

You Are Blessed!

February 2, 2020

UMCG

For the remainder of this year, we will be preaching from the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C. Year C primarily centers on the Gospel of Matthew, hence you'll be hearing many sermons from Matthew in the coming weeks and months. So...it is very important that we know some basic things about Matthew's Gospel...Matthew's story of Jesus.

For starters, who was Matthew? Well...we really don't know! Church tradition from the 2nd century CE suggested, with no definitive proof, that the author was Matthew the tax collector, a disciple of Jesus. Based on the text itself, most scholars today surmise that the unknown author was a converted Rabbi or synagogue ruler who was thoroughly familiar with the Jewish scriptures. Hence, Matthew is the most "Jewish" of all the Gospels.

Next, when was this Gospel written? Most scholars place the writing around 90 CE, or at least 80-90 CE.

So, what was the larger historical context? 90 CE was 20 years after the Romans brutally quelled a Jewish uprising in their small colony of Palestine in 70 CE. The city of Jerusalem, with its Temple – center of worship for Jews world-wide – was utterly destroyed. No longer would sacrifices be offered there. No longer would God dwell in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. Loss of the temple forever changed the Jewish religion, and Christianity as well. Prior to 70 CE, a number of Jewish religious groups or sects existed in and around Jerusalem. You know some of these. There were Pharisees and Sadducees, the Essene community at Qumran, Zealots (revolutionaries who resorted to armed violence) and Herodians (supporters of the Herodian kings). And – there were Jewish followers of Jesus. These Jewish disciples saw themselves...and were regarded by other Jews...*as just one more Jewish sect* that arose following the death of Jesus around 30 CE. What differentiated them from other Jews was their belief that Jesus was the Messiah.

The book of Acts in the NT tells us that these Jewish disciples of Jesus met regularly at the Temple in Jerusalem for worship. After Rome's destruction of

Jerusalem and the temple, only two Jewish sects remained! The Pharisees and the Jewish followers of Jesus. The Pharisees quickly morphed into what is now called Rabbinic Judaism, centered on the Torah and the synagogue. At the same time, Jesus's followers increasingly distanced themselves from the Pharisees and their synagogues, eventually forming a new religion – Christianity – that generally met in believers' homes.

To whom did “Matthew” write his story? In other words – who was the audience? Matthew wrote his story to a predominantly Jewish audience of Jesus-followers who were in the process of opening up to Gentiles at the very same time they were separating from Rabbinic Judaism. (For example, the Great Commission, found in Matthew 28:16 -20, is crystal clear that the mission of Matthew's community was the world-wide spread of the Gospel to all nations – the Gentiles). Based on the text itself, the Gospel was likely written to fairly wealthy persons living in an urban setting, possibly the city of Antioch in Syria, north of Jerusalem.

Why was Matthew written? Matthew sought to shape the identity, the self-understanding, of members of this new, predominantly Jewish religious community of Jesus followers. Matthew addresses concerns that all Jewish people were dealing with in the wake of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE: How is God present with us now? What is the continuing value of the Torah (Law)? How will God's promises to Israel be fulfilled now? How does this newly emerging form of Jewish/Gentile religious community – the church – both retain aspects of Judaism while seeking to separate from Rabbinic Judaism? Of course, the main point of contention was whether or not Jesus was the Messiah. Rabbinic Judaism said “no.” Jewish followers of Jesus said “yes.”

In a way, Matthew walks that tight rope so many adolescents and young adults have walked as they seek to retain ties with their families of origin, while at the same time individuating, breaking some of those familial ties and forging their own identity. In an effort to retain ties with Judaism, Matthew goes to great lengths to point out in his genealogy that Jesus the Messiah's ancestry follows the line of King David, all the way back to Abraham, the founding patriarch of Israel.

Likewise, Matthew is the only Gospel to emphasize throughout that Jesus is the new Moses, the new liberator and Savior of God's people. After all, both Moses and Jesus escaped infanticide by maniacal rulers. Both spent time in Egypt (Moses was born there and grew up in Pharaoh's family, Jesus's family fled King Herod's infanticide by escaping to Egypt). Both Moses and Jesus left Egypt in order to save God's people. Both Moses and Jesus ascended a mountain to receive God's word, God's Law for the people. Moses ascended Mt. Sinai to receive Torah, the Law, directly from God. Thus, Jesus, the new Moses, in today's Gospel lesson, ascends a mountain and reveals to his 12 disciples (symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel) God's revised Torah, or law, that builds upon, yet exceeds the Mosaic law...thus breaking some ties with Judaism. Fascinating, eh!

So, Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) begins with Beatitudes – eight in all. For starters, who is Jesus addressing in Matthew 5:1-12? Although accompanied by a great crowd, the 12 disciples are Jesus's real audience. He pulls them aside, and in Rabbinical fashion, sits down and teaches them. The crowds, however, are there to remind those first disciples, and us, of who we are and the deep commitment it takes to submit to Jesus's kingdom values. Second, what in the world is a "beatitude?" A beatitude is simply a blessing, an announcement of God's approval, God's favor. In a culture whose highest values revolved around honor and shame, Jesus in effect, blesses and bestows honor on his followers. The beatitudes could be read, "How honorable are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and so forth." Note that such blessing, such honor and favor, are both present and future. Each beatitude uses the verbs *are* and *will*, indicating what is true now about Jesus's followers, and what will be true of them (of us) hopefully in this life, but definitely in God's future kingdom when God's new creation will be completely established. For example, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth, etc."

New Testament scholar *Fred Craddock admonishes preachers NOT to turn these blessings into commands, NOT to legalistically push and exhort parishioners to "work at" producing these qualities. As he puts it, "It is more difficult to hear and receive a blessing than to attempt to achieve one...God's favor precedes all our endeavors. In fact, all our efforts at kingdom living are in

response to divine grace. In this regard, the Sermon on the Mount begins as Moses's Ten Commandments begin, with a statement of God's gracious initiative: "I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of bondage." (Exodus 20:2) Craddock goes on to say, "Most importantly, God's blessing, favor and honor are granted to those whom society regards as the ones left behind: the poor in spirit, the mourners, the merciful, those hungering for justice, the pure-hearted, the makers of peace, those mistreated for the cause of justice. On these Jesus bestows honor and blessing."

**Professor David Lose points out that "Jesus lived in a culture of honor and shame and defied both cultural norms by offering blessing. We live in a culture of affirmation and blame, and need also to defy both by offering blessing. Affirmation. We crave it. Have you noticed how often our children receive medals, ribbons and trophies merely for "participation" ...for just showing up! Affirmation is nice and good. But often it is empty. Then there's blame. It's become a national past time. It's our politicians' fault, right? It's the referee's fault, my teacher's fault, my parent's or my children's fault, and so on. Blame is a way of discharging pain and disappointment without taking any responsibility."

"In short, we've been taught to pursue happiness, settle for affirmation, and — when neither of those work out—relapse into blame. So...in place of empty affirmation and corrosive blame, let's substitute blessing—God's unconditional regard for us, assurance to accompany us, power to help us persevere and flourish, and God's promise that we deserve love, honor, and respect."

Blessing is something that can't be pursued or achieved. It can only be received as gift. And having received God's blessing—let's in turn bless others!

Amen.

*Fred Craddock, *The Christian Century*, January 24, 1990.

**David Lose, *Dear Working Preacher*, January 28, 2014.