

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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III Pentecost & Juneteenth, Matthew 9:35-10:16

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.ⁱ *Amen.*

Alright, Trinity Church: let's trace the Gospel of Matthew's first seven chapters in a single, opening paragraph:

The Good News begins with the identification of Jesus “as a son of David, a son of Abraham”ⁱⁱ and provides the genealogy of Joseph’s firstborn, clearly aiming the Gospel’s narrative toward Jewish and Jewish-Christian communities. Moving from Chapter 1 to Chapter 2, Matthew includes stories of Jesus’ birth and early childhood,ⁱⁱⁱ before rocketing ahead some thirty-odd years to Jesus’ baptism in Chapter 3.^{iv} Between the familiar stories of Jesus’ temptation^v in the wilderness and his call of the first disciples,^{vi} in Chapter 4 Matthew reiterates its Jewish-Christian focus, identifying Jesus’ early travels as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies.^{vii} Jesus then begins a ministry of preaching and healing that quickly attracts a crowd, and, beginning with the Beatitudes,^{viii} he delivers his “Sermon on the Mount” for three full chapters, numbers 5, 6, and 7.

We sketch this overview to establish how we can observe the Matthean community seeking to understand their situation and appeal to their chosen audience with *deliberate* editorial decisions of the Jesus story.

In another paragraph, we can trace the next two chapters in some detail and reach the context of this morning's lesson:

As Chapter 8 begins, Jesus comes down from the mountainside [remember, *Sermon on the Mount*], and Matthew recounts an impressive series of miracles. In quick succession, Jesus cleanses a leper;^{ix} heals the Centurion’s servant at Capernaum;^x heals Peter’s mother-in-law, casting out demons and curing many others at her house;^{xi} calms a storm while boating across the sea with his friends;^{xii} sends the Gadarenes’ demons into a herd of swine and then shoos them off a cliff;^{xiii} heals a paralytic;^{xiv} brings the synagogue leader’s daughter back to life and heals the long-hemorrhaging woman (last week’s lesson);^{xv} restores sight to two blind men;^{xvi} and returns speech to a possessed man whose demon had made him mute.^{xvii} *Blammo, dos mas capitulos!*^{xviii}

Immediately before today’s appointment begins, a Pharisee concludes that series of miracles with an accusation: “By the ruler of the demons [this man] casts out demons.”^{xix} *Then* “Jesus went about all the cities and villages . . .”^{xx} This first line of our lesson reads almost identical to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry back in Chapter 4, verse 23: “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”

This repetition suggests Matthew's community considers the summary important, as more than throwaway transition. The setting of Jesus' teaching ("in their synagogues") keeps the Gospel trained on the Jewish community. With the sheer power of these many miracles reinforcing claims of Jesus as Messiah – note the word "every"^{xxxi} – the narrative counters that Pharisaic claim of Jesus' as demonic, noting instead "compassion" as his motivation to serve the crowds he encounters.^{xxii} Jesus then turns to his disciples and declares, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."^{xxiii}

In all this, we should feel the Matthean community purposefully arranging their treasured stories and sayings of Jesus. That is, their "editing" can reveal clues as to what Matthew's community was experiencing and how they understood it. Perhaps this cohort of early Christians had encountered religious leaders who accused them of demonic possession. Their Gospel counters that claim, for *Jesus* "summoned his twelve disciples and [*he*] gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness;"^{xxiv} Jesus empowers the disciples, not Legion.

Further, the model of "their" Jesus calls their community to generosity, calls them to understand the ornery crowds they meet as "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."^{xxv} Indeed, the difficulty of the people they meet only testifies to the "plentiful harvest;"^{xxvi} given the scale of the need, why, the disciples should *ask* to be sent out, clamoring for their mission. And the relative scarcity of apostles encourages Matthew's community to feel proud of their task, to feel special that they are among the *select* called to this evangelistic labor.

Finally, the succeeding catalogue of disciples^{xxvii} recalls Chapter 1's "begats," and this list also performs a genealogical function, allowing Matthew's community to understand themselves as borne of these faith-filled ancestors, to set themselves in the uninterrupted line of Jesus' intimates. Moreover, the apostolic roll call serves as a Cooperstown of sorts, a Hall of Fame to inspire the early Church to imagine their efforts might one day be memorialized and recalled with the same admiration and gratitude.

From your fifth-grade English class, do you remember the term "onomatopoeia"?

For one thing, it is as fun to say as it is unintuitive to spell: *onomatopoeia* ... *onomatopoeia* ... has a certain rhythm to it. "Onomatopoeia" is a word that either creates the sound to which it refers, or phonetically points to its referent in some conspicuous way. These are comic-book words that end in an exclamation point, like "Splat!" and "Bang!" These are words from the animal kingdom, like "cuckoo" and "buzz." These are domestic words, like "sizzle," perhaps as in bacon on a Father's Day morning. With onomatopoeia, referent and reference, symbol and signified, *merge*, become one.

In the "Missionary Discourse," Jesus commends us to a *spiritual* onomatopoeia.

As the lesson continues, Jesus' commission once more reiterates Matthew's priority for the Jewish community – go “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,”^{xxviii} he commends – and he sends the disciples to abide the pattern of his own ministry, that one we just heard repeated from Chapter 4: “proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.”^{xxix}

Jesus further explains that the synchronicity of the disciples' faith and mission cannot depend upon the worldly reassurances of silver or gold; not of favored staffs or spare tunics; not even upon external affirmation.^{xxx} Rather, their strength must depend entirely on the greater promises of their God; as God has been generous, so they should be generous – and, moreover, welcoming to the generosity of those gracious strangers they encounter.^{xxxi}

As we approach the challenging words of this pericope's conclusion, Jesus challenges his disciples to demonstrate self-differentiation (to use a therapeutic term). Jesus urges us to marry our belief and our behavior, that the referent of our faith would be self-evident, *no matter the hardships of our circumstance, no matter the difficulty of our company*. We should not give other people permission to determine how we will behave, and our “evangelism” should not require either arguments or exposition. Instead, the character of our lives – our individual life and our community's life – would all declare God's Good News, acknowledging the cruciform world, yet announcing that our God is Love, before and above all hurt!

Jesus commissions us to embody God's hope, to embody God's justice, to embody God's freedom – not only by what we do, but by who we *are*. This is our spiritual onomatopoeia, and that consonance is both our savvy and our innocence,^{xxxii} all that we need for the good work God has given us to do. Indeed, that loving accord of spirit and substance will become the *miracle* of our ministry – God's blessing for us, and our Grace for the whole world.

That we would make this our life together;
I pray with gladness and singleness of heart,
Amen.

ⁱ From Psalm 31.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 1:1. The genealogy runs through verse 17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 1:18-2:23.

^{iv} Matthew 3:13-

^v Matthew 4:1-11.

^{vi} Matthew 4:18-22.

^{vii} Matthew 4:12-17. Quoting from Isaiah: There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations” (9:1).

^{viii} Matthew 5:1-11.

^{ix} Matthew 8:1-4.

^x Matthew 8:5-13.

^{xi} Matthew 8:14-17.

^{xii} Matthew 8:23-27.

^{xiii} Matthew 8:28-34.

^{xiv} Matthew 9:2-8.

^{xv} Matthew 9:18-26.

^{xvi} Matthew 9:27-31.

^{xvii} Matthew 9:32-33.

^{xviii} Matthew interrupts these miracles only once, with two short dialogues in Chapter 8: “Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side [of the sea]” – that’s when he would calm the storm; then – “A scribe then approached and said, ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’ Another of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead’” (8:18-22). The scribe – an expert in Jewish Law, resharpening Matthew’s focus – promises commitment to Jesus, yet Jesus follows with an unexpected turn, responding that he has nowhere to find peace. The lament lands as rude and insulting; it sounds as though Jesus protests the burden of the scribe’s faithfulness. Without a transition, another one of his followers makes what feels like a reasonable request, and Jesus questions *his* fidelity. In some scholarly circles, the difficulty of these sayings lends credibility as “true” sayings of the historical Jesus. Like the difficult elements of today’s appointment, we – like the Matthean community – should subordinate the variances from Jesus’ core message, rather than allow the exceptions to judge the standards.

^{xix} Matthew 9:34.

^{xx} Matthew 9:35.

^{xxi} Ibid.

^{xxii} Matthew 9:36a.

^{xxiii} Matthew 9:36b.

^{xxiv} Matthew 10:1.

^{xxv} Matthew 9:36.

^{xxvi} Matthew 9:37-38.

^{xxvii} Matthew 10:2-4.

^{xxviii} Matthew 10:5-6.

^{xxix} Matthew 10:7-8.

^{xxx} Matthew 10:9-15. I move briskly across some of these harder sayings! The principles from the earlier footnote endure here: the difficult words serve the core message of Good News, not the other way around. The Matthean community received their inherited stories of Jesus and invited them to speak into *their* contemporary situation. We should do the same, though taking care not to fit ourselves into the most convenient characters, eg: “This is a powerful story, and, in it, I relate *so much* to Jesus. My children and my colleagues and my neighbors so often will not do what I have told them to do.” Umm, *no*. Maybe frame our pursuit of connections to the Jesus story as questions: Are we at Trinity Church “worthy”? How well do we welcome?

^{xxxi} Matthew 10:8b-10.

^{xxxii} Matthew 10:16. “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”