

Announcing the Kingdom

The Gospel According to Matthew

Reflection Guide

Weeks 10-13

Announcing the Kingdom: The Gospel According to Matthew
Reading Guide: Week 10 (Matthew 13:54-58 – Matthew 15:21-28)

Matthew 13:54-58

It is always special to witness people being recognized for significant accomplishments, especially in their hometown. Crowds typically gather and line the streets to celebrate the arrival of their home team after the winning of the Super Bowl or other sports related victory. Jesus has accomplished much prior to his arrival at Nazareth and one would expect the people to offer a similar welcome. Yet something about his humility and modesty prevents the people from recognizing his true identity, which in turn robs them of a great blessing. Who are the people in our communities that we easily dismiss because of their external appearance? What kind of blessing might we be missing out on because of this?

Matthew 14:1-12

In this passage we encounter the clash between the earthly powers and the reign of God. John challenges and opposes the corruption of Herod and his empire and is met with hostility and violence, ultimately costing him his life. The passage is encountered right in the middle of Matthew's gospel, as a way to expose the reader early on to the serious demands associated with bearing witness to the truth. How much are you willing to suffer in order to stand for what is right?

Matthew 14:13-21

Imperial propaganda during the days of Jesus argued that the gods were responsible for providing food and did so through the emperor. Perhaps this was a myth that sought to elevate the position of the emperor in response to the most basic need of the people: food. [Notice that this text occurs right after Herod's banquet with the elite]. This passage opposes this imperial propaganda on two levels. First, God is the only one who can provide for the people and does so through Jesus Christ. Second, all are welcome to feast at God's banquet until they are satisfied. Pray today that God may use your limited resources in order to help provide for the needs your community.

Matthew 14:22-36

Imperial propaganda also claimed [see prior entry] that emperors like Domitian, who ruled at the time Matthew's gospel was written, were "rulers of lands and seas and nations." This passage challenges this myth by revealing the only one who has control over such: Jesus, thereby calling us to place our faith only in him. When you find yourself in a situation like the disciples and feeling like you're about to sink, find hope in the words of Christ, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Matthew 15:1-11

Christian theologian, Jaroslav Pelikan, once said, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." Tradition is a critical and living element of our faith as our Book of Worship further states; "Christianity does not leap from New Testament times to the present as though nothing were to be learned from that great cloud of witnesses in between" (p. 105). Traditionalism on the other hand is when rules and regulations replace mercy and grace. What do you most cherish about our historic Christian faith? What are some rules and regulations you recognize inside the church that keep us from embodying mercy and grace?

Matthew 15:12-20

Jesus is not attempting to throw out the baby with the bathwater, so to speak, in his debate with the Pharisees regarding purity observances. Instead he is making the point that internal convictions must be expressed in external actions. As our Book of Worship attests, our Methodist understanding of holiness is that it always entails more than personal piety for "love of God is always linked with love of neighbor, a passion for justice and renewal in the life of the world" (p. 102). Do you feel drawing closer to those in need as you draw closer to God? What are some of the ways your internal convictions can be expressed in external actions?

Matthew 15:21-28

The Canaanite woman and her sick daughter are further driven into despair because of the cultural, ethnic, political, economic, and religious barriers that exist. As the woman cries out to Christ for mercy and compassion she is met with the rejection of those gathered around him, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." Nevertheless she persists and dares to challenge all the barriers present because human suffering knows no limits. What are the barriers that keep others out in our day? If you were in the woman's place with a child in need, what would you have done? What are you willing to do so that those on the margins may find mercy and compassion?

Announcing the Kingdom: The Gospel According to Matthew
Reading Guide: Week 11 (Matthew 15:29-39 – Matthew 17:22-23)

Matthew 15:29-39

Christ's concern for the people reveals a significant truth about our collective Christian ministry: "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way." Our ministry with others must embody a holistic approach where the soul and the body are both cared for. God certainly cares about our souls and Christ's incarnation is an affirmation that our bodies matter in the same way to God. Because of this conviction people of faith have combined spiritual practices such as prayer and contemplation with activities such as running and yoga. How does this understanding shape your vision and practice of discipleship? Does it spark your imagination?

Matthew 16:1-12

Even after performing many miracles that include exorcisms, healings, and feeding thousands with a few loaves of bread and fish, the Pharisees and Sadducees still demand a sign from Jesus. It is highly unlikely that an additional sign would have led the Pharisees and Sadducees towards faith in Christ. Do you recognize the signs of God's grace all around you? Take a moment this week to discern the presence of God in the places you shop, work, and play.

Matthew 16:13-23

On February 22 the Church observes the feast of the chair of Saint Peter, which is a celebration based on this passage commemorating the passing of the baton, so to speak, of church leadership from Jesus to Peter. Every disciple since then has been entrusted with caring and leading the Church forward, even when "the gates of Hades" rise against it. How does this crucial task make you feel? Are you actively involved in building up your local faith community?

Matthew 16:24-28

German theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, shares in his theological treatise "*The Cost of Discipleship*" the following exhortation regarding this passage: "The Cross is laid on every Christian. The First suffering which every [person] must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world." How does this understanding of Christian discipleship inform your understanding of grace in our Wesleyan/Methodist tradition?

Matthew 17:1-13

The Transfiguration is an amazing story filled with vivid detail and great imagery. It is a mystery to behold rather than a puzzle to be solved. Peter wants to capture this sacred moment by creating three dwellings for each of the characters present but his request seems to be ignored and interrupted as described in verse 5: "While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'" Are you comfortable in living with complexity over simplicity when it comes to your faith? What are some of the ways Christians today, like Peter in the text, continue to try to put God "in a box" in an effort to make faith easy and simple? Do you think this can strip our faith of beauty and wonder?

Matthew 17:14-21

The disciples are unable to cast the demon out of the child and this leaves them confused perhaps wondering what great faith such task requires. Jesus does refer to them as having "little faith" yet proceeds to reveal that the kind of faith necessary in the Reign of God is "the size of a mustard seed." It appears that such seemingly small faith is enough to move mountains. How would you describe your own faith? Have you been holding back on God's calling on your life because you don't feel that you have enough faith? What mountains are you facing at the moment?

Matthew 17:22-23

The timeless American Spiritual *Were You There (When They Crucified My Lord)* has deeply touched faith communities since it was first printed in 1899. The lyrics capture what may well be the most appropriate response to Christ's betrayal, suffering, and execution on our behalf: "O sometimes it causes me to Tremble! Tremble! Tremble!" How would you describe your own feelings when you reflect on Christ's suffering on your behalf? (Make sure to attend worship on Holy Thursday and Good Friday so that you may be with Christ in this time of his great suffering.)

Announcing the Kingdom: The Gospel According to Matthew
Reading Guide: Week 12 (Matthew 17:24-27 – Matthew 19:16-30)

Matthew 17:24-27

It's rather interesting to consider this question of whether Jesus should pay the temple tax? Jesus is the Son of God and would therefore not be subject to anything on earth. Jesus is also the second person of the Holy Trinity, God in the flesh, and the temple belongs to God! Nonetheless, Jesus opts to pay the temple tax thus setting the example for his disciples. Disciples today are therefore called to support both civil institutions and faith communities through their taxes and tithes/offerings in obedience to God. But what do we make of the fish in the passage? The fish could be a detail included in the text to add a bit of humor to a sensitive topic. The fish could also symbolize God's provision in the same way the whale provided for Jonah in the Old Testament. The fish could also illustrate the ways God often calls us to exercise our faith in peculiar, interesting, and ways that make little sense. What does the fish mean to you?

Matthew 18:1-11

One of the central themes throughout the gospel is role reversal; the high are brought low, the low are lifted up, the first become last, and the last become first. Jesus challenges the question about greatness by presenting a young, innocent, and vulnerable child to show the qualities that constitute the very reign of God. One cannot read this text without feeling a bit of discomfort given the current situation regarding the abuse of children inside churches. Jesus gives the warning "take care that you do not despise one of these little ones" because such are children of God. How are you caring for God's children inside the church? How might you advocate and express God's love for those who are marginalized, misunderstood, rejected, (or taken advantage of) by the church?

Matthew 18:12-22

What if Peter's question were rephrased into, "Lord, if I sin against another member of the church, how often should they forgive me?" It is always easier to play the role of the offended but much harder to recognize the times we have wronged others. This passage speaks about forgiveness, confession, and reconciliation, recognizing that community is impossible without these essential practices. Which of the three underlined practices do you find most difficult to embody?

Matthew 18:23-35

Throughout the Old Testament the Israelites are often accused of being forgetful and then invited to remember the ways God has been faithful to them in the midst of famine and persecution, among other catastrophes. This admonition carries on in the New Testament and is delivered to the followers of Christ for the same reason: it is easy to forget what God has done for us and we must therefore remember. This is especially true when we consider the complexity of relationships and our call to forgive the faults of others in the same way God has forgiven us our faults. Perhaps even more difficult is forgiving ourselves for our faults even after others have forgiven us. Do you struggle with being kind to yourself and offering yourself grace after having wronged somebody?

Matthew 19:1-12

Rather than expressing gratitude and praising God for the healing of the multitudes who followed Jesus into the region of Judea, the Pharisees instead make another attempt to test Jesus. In doing so, they are hoping to either publicly discredit him before the people or to report him to the authorities to meet the same fate as John the Baptist. Furthermore, there was a high ideal of marriage and a low view of women during this time which complicated things even further, especially for women. It is easy to get caught up in a heated debate regarding marriage and divorce while ignoring the casualties that get injured in the crossfire of opposing ideologies. These injured souls now find healing and restoration in Christ. Who are some of the people today who are casualties in the crossfire of opposing theological and/or political arguments?

Matthew 19:13-15

The disciples appear to be bothered both by the presence of playful children and by the disruption of their carefully planned activity, which prompts them to react with harsh words. It is astonishing to consider how the disciples, who were once outcasts themselves, now behave like those who rejected and marginalized them when they might respond with the compassion and understanding that they have been shown. It is also wonderful to know that no person is too small for Jesus to notice nor any event too important for Jesus to pause in order to acknowledge others. Do you allow disruptions in your plans in order to help a person in need?

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Matthew 19:16-30

The late A. W. Tozer once said: The true follower of Christ will not ask, “If I embrace this truth, what will it cost me?” Rather he will say, “This is truth. God help me to walk in it, let come what may!” The rich young man in the passage is essentially asking this question before making a full commitment to follow Christ. He walks away grieving because the demands of discipleship are too much for him. We may not have astounding wealth which prevents us from following Christ but we all have things that create barriers from following Christ daily. What are the things you struggle with in your daily walk with God? Have you found yourself struggling with things in the present that you haven’t struggled with in the past? When you find yourself wrestling with temptation and/or with obstacles in your relationship with God, remind yourself of the words spoken by Jesus, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.”

Announcing the Kingdom: The Gospel According to Matthew
Reading Guide: Week 13 (Matthew 20:1 – 21:22)

Matthew 20:1-16

Often, I want mercy for me, while demanding “justice” for others. Consider why the third shift workers might have still been in the marketplace, why no one had hired them. In Jesus’ day, they would have been the physically weak, sick, disabled, aged, or perhaps those with reputations which preceded them. Those on the first shift were paid as promised. Were they more upset at the extravagant generosity to those whom they considered less deserving, or did they simply resent it “made them equal to us?” We’re all equally undeserving recipients of God’s unmerited mercy... it begs the question, “Do we see and treat one another as equally deserving of the fullness of God’s grace?”

Matthew 20:17-28

There’s a lot of networking going on. How do you react to this mother’s attempt to leverage her close relationship with Jesus to secure her sons an esteemed place in the coming “kingdom?” Jesus cuts to the heart of the matter with a sobering answer which could be paraphrased, “Be careful what you ask for.” Meanwhile, the other Disciples are focused on their anger at such a blatant power grab by James and John. All of this comes immediately after Jesus said He was going to Jerusalem to die. From our removed and relatively comfortable perspective, it might be easy to take a judgmental view of these Disciples. How could they be so self-centered and spiritually blind? Consider how easy it is for us to focus on the wrong things and miss the main thing when we value the temporal over the eternal. Honestly, it doesn’t always feel great to be the servant. The martyred missionary Jim Elliott put it this way: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Matthew 20:29-34

Jesus again shows compassion for those the “in-crowd” would rather He pass by without notice. Many anticipated Jesus might be the promised Messiah who would deliver them from Roman oppression. Surely this liberator and prospective king had more important business than blind beggars at the side of the road. At the lowest level of society, their blindness interpreted as judgement for sin, despised and outcast, they had little to lose when chastised by the crowd. So they cried out even louder. Why did Jesus ask, “What do you want me to do for you?” Wasn’t their need evident? Jesus restored not only physical sight, but also met an even deeper need of spiritual vision. As miraculous as it was, the restoration of sight would eventually be limited by physical death, but following Jesus offered the ultimate healing of eternal life. What needs healing in your life?

Matthew 21:1-11

Jesus prepares for a journey to Jerusalem and a coming appointment on the Cross with both divine authority and Christ-like humility. The colt was traditionally used in coronations of Israel’s kings, the donkey a lowly beast of burden. With hopeful expectation the promised Messiah would be revealed during Passover, the Jewish crowd would have made the connection with the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9: “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey....” The Romans couldn’t have missed the bold contrast in imagery to Pontius Pilate. A cavalry officer, Pilate was parading into west Jerusalem on his war horse as Jesus entered from the north. The crowd shouted the words of Psalm 118:25-26: “Hosanna,” or “Yashá Na” in Hebrew “...save please!” In a matter of days, this same crowd would shout for His execution. How often do I cry out for help from God wanting a deliverer on a war horse to crush the opposition, only to miss the salvation found on the donkey?

Matthew 21:12-13

Have you ever purchased a drink at a sporting event where outside beverages are prohibited? The only approved sacrifices were those sold by the priests. For payment of what could be as much as ten times the normal cost, only Jewish money was accepted. Many making the Passover pilgrimage needed to exchange foreign currency. No problem, we have money changers right here! This captive audience was again met with an exorbitant mark-up in the exchange rate. This occurred in the Court of the Gentiles, a place where seekers and Gentile converts to Judaism could come to worship God. These merchants were, in reality, selling forgiveness at an enormous profit. In confronting this unholy and oppressive practice, Jesus paraphrases two quotes from the prophets (Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11). A place at God’s table for “all peoples”

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is something Jesus takes very personally. In our culture, what obstacles does “religion” impose on those seeking a connection with God?

Matthew 21:14-17

Were these children simply repeating what they’d heard their parents chant upon Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, or in their innocence were they recognizing something the adults with an agenda were missing? What was it that so inflamed the religious leaders? When the infuriated priests and scribes asked Jesus if He heard what the children were saying. His perfect response cites an old saying from Psalm 8:2: “Out of the mouths of babes....” Remember Jesus’ rebuke of the Disciples as recorded in Matthew 19:14 when they tried to prevent parents from bringing their children to Jesus? “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” What voices do we fail to recognize as proclaiming the Kingdom of God?

Matthew 21:18-22

At first glance, this represents one of the more peculiar references in Scripture. Jesus seemingly got really angry at a fig tree. I can relate on some level. Opening a Fig Newton on a long transatlantic flight, I found its expiration date was more than a year passed on the crumbly remains, and I too cursed a fig. Was Jesus, able to resist the temptation to turn a stone into bread after fasting for “forty days and nights,” simply “hangry” after missing breakfast? As you might guess, there’s a deeper meaning to this story as the Disciples are at a teachable moment in this visual parable. In Jewish thought, a fruitful fig tree is symbolic of God’s blessing (Jeremiah 17:7-8). Likewise, a withered tree signals God’s judgment (Isaiah 28:4; Hosea 9:10; Psalm 105:33; Jeremiah 8:13; Micah 7:1-6). Israel’s empty worship, corruption, and injustice toward those whom Jesus considers “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40) wasn’t excused. Rather than a blank check for the Disciples to assume magical powers, Jesus’ reference to a faith which moves mountains was a challenge to their lack of faith in bringing about this Kingdom of God “on earth as it is in Heaven” (Matthew 6:10). What are indicators of the presence or quality of “fruit” in our lives and worship?