



## **Transformed for Disciple Community: Matthew in Pentecost\***

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“Are you the one who is to come or do we keep looking for another?” (Matt 11:3). Though placed in the mouth of the Baptist, it is certainly the overwhelming effect of Matthew’s narrative to invite every hearer of the gospel story to share this question. What do we make of this Jesus, and how will we respond to him? The preacher in the second half of Pentecost does well to keep this focal question continually in view. A constant recollection of the journey thus far in the year of Matthew will facilitate our vision of the way in which this question has shaped and guided the unfolding response of the hearer to Matthew’s narrative.

From the beginning, the gospel has announced this Jesus as both Messiah (1:1) and Son of God (3:17). With Joseph, we have heard the promise that his birth will signal the miracle of God’s saving presence—Emmanuel, God with us (1:23), a salvation that will be specifically linked with the forgiveness of sins (1:21; cf. 26:28). We have heard Jesus’ call to discipleship and been challenged and encouraged by the first disciples’ radical and immediate witness to the power of God in him to

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change lives (4:18-22). Words of God’s blessings spoken from the mountain (5:1-12) have captured our imaginations and inspired hope in the possibilities of that new life of righteousness in the kingdom.

Yet Matthew’s picture of discipleship is a realistic one. Obedient discipleship journeys in the midst of ambiguity and hiddenness. In the story of the stilling of the storm (14:22-33), we meet a disciple community that wavers between ecstatic worship in the presence of its Lord (14:33) and moments of doubt when faith and life itself are at risk (14:30-31). That this is the experience of the disciple community of every generation is underscored by the way in which this ship on the storm-tossed (literally, “earthquaked”) sea is a kind of parable of the “church,” and by the careful juxtaposition of the same two words—worship and doubt—at the meeting of the disciple community with its Lord on the mountain in Galilee after the resurrection (28:17).<sup>1</sup> Called and blessed and living in the promise of the presence of its risen Lord, but constantly on a journey—between confident worship and painful doubts—such is the story of the disciple community.

John does get an answer to his question: “Go and tell John what you hear and see” (11:4).

Jesus' words and actions in Matthew's story respond to our request as well: "Show us this Jesus." In Jesus' words and actions we, too, hear his invitation: "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" (11:28), and with his call we, too, experience God's power in him to shape us into a transformed community of obedient discipleship.

*Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 16:13-20*

Peter's confession certainly represents a pivotal and climactic point<sup>2</sup> by representing the faith of the Christian community at its most profound level. Yet the context in which this confession stands suggests that the issue of faith is never finally decided.

Chapter 16 begins with uncertainty regarding the ability to read signs—the salvific "sign of Jonah" that points to Jesus' death and resurrection. It is clearly in doubt whether the disciples possess the requisite faith so clearly reflected in the persistent pleas for mercy of the Canaanite woman (15:21-28). "Do you not yet perceive," Jesus pleads with these "ones of little faith" (16:8-9). When they do "understand" (16:12), the language literally recalls that special "understanding" characteristic of the kingdom that has been given as a blessing to these disciples (13:10-17) and envisions Jesus' blessing pronounced upon Peter's confession that immediately follows. Seen from this perspective, several things in this lesson seem clearly important for Matthew's readers.

First is the centrality for Matthew of the concept of blessing as a key for understanding the origin and nature of discipleship. An examination of Matthew's

<sup>1</sup>Matthew's word for "doubt" occurs only in these two places in the New Testament, and both times in conjunction with "worship."

<sup>2</sup>Jack D. Kingsbury, indeed, sees this pericope as the conclusion of the second major division of Matthew's gospel culminating the public proclamation of Jesus Messiah (4:17-16:20) (*Matthew*, 2nd ed., [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986] 26-32).

distinctive use of this word shows that it always appears linked to issues of discipleship. In the familiar "beatitudes" it is repeatedly joined to talk about the thirst for "righteousness" and the gift of the "kingdom of God" (5:1-12). John's question about the coming Messiah receives Jesus' response that those who take no offense in him are particularly blessed (11:6). The disciples, who understand Jesus' parable teaching, are reminded by Jesus of the particular "blessing" therein that belongs to the vision of the disciple community (13:16, "Blessed are your eyes..."). Later, in 24:46, the hearer will be reminded that blessedness is the mark of the servant who remains faithful and ready when the master comes. So it is instructive when Matthew uniquely describes Peter's confession here not as a sign of his own initiative, but as a sign of a "blessing" from God (17). The response of faith that empowers one to receive the kingdom is ultimately a gift from outside. As such there is no program that can produce it, no personal status, efforts, or designs that can control or secure it. Rather the movement and the power of God "among us," by which many are called to discipleship and mission and by which things hidden are revealed (cf. 10:26-33), is mystery. To you it has been given (13:11); it is a blessing.

Second, Peter's central role in this story is consistent with his special role generally in the tradition and especially for Matthew. He is among the first disciples to be called (4:18) and the first named when they are commissioned for mission (10:2). More significantly, whereas in

Matthew's unique story of Peter's walking on the water (14:22-33) Peter joins the other disciples' confession of Jesus as "Son of the living God," it is in Peter's own confession here that for the first time in Matthew confession of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God are brought climactically together. Still the backdrop of the episode of Peter's "little faith" on the water and the later story of Peter's denial during the passion—the final reference to Peter in Matthew's narrative—provide reminders that even Peter's inspiring confession does not set him outside the blessing of God that occasions discipleship, nor outside the story of faith that constantly moves between confession and worship and doubt. Of that we will be immediately reminded as well in Peter's response to Jesus' passion prediction in next Sunday's lesson. At every stage—in the heights of confessing, in sinking doubt, and even in denial—Peter is clearly representative of the disciple community and of the constant struggle of faith and obedience to which it is called.

Finally, in the phrase "on this rock" (18) there is clear reference, again unique to Matthew, to the fact that the faith of the disciple community rests on the same foundation of Peter's confession. Careful hearers of Matthew will recall here that "building on a rock" was Matthew's key descriptive image of what it means for disciples to be hearers and doers of the words of Jesus (7:24f.). Called to be hearers and doers, such a blessed disciple community will be marked by the fruits that it bears, because it will be empowered by the promise that whatever it "binds and looses" in prayer will prevail against all the powers of evil and death.

*Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 16:21-26*<sup>3</sup>

Though the motifs of "blessing," "rock," "church," and "binding and loosing" noted in the previous Sunday's lesson are unique to Matthew's telling of that portion of the story, in this lesson Matthew follows more closely the lead of his probable source (Mark) in his presentation of the first of three passion predictions (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; Matthew adds a much abbreviated fourth at the beginning of the passion narrative proper, 26:2), followed by Peter's rebuke with Jesus' response, Jesus' call to a discipleship of taking up one's cross, and the comments on finding and losing one's life.

Still Matthew's narrative does contain distinctive features that mark his particular focus and shape the hearing of this lesson in a special way. Whereas Mark says Jesus began to "teach" about his impending suffering, Matthew describes Jesus' action as "showing." He thereby calls to mind characteristic Matthean motifs of hiddenness and revelation, the gift of special knowledge, and, in the immediate context, the origin and blessedness of the revelation given to Peter as described in last Sunday's lesson.

The juxtaposition of talk about the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus with themes of revelation is a reminder to the Christian community that discipleship is shaped not just by lofty confession but by its close identity with the story of Jesus of Nazareth and his suffering and death. Jesus' identity as Messiah and Son of God is inseparable from God's son fleshed out and lived out in the life, mission, and death of Jesus of Nazareth. To that particular life and destiny Christian discipleship is linked by the call to take up the cross and follow him. Discipleship is more than proper words or great confessions—"not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord'" (7:21f.). It is a call to the obedient giving of self for the neighbor, a giving in which hearing and doing are in conformity, in which the whole of the law and prophets are fulfilled (7:12).

Such conformity comes to fruition only by the transforming power of God's continuing

gift and presence to the disciple community. Even in the immediate afterglow of his confession, Peter cannot manufacture it. Matthew's detailing of Jesus' and Peter's interchange regarding the coming passion are instructive. Jesus' words, "Get behind me Satan," are a repetition of his same words to Satan at his temptation (4:10). Fresh from lofty confession, Peter is at risk of being in league with the enemy, Satan, and standing against the purposes of God's salvation in this Jesus. As such he risks being one of the "weeds," those "children of the evil one" that do not bear fruit befitting the "children of the kingdom" (13:37-39).

This link is further strengthened by Matthew's unique characterization of Peter as an "offense" to Jesus' mission. This word, elsewhere also translated as

<sup>3</sup>It is somewhat strange that this passage should be separated in the lectionary from the previous Sunday's lesson and the preacher will want to read the whole of chapter 16 of Matthew and keep it within the imaginative field of vision. The separation, however, is perhaps not so strange if one adopts the outline suggested by Kingsbury (see note 2), according to which the transitional words "from that time" mark this passage as the beginning of the third and final major section of Matthew's gospel: the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Messiah (16:21-18:20).

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page 312

"stumbling block," is a key to Matthew's perception of discipleship. Used here it reflects back on Jesus' response to John's question (11:6), while it also looks ahead to those persons who become the occasion for "the little ones" of the community to fall away from following Jesus (18:6-8).

The fact that this same word describes Peter's denial of Jesus during the passion (cf. 26:31-33) marks it as a definite "disciple" motif for Matthew. It returns us to our opening question ("Are you the one who is to come, or do we look for another?") and makes it *the* question of discipleship. That one's answer to this question should not be expressed in the obedience of hearing and doing can only be the sign that one has taken offense at Jesus' words and deeds (11:6) and ultimately in his presence among us as God Emmanuel. Here as in Matthew 11:6 we are reminded that such faithfulness is a blessing granted to ones who are enabled to respond in obedience and so to take up their cross in a discipleship of following.<sup>4</sup>

In his linking of the theme of "offense" with confession of Jesus as "Messiah" and "Son of the living God," Matthew has also focused the relationship of discipleship and christology. The point is that even though Peter has the name right, it is a confession that rings false if not connected to suffering and the cross. Discipleship takes shape in the blessing of God that empowers and enables the transforming act of following that conforms confession to life, that sees in the losing of life the gaining of life. On this point it is ironic that the summons not to take offense at a Messiah-King who suffers and dies should take place against the backdrop of a city named "Caesarea," thereby explicitly calling to mind another model of ruling and allegiance.

Christian discipleship reflects a transformed vision enabled by God's blessing to see what it would mean for us to take up the cross and follow. Such vision is certainly shaped by the empowering presence of the risen Lord Jesus in the life of the disciple community. It will have to do with practical realities of counting the cost, and will be shaped by the model of Jesus' own life of merciful servanthood on behalf of the sinner and outcast (9:13). Losing one's life is part of the mission of the community (cf. 10:38-42) in the exercise of love toward the needs of the world.

In that exercise of love and mercy in the world lies the special wisdom and blessing that has been given to the disciple community. To be involved in those decisions that fulfill the

command to love the neighbor is to know the gift of wisdom, to recall the psalmist's theme of the blessedness that belongs to the one who "walks not in the counsel of the wicked, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord," the righteous one who is like a tree that "yields its fruit in its season" (Ps 1:1-3).

<sup>4</sup>On the other hand, those who reject Jesus are described as taking "offense" at him (13:57) or as ones who "fall away" (24:10) or betray or hate one another in times of suffering or persecution.

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page 313

*Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 18:15-20*

The misleading title, "On Reproving Another Who Sins" (NRSV), traditionally attached to this passage, has often contributed to misplaced flat or rigid attempts to interpret this section as a literal model for the exercise of church discipline, leading even to excommunication when necessary.

A quite different sense emerges from consideration of the wider context, the unifying theme of the "kingdom of heaven" that frames the beginning and end of chapter 18. The issue of the opening question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom?" (1), flows through the chapter to its concluding assertion, "so will my heavenly Father do to you if you do not forgive" (35). From this perspective, Jesus' remarks form a consistent whole linked by the theme of discipleship and forgiveness and arguing that, for the disciple, forgiveness is the true mark of greatness in the kingdom. This overall perspective is an important focus that joins the lessons for Pentecost 16 and 17.

The chapter begins with Jesus holding up the example of a child's humility as the key characteristic of discipleship in the kingdom (4). He then pronounces woes on any person or thing (6-9 NRSV) that would become a "stumbling block"<sup>5</sup> for any of God's "little ones." God's serious concern for these little ones is next illustrated by the parable of the lost sheep with its clear concluding point, "So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost" (14).

In light of this important point about God's will for the "little ones," Jesus proceeds to talk about treatment of a brother or sister who sins against another. It is clear from this that it is the erring member, not those who are supposed to be exercising "discipline," who is equated with the "lost sheep" or the "little ones" of the kingdom. Of utmost importance is how this disciple community exercises care and concern for the little ones in its midst in such a way that not one is lost. Jesus' language describing those who fail in exercising such concern is very pointed (see 18:6).

This is important community talk. Its crucial character is evident in the specific steps instructing the community in its faithfulness to that responsibility. The steps may seem most appropriate to a small community or to a house church, but the particulars are hardly meant to be binding. Imagining three stages perhaps simply suggests the exhausting of all options to prevent a little one's loss. Should all efforts fail and such a one "be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (17), even then the community needs to recall that just such outcasts and sinners are the focus of God's love and call (cf. 9:10-13).

Concern for the "little ones" also provides the continuing focus for Jesus' subsequent sayings on "binding and loosing" and the community "gathered" in

<sup>5</sup>We have noted above how use of the same Greek word *skandalon* here, as in Jesus' response to John's question in 11:6, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me," underscores the persistent theme of discipleship and belief in Jesus.

his name (18:18-20). When Jesus' promise ("It will be done") is attached to whatever the community agrees to ask, that certainly speaks primarily to the community's confidence that when and where it asks for forgiveness on behalf of an erring member, there the empowering presence of the risen Christ is "among them." This power, promised at the birth of Jesus "Emmanuel"—God with us (1:23)—is promised again in the words of the risen Lord to the disciple community of all ages: "Remember I am with you" (28:20).

We see then that greatness in the kingdom has to do with the way in which the believing community exercises discipleship through the extravagant discipline of forgiveness. A community that regularly prays the familiar petition on forgiving in the Lord's prayer will link its own experience of forgiveness to the way in which it forgives those who sin against it (6:12). This Sunday's lesson thus adds a practical down-to-earth appeal in its promise and challenge that such forgiveness be exercised in the specific interchange of persons and conversations, where God's Spirit is present in the gathered community. Living in community in Christ's presence there are things—disciplines, specific processes and actions of care and concern—that need to be structured and tended. The word of the Lord is not out there somewhere, but wherever the community gathers—two or three are enough; there, in a different dynamic of greatness, the oneness of disciple community comes into being. Such a forgiving community is called always to remember and to live toward that goal for which the presence and promise of the Lord is given. Exercise of "discipline" is not the prime issue, but rather how not to lose its master's sheep. Next Sunday's lesson will remind us that there is no limit to the imaginative lengths to which such extravagant forgiveness will go.

*Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 18:21-35*

Peter's question (18:21) about how many times one ought to forgive another member of the community makes clear the integral linking of this lesson with the verses that have gone before. The numbers here are, of course, not meant to encourage the use of calculators. The image serves to make a point. It seeks to open the community's imagination to the power available for faithful discipleship.

Peter's limited imagination ought not be too quickly chastised. The "holy" number seven after all suggests wholeness or completeness. Yet it does not begin to fathom the extravagance of God's mercy. To his question about the possible extent to which the call to exercise forgiveness in the community can be stretched, the authoritative and cryptic pronouncement of Jesus speaks of an endless, unimaginable plurality of forgiveness—seventy times seven. The hyperbolic language may be an intentional recollection of scriptural tradition, an invitation to see in the power of forgiveness an utter reversal of that kind of exaggerated vengeance of a Lamech who sought only retribution for wrongs received (cf. Gen 4:23-24).

The point of the imaginative power in this promise of forgiveness is sealed by the negative example of the parable of the "Unforgiving Servant," its unique occurrence in Matthew's gospel underscoring its intentional placement in this context. In essentially parallel episodes, two servants each plead for the patience of

another toward the repayment of a debt. The language of their respective petitions is almost verbatim, “Have patience and I will pay you” (18:26, 29). What is different is the one addressed—in the first instance the master king, in the second a fellow servant. Accordingly, the point is driven home by the exaggerated contrast of the inconceivable enormity of the debt forgiven to the servant by the powerful king with the relatively puny debt of a fellow servant, payment of which he not only refuses to forgive but even to await with patience.<sup>6</sup> The master’s outright forgiveness of the debt is further surprising when one notes the first servant’s failure even to realize the ridiculous helplessness of his situation: “I will pay you *everything!*”

What does it mean to hear this story in this context? Once more it is clear that forgiveness has implications for relationship in community. It is the servant’s peers who become incensed at the actions of one of their number in light of the lavish extravagance of their master. When some might think that discipleship is a matter of making careful judgments and decisions about how to treat those who seem to do us wrong, this parable reminds us of a God who forgives abundantly and then holds the members of the disciple community to the same extravagant discipline. What might it mean if we were really inspired and enabled to live in the power of that call? It’s not an easy question to answer, as next Sunday’s lesson makes clear.

#### *Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 20:1-16*

Once again a parable about the “kingdom of heaven” invites exploration of discipleship. Through intentional literary devices Matthew has integrally tied this parable, again unique to his gospel, to themes present in the immediately preceding verses (especially 19:16-30). The “for” of 20:1 specifically identifies the parable as supporting “rationale” for the previous discussion, and its concluding prophetic pronouncement about the first being last and the last first (19:30) is matched at the parable’s conclusion.<sup>7</sup>

In those preceding verses there is a prominent concern with themes of “money,” “possessions,” “riches,” and “treasure.” It encompasses the young man’s “What good deed must I do?” (19:16), the disciples’ despairing “Who then can be saved?” (19:25), and Peter’s “We have left everything; what then will we have?” (19:27). In the characteristic manner of a teacher of wisdom, Jesus responds with a challenge that cuts to the heart of the matter: “Go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven” (19:21). To the astonishment at this charge he responds with the promise that “for God all things are possible,” (19:26) and concludes his explanation with the even more cryptic remark about first and last (19:30). Instead of giving a law Jesus now illustrates with a story.

<sup>6</sup>If one talent is approximately 15 years’ wages, then the debt forgiven is literally ridiculous: 150,000 years’ wages. For the striking effect of this unlikelike character in this and the following Sunday’s parable of the workers in the vineyard, see Norman A. Huffman, “Atypical Features in the Parables of Jesus,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978) 207-220.

<sup>7</sup>The order of Jesus’ pronouncement is chiasmatically reversed in 20:16 so as to make it correspond closely with the detail of the parable: the laborers are paid “beginning with the last and then going to the first” (20:8).

In the details of the story many have noted recognizable features of its cultural setting: a master of a vineyard hiring day-laborers under the crucial pressure of gathering the harvest before

it spoils. But it is the surprising or distinctive features of the story that clearly shape the way it is heard and understood. First, one needs to note the clear emphasis on the theme of “justice” in the parable. The landowner’s arrangement with the first workers is a matter of common consent (*sym-phonesas*, 20:2). Furthermore, he explicitly promises to give a “just” (*dikaion*) compensation to those hired at the ninth hour.<sup>8</sup> Finally, when the workers hired first grumble about the landowner’s actions at the day’s end, the landowner argues that his actions were “just” (“I am doing you no wrong,” Greek: *ouk adikw se*; 20:13). In so characterizing the landowner’s actions, Jesus’ parable certainly presses both the surprising and unsettling character of God’s justice.

Jesus earlier told the young man, “There is only one who is good” (19:17). Here the ultimate pronouncement of the landowner is “I am good” (20:15). Now in this story hearers are thus challenged to consider how they will react to such surprising and unsettling justice and goodness. At this point, are not the workers hired at the end of the day a paradigm of sorts? By going into the field without any assurances of compensation do they not in a way call attention to their implicit trust in precisely that justice or fairness of the landowner?

Our reaction, which may be more like that of the other characters in the story, is artfully anticipated. At the very center of the story, when at day’s end the manager gives the laborers their pay, it is with the explicit instructions to do so “beginning with the last and going to the first” (19:8). The words are a refrain recalling those words immediately preceding the parable (19:30) and anticipating its conclusion (20:16). When those last to be hired receive the full day’s wage, we can almost see the lights go on and the mental wheels of anticipation begin to whirl for those who have worked the full day. “Wow, imagine what we’re going to get!”

Yet when the wages for all turn out to be the same, instead of celebrating the fortune of their comrades and rejoicing at the landowner’s generosity, these workers get angry over not getting more than what was agreed upon by common consent (20:13). The generosity of the landowner generates only anger. What’s more, their resentment is attributed specifically to the landowner’s presumption in that he “made them equal” with the others (20:12). For these persons, justice or fairness means precisely not being equal. The transforming generosity of the landowner and its power to create a new forgiving community of justice runs squarely against the power of evil (cf. 20:15: literally “Is your eye evil [*poneros*]”) that feasts on vengeance and disciplinary distinctions that would divide and exclude from community.

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<sup>8</sup>It is perhaps worthy of note, in light of the prevalent concerns with riches and money in the context, that no mention of any compensation is made to those workers who are hired late in the day. The hiring of workers “early in the morning,” at “nine o’clock,” at “noon,” at “three o’clock,” and at “five o’clock” should probably simply be taken to indicate that hiring continues throughout the day in view of the pressing harvest.

## TRANSFORMING POWER FOR DISCIPLESHIP

It is that transforming power of a generous and forgiving God that speaks with one voice through these Pentecost texts. They invite the imaginative vision of a transformed discipleship that moves from confession to forgiving love toward the other, from the outpouring of love in the cross of Christ to the possibility of a new community in Christ created in the equality of God’s justice and love for all.

In this vision, the preacher and hearer are invited to experience the promise and the



implications of confessing with Matthew's community that God in Christ is Emmanuel (1:23) and of seeing the fruits of that presence in the justice and goodness at work among us in the transforming power of the cross. The promise "Wherever two or three are gathered, I am with them" (18:20) is not a generalized promise, but in its context is specifically tied to the responsibility of disciples to exercise forgiveness; it is the assurance that a renewed community can bear fruit, can act again and again through forgiving love to create and restore community. The promise is clear that God will exercise goodness and justice on behalf of all; that God calls disciples—who pray for and trust God's deliverance from evil (cf. Lord's prayer)—to responsible exercise of the same justice and mercy towards one another.

Such a speaking of the promise binds together hearing, confession, and doing. Christian disciples are not above the example of their master (10:24). Implicit in the witness to the incarnation—that in Jesus God became human—is the recognition that what Jesus says and what he does are integrally connected. "Go tell John what you *hear* and *see*" (11:4). Even so are the fruits of hearing and doing for the disciple (cf. 7:24-27).

If at its heart the disciple life means always to be open to the future, always to be open to what God is doing, to ask "Are you the one who is to come?" then it also means always to hear the answer given—"I will be with you to the end of the age"—and to find itself empowered in a transformed community to take responsibility for the exercise of justice, love, and mercy.

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