

Missionaries of Nonviolence
A Sermon on Matthew 9:35-10:23
Proper 6
June 14, 2020

Introduction

One of the distinctive things about the Gospel of Matthew is that it has five discourses. The Sermon on the Mount is the first; it takes up Chapters 5, 6 and 7. Today's text is the beginning of what is called the Missionary Discourse, which takes up Chapter 11. Today is the first of three sermons that Mary and I will do on the Missionary Discourse.

The Discourse on Parables takes up Chapter 13. We will cover it in July. The Community Discourse is in Chapter 18. We will preach on it in September. It talks about how to be church together. The Judgment Discourse in Chapters 24 and 25 will conclude the church year. We will get to it in November.

These discourses are forms of extended teaching. That is why the early church liked Matthew best and made it the First Gospel. Today Jesus begins his teaching on the mission of the disciples. The mission he gives them is our mission, too.

First Move: Miracles to Relieve Suffering

Matthew sees Jesus as the new Moses. Matthew's infancy story includes the slaughter of the innocents, in which Herod orders all the boy babies in Bethlehem that are less than two years old to be killed. It reminds us of Pharaoh's order to slaughter all the Hebrew boy babies in Egypt that are less than two years old.

Chapters 8 and 9 of Matthew, beginning immediately upon the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, describe ten miracles that Jesus performs. Moses inflicted ten plagues on the people of Egypt to persuade Pharaoh to "let my people go." Matthew reinterprets this story. Jesus is a greater prophet than Moses; he leads the lost sheep of Israel back to God.

The ten miracles of Jesus reflect a different kind of power. Instead of inflicting punishment on an oppressor, Jesus acts to heal people. His miracles are acts of mercy: cleansing a leper, healing a Centurion's servant, casting out demons. Jesus is doing battle not with Pharaoh but with Satan. There is a clash of kingdoms. Matthew understands Satan as behind the diseases and sickness that afflict people. The

Pharisees accuse Jesus as being the ruler of the demons because he can cast out demons.

Jesus looks at the people and sees that they are weary and downtrodden. The Greek uses two perfect passive participles. A more literal translation would be that the people have been worn down and thrown to the ground. They are suffering from a power greater than themselves. Jesus has pity for them.

Protestant scholars tend to focus on the meaning of the miracle and ignore whether the miracle is historical. Ulrich Luz, one of the leading commentators on Matthew, suggests that we should look for a historical basis for the miracles. The historical Jesus had a reputation as a healer. In each of the miracles, Jesus sees suffering in the people and heals them. Jesus is not violating the laws of nature, which as children of the Enlightenment we reject. No, Jesus is breaking the power that evil has over people. The kingdom of God is breaking in to overcome the kingdom of Satan. Jesus responds to the suffering of the people of Israel and to the everyday experiences of suffering people.

We should not think of belief in demons as reflecting a primitive worldview. The authors of the New Testament saw a power lying behind the power of kings. They saw an evil spirituality that guided the rulers of the world. We trivialize Satan when we think of him as a devil with a pitchfork. The spirituality of evil is a very real thing, and demons were how the people in the first century expressed it.

The Lord of the Harvest is an eschatological image. Before Jesus sends out the disciples, he asks them to pray to God to send more workers.

Jesus calls the 12 disciples. Matthew lists them by name. It was conventional to list the names of the disciples of Greek and Jewish teachers. Jesus commissions the disciples to carry out the same mission that he himself has undertaken in Matthew 5 through 9: to proclaim and to heal. Jesus gives them authority over unclean spirits, to cast out demons and to heal every disease and sickness. It is the same authority that Jesus has. We have the same mission, to go into the world, proclaiming the good news and relieving suffering.

Second Move: A New Type of Power

The mission at this point is confined to Israel. The 12 disciples represent the 12 tribes of Israel. They are to gather in the lost sheep of Israel, who have been led astray by political and religious leaders. The disciples are not to go on roads that lead to the Gentiles and they are not to enter into any Samaritan cities. Not everyone will be receptive to the good news. Go only to those who are lost, not those who are hostile to the good news.

The disciples are to proclaim that the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near. This highlights that the conflict between the kingdom of God and the powers of evil is approaching.

The disciples are to embody a new type of power. In the temptation Satan offered Jesus power over all the kingdoms of the world. The disciples are not given that kind of power. They are to go on the road helpless and vulnerable. They are not to take shoes; they are to go barefoot on their journey. They are not to take a staff, which travelers use to defend themselves against wild animals and predators on the road. This is Q's version of the story, which is earlier than Mark. Mark softened this requirement and allowed the disciples to take sandals and a staff on the journey.

The disciples instead are given authority over the unclean spirits. They are given power to overcome the spirituality of evil in the world. Their power comes from turning the other cheek and loving their enemies, embodying the higher righteousness that Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount.

The disciples are to be itinerant missionaries, just as Jesus was. They are to move about from place to place, not staying in one place too long.

Both Matthew and Mark instruct the disciples not to take any money in their belts. They are not to accept payment for their work. They are to rely instead on the hospitality of people they meet on the way. This actually gives the disciples more freedom. Nothing will distract from the good news that they are delivering.

The good news is that the powers of evil in the world are being overcome: the sick are being healed, the dead are being raised, the lepers are being cleansed, the demons are being cast out.

Jesus instructs the disciples to inquire who is worthy when they enter a town. To be worthy is to be entitled to respect. More concretely, it means to find out who will welcome you and who will listen to your words. Who are the ones who will show hospitality? In today's Old Testament lesson, Abraham treated the three strangers at the oaks of Mamre with extravagant hospitality.

We have to admit that this is an evaluation, a form of judging. Part of the function of the Son of Man is to judge. This is a tension in the gospel between the merciful shepherd and the Son of Man who judges. We must remember that judgment in Matthew is always contingent before the eschaton. The master in the parable of the wheat and the tares instructs his slaves to let them grow together until the harvest, then they will be sorted out. God always extends the time of judgment to allow as many people as possible to be saved.

Jesus further instructs the disciples. When you enter a house, show hospitality. Greet the people. Receive the gift of hospitality and leave your own gift. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon them.

If the house is not worthy, shake the dust off your feet as you leave the town. This is a sign of judgment. Jews knocked the dust off their sandals when they returned to Israel from Gentile lands. Towns that are unworthy will receive a worse fate than Sodom and Gomorrah. Later in Christian tradition, Sodom and Gomorrah came to be notorious for homosexuality, but that is not how people understood the story in Biblical times. When the three strangers left Abraham at the oaks of Mamre and entered the town of Sodom, the men tried to rape them instead of offering them hospitality. The men were violently disrespectful to the strangers. The sin of the men of Sodom is lack of hospitality.

Jesus tells the disciples that he is sending them out as sheep in the midst of wolves. This is another allusion to nonviolence. The missionaries are not to defend themselves. God will protect them. If they suffer, God will relieve their suffering.

Matthew took this part of the discourse from the Little Apocalypse in Mark 13. It refers to a later time when the Temple was being destroyed in 68-70 CE. They will hand you over to councils and scourge you just as Jesus was scourged. God will use this as an opportunity for you to testify to the nations. You will be witnessing to nonviolence. Do not be anxious about what to say; God will send the spirit to speak for you.

Conflict becomes sharper as the climactic struggle nears. Brother will rise against brother and parent against child. The conflict between good and evil runs through every family.

You will be hated by all on account of my name. This could also be translated as disregarded instead of hated. You will be seen as having little worth.

Today's text concludes with Jesus' assuring the disciples that they will not finish going about the cities in Israel before the Son of Man comes in judgment. The timetable is off. We are still waiting.

Third Move: Loving the Stranger

The instructions that Jesus gives the disciples are about loving your enemy. Hospitality is a way of loving the enemy. The enemy that the disciples will meet on the road are the stranger and the friendless.

Luke Brotherton, a professor of theological ethics at Duke, writes about hospitality in his new book, *Christ and The Common Life*. He says that hospitality is one of the essential practices in creating a common life together.

Gifts are offered and received by the guest and the host as tokens of esteem. You deem the other to be worthy of a gift. You offer the gift of yourself. You are opening yourself up to the stranger. Hospitality creates the expectation of relationship: you will be a friend not an enemy.

Christians live in tents—mobile, provisional places. We are always on a journey, with interchangeable roles of guest and host. On the road to Emmaus, Christ was the stranger and was greeted by two of his followers. They invited him to their home to share a meal. As Jesus interprets Scripture and breaks bread, the followers have their eyes opened. Christ becomes the host.

The Christian expectation is that we may encounter God in the stranger. We may be entertaining angels unawares.

In the hyperdiverse world that we live in, we need tools for navigating the different beliefs and practices held by the stranger. Alisdair McIntyre, a Scottish philosopher, describes hospitality as a process in which we give gifts to the stranger from our own customs and traditions. We each play guest and host with each other. There are three steps. The first is that the advocates of different traditions learn the language of their rivals' tradition, enriching their own vocabulary, recognizing what is and what is not recognizable in the other tradition. In the second stage, each person gives an account or history of the other in the other's terms, demonstrating that he understands the other's point of view. In the third stage each tradition evaluates itself in light of the other tradition and judges whether its account of the truth is inferior to the other tradition. This three-step process is a way of remaining firmly grounded in our own tradition, while putting down our defenses and engaging in dialogue with another tradition. We see ourselves and our tradition as the other sees us. We have to be open to the possibility that God sees us that way, too. We are encountering God in new ways through the other.

We also live in a divided age. The partisan divisions keep growing deeper. We live among strangers, people who have a different view of the world. There is little respect in the partisan divisions. We look at each other as enemies. We don't see each other as worthy. We want to shake the dust off our feet after we talk to each other.

I have been trying to overcome that partisan division by taking that first step, understanding the language of conservatives. I have been reading a collection of essays in a book called *American Conservatism: Reclaiming an Intellectual Tradition*, by Andrew Bacevich, a retired Army officer and a professor of history and international relations at Boston University.

Bacevich is looking toward a post-Trump world. He sets forth some of the founding principles of conservatism in hopes that conservatives will reclaim their

own intellectual tradition when the Republican party is no longer dominated by Trump.

The fundamentals are tradition, religion, morality and the individual. Conservatives used to have high regard for these things. I find much that I agree with and some things that I don't. They respect tradition and believe there is much wisdom in it; they prefer reforms to revolution. They believe that our culture has lost its way by turning away from God; they seek transcendence. They believe that a democracy can be healthy only if the people are virtuous. Finally, they believe that respect for the individual is the foundation of democratic society. Individuals need to be free to flourish.

I have been challenged by reading a [thoughtful] conservative critique of issues such as America's place in the world, journalism, the second wave of the women's movement and affirmative action.

There is much more to the book, but that is enough to get a conversation started. To break down partisan divides, we need to get past personalities and talking points and discuss different visions that conservatism and progressivism have for what our life together should look like.

We might just find that each of us only has a partial grasp of the truth and that we need each other to obtain a more complete understanding of the truth.

Conclusion

Jesus saw the people and had pity on them. They were hurting and he healed them. He sends us out to do the same thing. We are to proclaim the good news and rely upon the hospitality of strangers. We are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

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