

Sermon, 21 September 2008—Proper 20 & Matthew

Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6,37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 9:9-13

Once again, today, the Church asks us to remember something we might otherwise let slip by. Last Sunday, it was the mystery of the cross: not only a reminder of tyranny overturned, but the proclamation that God's power is displayed as perfect when seen through our weakness. Today, we have landed on the feast of the Evangelist Matthew—by a wonderful coincidence, the same Gospel we are listening to during this Church Year.

The thing that could stand out for you is that Matthew, of all the evangelists, is the one most concerned with goodness. Matthew is the Gospel of “going to the next level.” Matthew is the one who insists that God wants something more than minimum requirements. Matthew believes you can build on what you are and become more than you were.

Matthew, you see, was a Jew—as John was. For him, Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, was central. And just as Jesus had brought those to completion and gone beyond them, so we now, his followers, were also to complete the expectations of the Law and go beyond them. At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, after naming those things that make us blessed and warning us not to hide our light, Jesus offers his commentary on the Law. Listen:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill. Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the Law, until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them

will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

These words are found only in Matthew, and there are two things you might reflect on here.

First, we have become very comfortable, we Gentiles, with shifting the meaning of these words away from their obvious and specific sense. In this, at least, we prefer Paul, who tells us Gentiles are not obligated to keep the Law, over Matthew, who tells us we are. We have all broken the commandments in the Torah, and we have all taught others to do the same. For Matthew, that has grim consequences. Not only that. Matthew’s Jesus says not a single stroke with which the letters of the words of the Torah are written is expendable; none of it, not even the ink, can be discarded.

Now, you will find this or that minister who spiritualizes the meaning: it is God’s intentions, God’s standards, God’s goals, that do not pass away, though heaven and earth pass away. As if that were a way out! Matthew grimly agrees: “OK, then; live by the standards, not the letter.” He has Jesus review some of the most fretful parts of the Law: “You’ve heard it said, ‘don’t kill’? I say, ‘don’t be angry.’ You’ve heard it said, ‘don’t commit adultery’? I say, ‘don’t look with lust.’” Dear friend, this is tightening, not releasing, the vise. God’s standards, you see, are, of course, inhuman. We begin to gasp for air in Matthew’s company.

Second, Matthew suggests that the righteousness of Christians must exceed that of scribes and Pharisees. This also ministers have smirked over: aren’t the scribes and Pharisees the great hypocrites, those who pretend to have virtues they do not have? We, at least, are not hypocrites; and if we can’t avoid hypocrisy by being good in word and deed, we will avoid it by

admitting to everyone that “we’re no saints”—as if that were something to make God proud or to commend our way of life to someone else.

Remember, in Matthew’s day, when Jerusalem had been destroyed and the Jews scattered by the vengeful Romans, the Jewish leaders and teachers who had managed to escape and regroup began a desperate rear action to rescue and reestablish some remnant of their people and their religion. This Rabbinical strand of Judaism has survived to this day. This was the strand taught by scribes and Pharisees, Matthew’s contemporaries, the very people Matthew insists his readers must surpass.

Remember, also, the Christian strand of Judaism, Matthew’s careful construct, was lost forever. Stop and think about that. Of the Jews who became Christians, not a trace remains today—but these Jews were Jesus’ own people, who should have understood him best, followers of the core of Jesus’ own disciples who lived in Jerusalem and inheritors of those who followed his teachings most closely—and they vanished into history.

What remained of Judaism was what the scribes and Pharisees taught. With every earnestness, they developed a minutely codified version of Judaism. What were they to do, now that their Temple was gone? How could they show that they were still devoutly obedient to God when sacrifice was impossible? They remembered their days of enslaved exile in Babylon and returned to what had sustained them in those days. When they could not enact all that was in the Torah, they could at least honor and study and meditate on it; they could reinterpret its ritual guidelines into a blueprint for daily, not ceremonial, observance, and for personal, not priestly, practice; and they could bind it to their hearts, recite it with their lips, and perfect it in their lives. That is what Matthew saw coming into being: clear and humble in its devotion to keeping alive the traditions of the ancestors, the hundreds

of ways carefully dissected laws could become daily habits, so that their identity and their heritage would not be lost. Matthew wanted Christian Jews somehow to go further than that, so they could become, as Jesus had been, faithful and more than faithful. He is the only one who says, “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

How to do that? The hint is in the story we heard in the Gospel assigned to this day. Not only could Matthew see that the precise standards of the Pharisees lead to self-righteousness; Matthew could also see that his amplification of the Law into the innermost recesses of the spirit would lead to exactly the same place. Matthew’s intensified version of Judaism for the followers of Jesus could easily foster an over-achieving competitiveness, a breeding ground of hard vain believers in virtue. Like it or not, the religion which you and I profess is the sad result of that self-justification. Sadly, Matthew’s Gospel more than any other has set Christians up as rivals of the Jews, scrambling to wrestle from each other the closest proximity to the same God and the definitive meaning of the same Scripture, until that hostility became centuries of simple hatred and murder.

Matthew never imagined his words would be used by Gentiles against Jews. He intended another journey and wrote for different circumstances. It appears he was urging his readers not to be more scrupulous, but more comprehensive in their observance of God’s words. In the story we heard today, which also appears in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, Jesus does not condemn or avoid the tax collector, but calls him to follow him, then goes and shares a meal with him. Matthew, though, adds a comment that only Matthew adds, quoting a verse from the prophets that only Matthew quotes. In his version of the story, Matthew has Jesus dismiss his critics, when he goes in for a celebratory banquet with the tax collector who is now his

disciple, by recalling the words of God in the prophet Hosea and saying, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’” Only Matthew understands the story of the calling of the tax collector this way.

Now the wonder of this is that Matthew’s contemporaries, the scribes and Pharisees of the destroyed Jerusalem and the burgeoning new Judaism of the Diaspora had already come to the realization that there is more to a relationship with God than legislated ritual. These rabbis, who were probing for a new way to be faithful without a Temple, were beginning to use these very same words from Hosea to guide their invention of a new way to be Jewish. With the Temple gone, what were they going to put in its place, when sacrifice is not longer possible? Hosea urged that “mercy” mattered more. Both the founders of Rabbinical Judaism, working with distraught exiles, and Matthew, working with the Christian Jews, had retrieved the same verse: “mercy, not sacrifice” is what God hopes for.

Wondrously, in other words, Hebrew Scripture had already given them the way to go beyond the strictures of the Torah: the prophet calls for compassion, for loving-kindness, for the tender justice that cares for those who are trampled by the powerful—no sacrifice will ever clear us of the sins of the hardened heart. And mercy is available as a practice to any one of us wherever we find our selves. You might find yourself unable to offer sacrifice: too far from the temple, too poor to buy what is necessary. But God forbid you should ever be so estranged from yourself that you find that mercy is out of your reach. Your ability to forgive is always at your hand; your compassion is always accessible to you.

You might ask where all this ends up for Matthew. Where is his bottom line? Many people find it in a parable that we only find in this Gospel, the very last parable Matthew has Jesus tell, the final terrible parable

of the separation of the sheep and the goats. If, as Matthew says earlier, someone who teaches others to neglect “the least of these” commandments is the least in the kingdom of heaven, a far more terrible fate awaits those who neglect “the least of these” human beings who are their brothers and their sisters. “I was hungry, thirsty, naked, in prison, on my sickbed, or wandering the earth as a homeless stranger—and what did you do?”

In this also, Matthew remains Jewish to the core. All the careful instruction of the Torah is for the purpose of compassion. “Remember,” God says in the Torah, “you were a stranger once in Egypt; so care for the stranger in your midst.” What is new is our oneness in Christ; we are not strangers to each other, but brothers and sisters, all the way down to “the least of these.” Christian Scripture also gives us the way to go beyond the strict injunctions of Matthew. The one who stands in the place of the prophets, Paul, calls us to be, not simply good followers of Jesus, but one with the Risen Christ, so that we can see all humanity as one, so that the actions of mercy become as natural as caring for ourselves, so that we will be well prepared to see without division or rivalry on that day when we are raised together to enter into the praise of the one God, Eternal Source, and Only-begotten Word, and Life-giving Spirit, whom we praise in our imperfect ways today.