shin-skee). In it he refers to chairs --used in ancient Greece called *klismos*, which had a curved backrest and tapering, out-curved legs; the yokeback chair of the Song dynasty, which included one of the earliest uses of lumbar support; the modern ergonomic desk chair; the rocking chair that famously helped alleviate President Kennedy's back issues; and the dentist recliner that made it easier to treat cavities.

Rybczynski explains that the history of chairs is a *social* history -- of different ways of sitting, of changing manners, and attitudes, and of varying tastes. He notes that the ancient Chinese switched from sitting on the floor to sitting in a chair, and how the iconic chair of Middle America -- the Barcalounger -- traces its roots back to an art school in Germany. He even looks toward the future, suggesting we mortals may eventually invent a chaise-like seat designed around browsing a smartphone.

But here's the main point for us: Rybczynski says that the search for the perfect chair will never end -- *because humans aren't built to sit*. "We are good at walking and running, and we are happy lying down," he writes. "It is the in-between position that is the problem."

Stan Purdum, author of *New Mercies I See* and other books, and a long-time pastor himself, tells of a couple in their 80s who were members of the first church he pastored and were in good health. Every time Purdum dropped by to visit, he found the wife busy around the house and the husband out back in his woodworking shop, making items he gave away. One time, Purdum commented on their activity level, and the man said, "When my brother retired at 65, he went out

on the front porch and sat down. That's where he was most of the time. And within three years, he was dead. I don't think we're made to sit for long."

With this in mind, consider the final verses in Matthew's gospel, found in our narrative for today, a passage we usually refer to as "the Great Commission." In it, Jesus tells his disciples to "Go therefore 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 Christians ever since have understood those words as a call for the whole church. We can say that Jesus is telling us that we're not made to sit because he has work for us to do.

But there's a little comment Matthew includes in his narrative that we sometimes overlook. In Matthew's timeline, when the 11 disciples -- those remaining after the defection and death of Judas -- come to a mountain in Galilee for a rendezvous with the resurrected Jesus, it's the first time they have seen him since they fled at the time of his arrest. True, Luke and John tell of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples in Jerusalem, but Matthew does not. So, sticking to Matthew's account, when the 11 see Jesus in Galilee, it's the first time they've laid eyes on him since before his death. And there Matthew comments, "When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted."

Some *doubted*? With the resurrected Jesus standing right there in plain sight, some of the 11 who had been with him throughout his ministry *doubted*? Well, yes. We can imagine that seeing a dead person alive again was so far outside anything that they'd ever known, and that they perhaps weren't sure whether their eyes were playing tricks on them. Maybe Matthew's comment about their doubt, however, applied to the whole experience there on the mountain, because Jesus told them to do three very hard things, and they may have wondered how those things could possibly be accomplished.

Now, the first hard thing Jesus told them to do was to go and make disciples of all nations. The world of the disciples was smaller than the world as we know it. They had no idea of the existence of North and South America, for example, but they also were limited by first-century modes of travel and communication, so even restricting their world to the geography they *did* know about, making disciples of all nations must have sounded like a daunting task.

But beyond the dimensions of the mission, a latent distrust of foreigners was a huge problem, especially for disciples who were neither well-traveled nor learned men. Even today, many of us have difficulty relating across cultural and racial lines. What's more, the disciples had no power base to start from (unless, of course, you count the Holy Spirit, but Pentecost hadn't happened yet). *And*, they belonged to an oppressed subgroup -- the Jews -- within the Roman Empire. Yet, Jesus says to these most unlikely of candidates: "Go turn the world upside down." It must have sounded like a monumental -- impossible -- undertaking.

The Second hard thing Jesus commanded his disciples to do, once they got moving on their first difficult assignment, involved baptizing the people of those nations in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Of course, baptism was not the first step in making new disciples; baptism only took place after a person had been evangelized and was persuaded by the gospel message to embrace Christ as their Savior and Lord. So, what Jesus was telling the 11 to do was huge. He was telling them to share the gospel with strangers, to publicly identify themselves as followers of someone who had just been officially declared an outlaw and executed. They were to give personal witness to their faith (and we all know how hard *that* is!).

We are also aware that once Pentecost happened, the disciples found greater incentive to proclaim the gospel, but as I mentioned earlier, Pentecost hadn't

happened yet. And what about us? We live on *this* side of Pentecost, but still, not many of us find the evangelism process easy to do.

Now, the third hard thing Jesus charged his disciples with was teaching the newly baptized converts everything he had commanded them -- the 11 -- to obey. That, too, must have sounded like an impossible mission. Even assuming a few of them had the gift of teaching, where was the curriculum? The gospels hadn't been written yet. The apostle Paul, whose letters would eventually become much of the New Testament, had yet to be converted. The church hadn't been formed yet, the doctrines hadn't even begun to be formulated, and the creeds were still a couple hundred years or more in the future. In fact, the only teaching materials that were available to disciples at that time included the Hebrew Bible -- our Old Testament -- and the disciples' memories of what Jesus had said and done while he was with them. No wonder some of the 11 doubted that day!

But those three hard things were their commission, and somehow, initial doubts notwithstanding, they pulled it off -- or at least the big start of it. And then there's this: With the passage of time, that commission got passed on to new generations of Jesus' followers. And each generation of people calling themselves Christian has the same Great Commission, telling us that his followers are not to be sitters. Rather they -- we -- are to be goers, movers, shakers, tellers, proclaimers, explainers, teachers, witnesses, and more.

Jesus never said it would be easy, but he did say -- *just do it!* It shouldn't surprise us that what Jesus asks us to do is hard, because that's right in line with other things he said -- like these from his Sermon on the Mount: + Love your enemy. Hard to do! + Turn the other cheek. Hard to do! + Be pure in heart. + Rejoice and be glad when people revile you. + Don't lust. Hard to do! + Go the second mile. + Forgive others of their trespasses. + Don't worry about tomorrow. + Be doers of his words and not just hearers. Talk about Hard to do!

Please know that I'm not listing these things to discourage anybody, but what kind of witness would I be if didn't tell the truth? Yes, earlier in Matthew Jesus did talk about one kind of easiness: "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light," and compared to a life of sin, or the burden of trying to be righteous by following all the rules without the grace of God, his way is easy. But when he talked about discipleship, Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Self-denial? Cross-carrying? Those things are far from easy!

C.S. Lewis got it right when he wrote, "Christ says, 'Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good ... Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked -- the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.'"

Thankfully, those 11 disciples who were present when Jesus gave the Great Commission didn't let the difficulty of the mission stop them from trying. They didn't sit on their butts. They got up, did what they could, and God did the rest. Nor should we remain seated. We're not made for that. We're made to be up and moving for the glory of God, and if we're committed to following Jesus, then we need to accept that there'll be some hard things to tackle. But thankfully the Lord promises to always be with us while we do the work of God. And thanks be to God for that!