

Announcing the Kingdom

The Gospel According to Matthew

Reflection Guide

Weeks 16-18

Announcing the Kingdom: The Gospel According to Matthew
Reading Guide: Week 16 (Matthew 24:42 – 26:30)

Matthew 24:42-51

Jesus addresses this warning to the community of believers. Perhaps you've heard the saying, "Stay alert, stay alive." What does it mean to be alive in Christ? Complacency can come both in the boredom of the mundane and in the despair of the unmanageable. How can the church stay alert and alive in bringing and being the presence of Christ in our world? How can we be agents of restoration and reconciliation... where Jesus lives?

Matthew 25:1-13

This parable, found only in Matthew's gospel, represents another apocalyptic encouragement to remain focused and hopeful. Once again using the allegory of a Jewish wedding banquet (cf. Mt 22:1-14 from April 4th), imagery of this important ceremony would resonate with the original audience. The delay of the bridegroom is an allusion to the postponement of the prophesied end-times. While other ancient translations (Latin, Syriac, Persian) later added "and the bride" to 25:1, Matthew omits this, perhaps strengthening his case the bridegroom represents the promised messiah. Why is Matthew so determined to connect the teachings of Jesus with His identity as the Christ? How should that recognition affect our application of this passage?

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus continues with another eschatological parable, also unique to Matthew's account, with instruction on faithful living while anticipating His earthly return. As in previous examples, while the event is a certainty the timing is unknown. Yet, Jesus makes it clear this world isn't simply our waiting room for Heaven. How do you see the characters in this illustration? Compare and contrast the servants. Are we to assume "the man" in verse 14 represents Jesus? Why, or why not? Is there also a righteous judgment for one who exploits others for personal gain? So, what does it really look like to faithfully serve Jesus, emulate the ministry of Jesus, and share the love of Jesus?

Matthew 25:31-46

To Jesus' original audience on the Mount of Olives, the connection with Zechariah 14, Ezekiel 34:17, and Isaiah 61:1 may have been apparent. In this teaching, the "blessed" are those who demonstrate faithfulness by caring for the poor, marginalized, despised, and forgotten... "the least of these." They continue Jesus' ministry by instinctively feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing those in need, caring for the sick, and visiting those in prison. These disciples would eventually be among those who were persecuted and imprisoned. How can our own need and painful experience inform our ministry to others? How can our relative comfort and comparative lack of need invite increased responsibility?

Matthew 26:1-5

While this is the fourth time Matthew records Jesus predicting His own death, the plot now begins. His crucifixion will be linked to the Passover, a Jewish festival of sacrifice and liberation from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. Avoiding a riot remained a constant concern for the authorities who conspired to arrest Jesus (cf. Mt 21:46 from April 3rd). Jesus' popularity would, however, soon dissipate in a groundswell of public opinion calling for His execution. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor martyred for his opposition to Hitler, wrote, "*The Cross is God's truth about us, and therefore it is the only power which can make us truthful. When we know the Cross, we are no longer afraid of the truth.*" How does the Cross define us as a community of believers? As representatives of the risen Christ in our world? How might it also mark us to share in His suffering?

Matthew 26:6-16

Other synoptic gospels identify this "woman" as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus who lived in Bethany, a village just east of Jerusalem. The "...in remembrance of her..." statement of verse 13 has been considered by biblical scholars as not only a specific reference to her alone, but also collectively indicative of Jesus' recognition of the instrumental role of women in the early formation of the Christian church. What might have informed Mary's response as one who truly grasped the significance of the situation? While Matthew records the disapproval of all the disciples at Mary's extravagant expression of love, why do you imagine Judas Iscariot's reaction was particularly intense?

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Matthew 26:17-30

In this passage, we find the institution of the sacrament of the Lord's Table. It's commonly referred to in Christian communities of faith as "The Lord's Supper," "Communion," or the celebration of the "Eucharist." All of these encompass a direct reference to this Passover table, representing unity with God and fellowship with others through Jesus' self-giving sacrifice as payment for human sin. Betrayal by anyone is a painful experience, but have you ever been disappointed or deceived by someone you love? Have you ever been falsely accused or maligned? Harassed, abused, or violated? Grieved the death of a loved one, or confronted your own mortality? What can we do with pockets of pain, brokenness, and fear too raw to even unpack, much less forgive or overcome? How can we truly experience the reality of the Crucifixion and Resurrection in the symbolism of the Table, individually and in community?

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Reading Guide: Week 17 (Matthew 26:31-27:26)

Matthew 26:31-35

We are all likely familiar with the story of Peter denying Christ in just the way Jesus predicts in this passage. The prediction follows the institution of the Lord's Supper whereupon Jesus says to the disciples, "You will ALL become deserters..." Even so, it is Peter's denial of Christ that has taken hold in our imagination, and so perhaps we miss the final words of verse 35, "And so said ALL of the disciples." This suggests that all of the disciples were basically saying, "Here, here!" to affirm that they, like Peter, feel they will never desert Jesus come what may. Do you sense that your commitment to Jesus is more stable than these disciples? How might you deepen your commitment in the days ahead?

Matthew 26:36-46

Quite often, because we believe that Jesus was divine, we forget that he was also human. But it is a mistake to think that Jesus faced his life and its trails with 'super-human' calm and equanimity. This text helps make this clear, that Jesus suffered just as we do. He probably would have liked nothing more than to have joined his disciples as they napped, but he was suffering both great mental anguish and physical pain. This passage reports the mental and spiritual anguish he suffers as he prays in Gethsemane. But he will soon suffer physical pain as he endures both torture and execution. Have you experienced times of anguished prayer? How has God responded (or not)? Do you think Jesus felt like his prayers to God were useful?

Matthew 26:47-56

By mentioning that Judas was one of the Twelve disciples, Matthew is reminding us that his arrest was an 'inside job.' Then, in typical Matthean fashion, he relates three responses to the arrest of Jesus. The first response is a violent retaliation by one of Jesus followers, which Jesus rebukes. The second response is from Jesus himself, reminding those who have come to arrest him that his whole ministry has been conducted nonviolently in public. The third response describes the disciples response: deserting Jesus and fleeing for their lives, just as he prophesied in 26:31. Had you been with Jesus, do you think you would have responded differently than his disciples? Why or why not?

Matthew 26:57-68

As Justo Gonzales points out, "Since we know that this council did not have the power to declare the death penalty, what we see in all of these actions of mocking Jesus is the wrath of those who feel impotent. [They] have no real power and whatever power they have depends on Roman support. Because they themselves are oppressed and do not wish to acknowledge it, [the council of Jewish authorities] oppress Jesus in order to feel strong and courageous." When you reflect on your own life experience, does it seem true that those who feel powerless to resist oppression will often take on behaviors that make them feel that they are not totally impotent, even if it means oppressing someone else?

Matthew 26:69-75

This passage is known as "Peter's denial" and it reports how what Jesus had foretold about Peter in 26:31-35 is fulfilled. In spite of his denials, it is interesting to observe that, unlike the other disciples, Peter evidently did not flee. Rather, as v. 58 reports, "Peter was following him at a distance... in order to see how this would end." Interestingly, many people seem to recognize who Peter is, which suggests that his connection to Jesus was well known. Do you think people would recognize you as a follower of Jesus? Why or why not? Would there be enough evidence to accuse you of being a close companion of our Savior?

Matthew 27:1-10

Why did Judas betray Jesus? Gordon S. Mikoski suggests, "He may have had his own material gain in mind. Perhaps he had trouble adjusting his own expectations of how the Messiah should act. Perhaps God needed Judas to play a necessary, if unpleasant, role in the drama of salvation..." Perhaps we can identify with Judas as we ask ourselves, do we not sometimes make decisions based on what will serve our self-interest? Doesn't our vision of the way things should be sometimes conflict with what Jesus teaches? Are we not sometimes swept up in larger dramas where we play a part that is not of our own choosing?

Matthew 27:11-26

Who is responsible for the condemnation and death of Jesus? This is the central theological question raised by this passage. Is it the Chief Priests and Elders who, according to v. 12, act as the prosecuting attorneys? Is it Pilate who is the only one who can release Jesus, but does not? Is it the crowd who, when given the choice of having either Jesus or Barabbas released, choose Barabbas? We might also ask, is God somehow responsible for Jesus' death? With all of these possible options, there is one option to consider: us. Sure, we were not there when all this went down, but had we been, would we've joined the crowd in demanding Jesus execution? I wish I could say I would not have gone along with the crowds, but my life experience does not give me such confidence as to think I would not have.

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Reading Guide: Week 18 (Matthew 27:27-37 – Matthew 28:16-20)

Matthew 27:27-37

Crucifixion was a humiliating form of capital punishment carried out in public spaces as a deterrent against future crime and/or potential revolts against Rome. It is believed that those sentenced were crucified naked thus making crucifixion both humiliating and dehumanizing. It is quite possible then that Christ was naked on the cross, fully exposed before God and the people. The Apostle Paul would later declare in his letter to the Galatians that all who follow Christ are essentially spiritually crucified alongside him in order to put to death our passions and inordinate desires. What does the image of being crucified naked alongside Christ and fully exposed before God evoke within you?

Matthew 27:38-44

Included among the many insults hurled at Jesus as he suffers on the cross is this poignant one in verse 40: *“If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”* The only other time we hear a similar statement is from none other than Satan as he tempts Christ during his fasting in the wilderness. (Matt. 4:1-11) As children of God it may seem to contradict the essence of our faith when we encounter trials and suffering especially when connected to our faith. Christ was innocent yet died on the cross so that others may live thus presenting us with the possibility that we too may have to suffer for the sake of others. Are you willing to stick your neck out especially for those often marginalized and rejected by our society?

Matthew 27:45-54

The cry of dereliction, *“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”* has often been interpreted as Christ encountering complete abandonment by God in this moment as bears the sin of the world. An alternate and quite appropriate interpretation involves Christ praying Psalm 22 in this moment of great pain. While the Psalm 22 begins with feelings of abandonment, it concludes by proclaiming the assurance of God’s ever abiding presence in v. 24, *“For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.”* The Psalms are considered the prayer book of the Bible for God’s people, or better yet, the songbook of our collective Christian journey. Take time to familiarize yourself with the beauty of the Psalms and consider the many ways you can find strength, hope, and comfort in its lyrics.

Matthew 27:55-66

There is common thread running throughout the gospel of Matthew concerning wealth and spirituality, which appears to frown upon the former because of it detracts upon the latter. However, in this passage we encounter a unique character who is described as being both a “rich man” and a “disciple of Jesus,” two descriptions that have appeared to contradict each other in the text thus far. Joseph of Arimathea asks for the body of Christ and after wrapping the body in a clean linen cloth he places it in his own new tomb. He uses his resources, including his direct access to Pilate himself, in order to ensure that Christ receives a proper burial. In the process he is risking his reputation by associating with a man described by the chief priests and Pharisees as “that impostor” a few verses later. Do share your resources and status in to provide for others? How about risking your reputation or image by associating with the least, the last, and the lost?

Matthew 28:1-10

The angel commissions the women to share the message of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. As they run with fear and great joy to share the gospel with the disciples, they encounter the risen Christ on the way. This is a powerful part of the story because it illustrates how women are the first to encounter the resurrected Christ and they are the ones entrusted with proclaiming the message to the men, all within a patriarchal culture and context that made little provisions for them. How do you feel about the ways God chooses those often rejected, oppressed, and ignored by society to be partakers of the Kingdom and share in God’s ministry?

Matthew 28:11-15

Deception, bribes, institutionalized religion, and corrupt politics are all deployed to resist and counter the Reign of God that was initiated at the birth of Jesus and continues through his resurrection from the dead. Unfortunately, the same appears to continue to this day. What could possibly make the resurrection so offensive? What is it about the Reign of God that makes the powerful and elite in Matthew so resistant to it? Where do you think this stands today?

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Matthew 28:16-20

The conclusion of Matthew includes the Great Commission from which we draw our mission as a church, understood and articulated within the United Methodist Church as “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” Embedded within the conclusion of Matthew is a very important detail that may easily be missed. In v. 17 we read, “*When they saw him, they worshiped him; **but some doubted.***” Within the church there will always be those who have certain doubts but are nevertheless included in the Body of Christ and entrusted with the Great Commission. This reminds us that the community of faith is anything but perfect and that doubt is an element that may always be part of the Christian journey. What are the doubts you carry? How do you wrestle with doubt? How do you feel about being part of an imperfect community of faith? Does this passage influence your thoughts and feelings about our denomination?