

## **A Word About the Word: Matthew**

It's the last decade of the First Century. We're more than fifty years removed from the ministry of Jesus, and at least 25 years removed from Paul's latest letters. Let's put that in context. The people living in Matthew's community are as close to the events of Jesus as we are in 2022 to the Moon Landing, Watergate, and the Vietnam War. In Matthew's community, just like our own, multiple generations of people are relying upon someone else to provide first-hand accounts of historical events. There is a sense of urgency to preserve the authenticity of those recollections while we still can. So...we record stories that can be remembered. And we search for words and images that best express how these events made us feel.

Today, even in a post-post-modern world (I'm not sure how many posts to include!), and even with an openness for interfaith dialogue, we live in a society of segmentation. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Bahai, Hindus, Buddhists, etc. are all considered distinct, and further segmented into denominations, and even household levels of faith expression. In general, we struggle to process the idea of Jewish-Christians, or Christian-Muslims, or Hindu-Buddhists, though to be honest, I could get behind such creativity and inclusion!

All of this is to say that in the First Century CE, there was still such a thing as Jewish-Christians. Jesus-followers considered themselves to be devout Jews, who recognized Jesus as Messiah, and who believed his life fulfilled the practice of Torah.

When the Temple is destroyed in 70 CE, worship and ritual must adapt to practices that are not centered around a specific place of worship or national shrine. The Pharisees, a group that highlights the importance

of Mosaic law, become a center of power in Judaism. The Pharisees also reject the idea of Jesus as Messiah. This becomes a source of tension which marginalizes Matthew's community from mainstream Jewish thought – Jesus-followers do not pass the litmus test for faithful Judaism.

The author of Matthew wants to prove the Jewishness of Jesus – this is not somebody who came to abolish the law, or to sully the traditions of faith; this is someone who came to fulfil the law. Clarence Jordan translates Matthew 5:13 in this way:

Jesus said: 'Don't ever think that I'm trying to destroy the moral and religious principles of our way of life. My purpose is not to destroy them but to establish them.'

Matthew's author also composes this gospel as a mini-Pentateuch, or a new Torah. The life of Jesus parallels and ultimately transcends the life of Moses. Genealogies and elaborate birth stories involving tyrannical rulers bent on infanticide evoke Genesis and Exodus. The Sermon on the Mount evokes Moses' receiving and giving of the law at Sinai. Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and eventually the cross, conjures up memories of Moses in the wilderness, and the Joshua generation poised for new lands and new possibilities.

Matthew is the story of a community of believers seeking to express what the life of Jesus meant to them, and how they sought to follow his example of being faithful disciples in a harried world. Matthew is emotional. There are poignant passages. And there are venomous ones, too. Our hearts speak loudly, and sometimes too impulsively, when they speak to defend those thoughts, people, and feelings we hold most dear. When you read this gospel, there will be instances where

you find hope and affirmation. And there will be moments that give you pause. I think Matthew is a very human, very raw gospel, much like the Psalms.

I'd encourage you to read Matthew with empathy. Perhaps, there is one nugget, or maybe even a few, where the humanity of Jesus illumines God's presence in the world. Maybe there are also some places where the vilification of Pharisees can carve out space for personal reflection. To whom do we deflect and dump upon our deepest woundedness? Why, in the telling of One who heals our brokenness SO well, do we still insist upon breaking others?

I was hungry, and thirsty, naked, and you neither fed me, nor gave me water, nor gave me a warm blanket. I don't want to return the favor. I don't want you to live in the fires of isolation. I want to break the system and the cycle that says one of us has to be whole and one of us has to be broken. I want to be reconciled.

Maybe, just maybe, Sardis, the rawness of Matthew will provoke our own desire to be reconciled with the Pharisees of our day.

### **Homily: *Blessed***

On Wednesday night, fifteen of us sat around a table, and we ate a simple meal, and we talked about who we are, and what God is calling us to be, and how we might approach that calling.

It's fitting then, that we read a passage this morning, where Jesus sits down (I imagine in one of those nylon camp chairs with a cup-holder), and he and his friends gather round, and they talk about who they are,

and what God is calling them to be, and how they might approach doing it.

This passage is famously called the Beatitudes. It is SO full of good stuff. And I want to tell you a million things about it. But...I promised to offer a short homily this morning. That's what I intend to do. But before I do it, I did discover that I preached a sermon on this text in 2020, and I don't want to brag, but y'all, it was really well done, and it holds up nearly three years later. I've linked it to this manuscript if you want to read it. [\*\*BLESSED ARE GOD'S PEOPLE, 2/2/2020\*\*](#)

Here's what's happening in our text. Jesus begins by using four statements to describe community, not just Matthew's community, but I think ours as well.

Blessed are those who are spiritually humble; blessed are those who are concerned and empathetic to the pain experienced by their neighbors; blessed are those who are kind and gentle to their neighbors; blessed are those who seek out justice in our world; blessed are the humble, and the mourners, and the meek, and those with a hunger and thirst for righteousness, because they are God's people.

Remember Exodus? Pharaoh. The manna-hoarders. The careless sons of Aaron. They weren't worried about fostering God's world, a world where love for God is expressed in love for neighbor. They were worried about sustaining systems that prioritize love of self over love of God and neighbor. But God's people, God's people are those who mourn, and grieve, and thirst, and hunger for God's world to break into the present. God's people are called to be God's agents in the world. "That's who we are!" Jesus says.

Next, Jesus uses five statements to describe who and what we're called to be. Don't think of it as a checklist. Consider these statements as examples of how we might share our best gifts and qualities with one another.

Blessed are those who are merciful; blessed are those who are authentic; blessed are those who seek out peace; blessed are those who seek to do the right thing despite the blowback of angry systems; blessed are those who are marginalized for claiming the title of Jesus-follower. Do Justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with your God.

The systems of this world ask what justice, and mercy, and humility might allow you to barter for. Unfortunately, relational items rarely appear on their ledgers. But Jesus tells us that when we spend the currency of justice, mercy, and humility we experience the receipts of love. When we are merciful, we receive mercy. When we are authentic, we begin to know one another. When we sow peace, we harvest it, too! In enduring God's work, we participate in a new economy. And if it's any consolation, the prophets, those who displayed the deepest social consciences, were ridiculed as well.

Through Jesus, I believe the writer of Matthew, was seeking to offer a synopsis of who this community was, and how they were going to approach their work. Matthew's author tells us the world is chaotic. And there are many who don't see it as we do. But Jesus has shown us what is good, and right, and just, and we intend to share our gifts in ways that bring about God's love in the world. The mainstream may tell another story, but we, Matthew's people, are gonna tell and live our story to the best of our ability. And we believe the living of our story will have a profound influence on the world.

**Matthew**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost, 10/16/2022**  
**Matthew 5:1-12**



a spiritually  
progressive  
community  
of faith

In the coming season, we, Sardis Baptist Church, are working on the expression of who we are, and what we're called to be, and how we'll express that calling in the world. Matthew gives us good food for thought. I see, in front of me, a people who are generous, and humble, and kind, and empathetic, and genuinely concerned about building a better world. I also see, in front of me, a people who work for peace, who live with transparency and authenticity, and who sometimes feel overwhelmed, perhaps even clobbered, by a world bent on proclaiming gospels completely incongruent with the Jesus we know. But most importantly, I see a people of conscience and conviction.

Yes, Blessed are those who Matthew mentions. But blessed also, are those who do the hard work of discerning, and ultimately living their calling. Good friends, may ours be a community that experiences such a blessing, and may God's world be evermore revealed in the living of our days. Amen.