

TAKE A LOOK AT MATTHEW'S BOOK

Insights and conversation starters
for the Gospel according to St. Matthew
in thirty sections.

A resource for the *Book of Faith* initiative
within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



book of faith

Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.



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TAKE A LOOK AT MATTHEW'S BOOK

The first gospel in the New Testament (but not the first to be written) is named after a tax collector, Matthew, who became one of Jesus' twelve main disciples. However, the book is anonymous, and it is anybody's guess who actually wrote it.

Whoever it was, the *author wrote in Greek*, not in Aramaic, the native language of Palestinian Jews like Jesus and his friends. It was the everyday Greek which ordinary people used throughout the Roman Empire for business and personal matters, not the literary Greek used by philosophers and historians and other serious writers. The author may have been a former Pharisee or scribe, someone trained in studying the Jewish scriptures.

Matthew's version of the story of Jesus is based on at least *two other documents*. One is the gospel of Mark which most scholars think was written around 70 CE, shortly before or after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. Matthew follows Mark's outline in most respects. In many cases Matthew abbreviates Mark's anecdotes, and frequently improves Mark's grammar.

The other source—commonly referred to as “Q”—is a reconstructed collection of Jesus' sayings based on teachings which appear in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark. The author's additions and revisions to these sources emphasize the idea that Jesus is the fulfillment of the old messianic promises and that the church is a properly constituted descendant with Israel as the people of God.

This gospel has several *distinctively Jewish traits*: The scriptures are quoted over sixty times, usually in the wording of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus sometimes teaches in the style of a rabbi, even though he rejects that title for himself.

Because Jews are often reluctant to utter the word “God,” Matthew refers to “the kingdom of heaven” where the other gospels talk about “the kingdom of God.” Some of the narratives are in the style of a midrash, a rabbinic commentary on a biblical text. Five balanced discourses spread throughout the narrative reflect the influence of the Pentateuch, the five Books of Moses.

The book probably originated around 85-90 CE in the vicinity of Antioch, on the coast of Syria. Its *original audience* would have been an urban, moderately well-to-do Jewish-Christian congregation which was experiencing opposition from the older established synagogues. Its purpose was to encourage and direct Christian communities as they struggled to establish themselves apart from their former Jewish institutions.

In Matthew two ideas color the *picture of Jesus*: He is a royal *king*, the “Messiah” or “Christ” or “Anointed One” greater than Moses, who was promised from olden times to rule God's people in the End Time.

And he is preeminently a *teacher*, whose instructions and commands intensify and surpass the ancient Torah. His demands call for a righteousness that is higher than the ethic of the rabbis, but his imperatives are grounded in the indicative of divine mercy and blessing on those who understand and respond in trust.

The content of Jesus' teaching is summarized in the so-called “golden rule” and the double command to love God and one's neighbor. His law is directed to acts of mercy for those who are less well off.

The *community of the church* is modeled by the disciples, who live as a family or household, and who follow the way of righteousness. They exist to carry out the mission of their risen Lord, confident that he is always with them as “Emmanuel.”

Matthew's gospel may not work as an organizational constitution for congregations today, and its seeming polemic against the Jewish leaders may sound like an anti-Semitic bias to our modern ears.

But as *21st century readers* we need to recognize that Matthew's critique was directed against the kinds of hypocrisy or double-mindedness in which good inner motives are not matched by outward action, in which outwardly righteous actions are contradicted by an opposite inner disposition, or in which professed love for God is inconsistent with poor treatment of others.

From this perspective Matthew's agenda for disciples who will be personally committed to following Jesus at some cost or personal sacrifice is still a valid challenge for us modern men and women.

As we study this document we can approach it on several levels. One way is to ask how these teachings and actions would have been interpreted in ***Jesus' original historical environment***. He seems to have ministered primarily in the villages of rural Galilee and its environs, not in the larger cities. How would the Jewish peasants with whom he worked have interpreted his teachings and healings and other actions?

A second approach is to ask how this particular narrative of Jesus would have resonated with the members of ***the mixed urban community in which Matthew first circulated***, a decade or two after Jerusalem had been destroyed and the center of Jewish leaning had migrated from Jerusalem to centers farther north. How would a group of Gentile and Jewish Christians have reacted to this story of Jesus' ministry, including his crucifixion and resurrection?

A third angle is to ask how all of this relates to ***the lives of modern readers*** who are 2,000 years removed from those events. The customs and cultural norms of the ancient Greco-Roman world are largely foreign to the values of middle-class American readers. How can we appropriate this story in a way which will impact our personal lives in particular as well as our larger society?

This series of exercises in reading Matthew's gospel has been prepared in conjunction with the ***BOOK OF FAITH INITIATIVE***, a movement within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Its goal is to enable our people to become "more fluent in the first language of our faith, the language of Scripture." It is a practical way for us to start living out our calling as disciples of Christ Jesus.

It assumes that we value the Scriptures as the "written Word of God," because they are the basis for our "proclaimed Word of God," which bears witness to the "incarnate Word of God," who is Jesus Christ himself.

The ***BOOK OF FAITH INITIATIVE*** is based on the idea that we can read the biblical documents from four

perspectives: "literary," "historical," theological," and "devotional." Attention to these will keep us from thinking of the Bible as an "answer book" for our questions. Instead, reading the Scriptures will become the means by which we are drawn into a relationship with the living God.

Literary analysis of narrative materials focuses on the characters, plot and setting of any story. Ask: Who are the main characters, and with which ones would you identify? What is the plot of the story, and how does its setting affect its emotional tone?

Historical analysis focuses on the context in which the narrative originated. Ask: Who wrote this? When? Where? Why? To whom? Did the author use other sources? Does it agree with, or contradict, other writings? How would it have been understood and used by its original readers?

Theological analysis explores the ongoing message or teaching of the text. Do we hear a text as Law, or as Gospel? Is it a word of command and condemnation, or promise and hope? Does it apply to our personal, family and churchly lives? Does it apply to our community, social and political lives?

Devotional analysis connects our Bible study with our prayer life. Does a passage call us to repentance? Or to action on behalf of our neighbor? Does it help us feel closer to God? Does it lift our spirits, and offer comfort or encouragement?

The ***thirty discussion starters*** which follow are not actually a running commentary on Matthew; rather they are a series of insights into the text coupled with questions which are meant to provoke reflection and conversation. Do not feel obligated to respond to all of them. Some you may want to skip. Some may ignite extended discussion.

At least that is how it worked for the people of Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church in south Minneapolis, who accepted the invitation to ***Take a Look at Matthew's Book*** with me during the time I was privileged to serve as their Interim Pastor from 2010 to 2012. I trust your journey through this gospel will also be a God-blessed venture.

TAKE A LOOK AT MATTHEW'S BOOK

THE PERSON OF JESUS THE CHRIST

Matthew 1:1-4:16

1. Genealogy (1:1-17)
2. Birth (1:18-2:23)
Joseph's dream – magi's visit to Bethlehem – escape to Egypt – murder of children – return to Nazareth
3. Preparation (3:1-12)
John the Baptist - preaching in Judean desert
4. Inauguration (3:13-4:16)
baptism by John – testing by the devil – move to Capernaum

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS THE CHRIST

Matthew 4:17-16:20

5. Initial ministry in Galilee (4:17-25)
four disciples called – teaching and healing throughout Galilee
- 1st **Discourse:** Teachings on discipleship (5:1-20)
beatitudes – salt & light – greater righteousness
6. 1st **Discourse, continued** (5:21-6:18)
Scribal teachings: murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, love – Pharisaic piety: alms, prayer, fasting
7. 1st **Discourse, continued** (6:19-7:27)
treasures – seeing & serving – worry – judging – asking & receiving – two gates, trees, builders
8. Demonstrations of Messianism (7:28-9:1)
leper, centurion's boy & Peter's mother-in-law healed – storm calmed – Gadarene demoniac freed
9. Demonstrations, continued (9:2-34)
paraplegic healed – Matthew called – fasting – dead daughter, bleeding woman, blind men & demoniacs healed
10. 2nd **Discourse:** Directives for missionaries (9:35-10:42)
compassion for crowds – twelve disciples – minimal supplies – harassments – fears – family troubles – rewards
11. Israel's rejection of Jesus (11:1-30)
John's doubts & Jesus' responses – condemnation of Bethsaida & Capernaum – prayer to the Father
12. Rejection, continued (12:1-50)
harvesting & healing on sabbath – demoniac healed & Beelzebul controversy – request for signs – Jesus' true family
13. 3rd **Discourse:** Parables on the Kingdom (13:1-52)
seed & soils- weeds in wheat – mustard – yeast – buried treasure – pearl – dragnet – plus various explanations
14. Withdrawal from Israel (13:53-14:33)
rejection at Nazareth – John the Baptist murdered – 5,000 fed – walk on water
15. Withdrawal, continued (14:34-15:20)
sick healed at Gennesaret – controversy on kosher traditions – defilement
16. Ministry outside of Israel (15:21-16:20)
Canaanite woman's daughter healed – many healed & 4,000 fed – request for sign – warnings against yeast/teachings of Pharisees & Sadducees – Peter's declaration at Caesarea Philippi

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST

Matthew 16:21-28:20

17. Anticipation of suffering in Jerusalem (16:21-17:27)
1st passion prediction – transfiguration – epileptic boy healed – 2nd passion prediction – temple tax
18. **4th Discourse:** Instructions on life in the church (18:1-35)
welcoming a child – offenses – parable of lost sheep – sinning brother – parable of unforgiving slave
19. Journey to Jerusalem (19:1-29)
teaching in Transjordan: divorce – children blessed – rich man departs – riches
20. Journey, continued (19:30-20:34)
parable of vineyard workers – 3rd passion prediction – Zebedees' mother's request – two blind men healed
21. Entrance into Jerusalem and the temple (21:1-17)
parade into city – temple desecrated
22. Controversies in the temple (21:18-22:14)
fig tree cursed – authority questioned – parables of two sons, tenant farmers, and royal wedding
23. Controversies, continued (22:15-46)
taxes to Caesar – resurrection of the dead – great commandment – David's son
24. Condemnation of religious leaders (23:1-24:2)
Moses' seat – woes for hypocrites – Jerusalem mourned – temple abandoned
25. **5th Discourse:** Prophecies of the End Time (24:3-51)
warnings: wars & persecution, Daniel's horror, the Son of Man, fig tree – unknown hour – faithful & unfaithful slaves
26. **5th Discourse,** continued (25:1-46)
parables of ten bridesmaids, talents, sheep & goats
27. Arrest during the Passover (26:1-56)
priests' plot & Judas' betrayal – anointing at Bethany – supper in Jerusalem – warning of desertion on Mt. of Olives
– prayer in Gethsemane – capture by crowd – disciples escape
28. Condemnation by the religious leaders (26:57-27:10)
hearings at high priest's home – Peter's denials – Judas' remorse
29. Execution by the Roman governor (27:11-56)
trial before Pilate – Barabbas released & Jesus condemned – mocking by soldiers – crucifixion at Golgotha
– darkness & death – earthquake
30. Burial, Resurrection and Commissioning (27:57-28:20)
burial by Joseph – tomb guarded – women & angel at empty tomb – guards' report – disciples gathered in Galilee

THE PERSON OF JESUS THE CHRIST (1:1-4:16)

1. Genealogy (1:1-17)

*Almighty God your Son our Savior called a despised tax collector to become one of his apostles. Help us, like Matthew, to respond to the transforming call of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (ELW #211) **

Read Matthew 1:1.

- (1) In Greek the opening words of this gospel are *biblos geneleos* or “book of genesis.” Do you think the author wanted readers to compare this story with the first book of the Bible?
- (2) Let’s get this straight: “Jesus” is his name; “Christ” is his title. *Joshua* or *Yeshua* was a common boy’s name in Jewish circles. In its Greek form it is *Iesous* or, as we say in English, *Jesus*. It means “Yah[weh] saves,” or “the Lord rescues [us].” From what you may already know about his story, does this name accurately describe Jesus’ work? If so, how?
- (3) *Meshiach* (or *Messiah* in English) is a Hebrew word. When translated into Greek, it is *Christos* (or *Christ*). When translated into English, they mean *Anointed*. For Jewish people, *Messiah* or *Christ* or *Anointed* was a way of referring to their king, as a descendant of David (see 2 Samuel 2:4 & 5:3), whose royal line was to last forever (see 2 Samuel 7:[11-]16.)

In other words, *Messiah* or *Christ* or *Anointed* was a political title. Jesus, of course, never held a political office of any kind; he was never literally a king. In fact, he ended his life executed as an enemy of the state. Yet his earliest followers pinned the title *Christ* on him, and apparently believed it was true! How could they expect anyone to agree that a crucified criminal was actually a royal ruler?

Read Matthew 1:2-17.

- (4) Jesus’ genealogy is divided into three sections of exactly fourteen generations each. From Abraham (the father of the Jews) to King David (the first “Christ”) to the Exile (when there was no king or “Christ”) to Jesus (who is called “Christ”). The pattern is almost too perfect. Does it bother you that the second series is missing four kings (see 1 Chronicles 3:10-24)? Or that the third series has only 13 generations? Or that the list does not agree with Luke 4:23-38 (which, by the way, takes Jesus’ genealogy all the way back to Adam, “the son of God”)?
- (5) Most ancient genealogies do not include women. Matthew names four of Jesus’ female ancestors. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites. Ruth was a Moabitess. And Bathsheba (who is not actually named) was the wife of Uriah the Hittite. All were foreigners, non-Jews. Does this tell us something about the mission of Jesus and his followers?
- (6) The four were also “sexually suspect.” Tamar pretended to be a prostitute to lure her father-in-law Judah into getting her pregnant (see Genesis 38). Rahab was the prostitute who sheltered Israelite spies (see Joshua 2). Ruth seduced Boaz at his threshing floor (see Ruth 3). And Bathsheba was seduced by King David (see 2 Samuel 11), who then had her husband killed. The fifth woman named is Mary, whose pregnancy also made her “suspect.” What do you think of that?
- (7) The verbs in the genealogy are all in the active voice: “So-and-so begat what’s-his name; what’s-his-name begat who’s-your-mom,” etc. But the end of the list changes to the passive voice: “Jacob begat Joseph, the husband of Mary, *of whom was begotten* Jesus called Christ.” Does this detail seem significant?

(8) One could conclude from his genealogy that Jesus was truly human, but *very* special! Do you agree?

* All prayers are from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Leaders Desk Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), pp. 60-160.

THE PERSON OF JESUS THE CHRIST (1:1-4:16)

2. Birth (1:18-2:23)

Joseph's dream – magi's visit to Bethlehem – escape to Egypt – murder of children – return to Nazareth

Almighty and ever-living God, you revealed your Son to the nations by the leading of a star. Lead us now by faith to know your presence in our lives, and bring us at last to the full vision of your glory, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (ELW #21)

- (9) Matthew's story of Jesus' birth is remarkable in two ways. First, it is patterned in part on the story of Moses (see Exodus 1-2). Both accounts have babies endangered by a king; both have a setting, at least in part, in Egypt. Can you think of other parallels between these two?
- (10) Second, Matthew's version centers on Joseph, unlike Luke's story which focuses on Mary (see Luke 1:26-56, 2:1-51). Would Jesus' paternal connection have been important for Matthew's original audience? For us today?

Read Matthew 1:18-25.

- (11) Joseph is described as a "righteous" man. The English terms "righteous" and "just" translate the same Greek term, *dikaios*. "Justice" or "righteousness" is a prominent theme in the gospel. Highlight the term in these verses and notice how it is used:

1:19	6:33	11:19	20:4, 7	25:37, 46
3:15	9:13	12:37	21:32	27:19, 24
5:6, 20, 45	10:41	13:17, 42, 49	23:28, 29, 35	

- (12) It would have been scandalous, of course, for an engaged woman to become pregnant before she had intercourse with her husband. So it takes the appearance of "an angel of the Lord" in a dream (see also Matthew 2:12, 13, 19, 22) to convince Joseph that this case is exceptional: Mary's "virginal conception" is the work of the Holy Spirit! Do you find this credible?
- (13) More importantly, Joseph learns the child is to be named "Jesus," which means that "he will save his people from their sins." (See item #2 in the previous section.) What could this mean? Who are "his people"? What are "their sins"? How can he "save" them?

Read Matthew 2:1-12.

- (14) Let's be clear about the details: The eastern visitors are unnamed. They are magi—that is, wise magicians, likely astrologers—not kings. We don't know their number, just that they bring three kinds of gifts. No camels or any other beasts of burden are mentioned. The star is a miraculous astral body, not a comet or a planet. Jesus is a two-year old toddler living in a house, not a babe in a manger. What, if anything, does this suggest about our celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany on December 25 and January 6?
- (15) Herod was the legitimate "King of the Jews," in the service of the Roman Empire. Does the magi's search for "the child who has been born king of the Jews" have any political implications for Jesus' ministry? For Matthew's original community? For us today?
- (16) The magi's posture (kneeling in homage) and their royal gifts (gold, incense, myrrh) suggest that Jesus' is someone truly special. If we were telling the story today, what modern gestures and bequests would signal our high opinion of Jesus?

Read Matthew 2:13-18.

- (17) Joseph flees to Egypt with “the child and his mother” to escape the murder of the rest of the toddlers in Bethlehem. Does this seem fair? Does “the divine plan” require the death of innocent bystanders?
- (18) The joy of the first part of the story, with its star, magi and royal gifts, is countered by the sadness of the second part, with its desperate escape and the murder of children. Does this pattern ring true with your experience? Can you think of examples in today’s world?

Read Matthew 2:19-25.

- (19) After the death of Herod the Great (who ruled 37-4 BCE), his son Herod Archilaeus succeeded him as ethnarch of Judea, Samaria and Idumea in the south (4 BCE-6 CE), and his other son Herod Antipas ruled as tetrarch of Galilee and Perea in the north (4 BCE-39 CE). So instead of returning to their home in Bethlehem of Judea, Joseph resettles his family in the village of Nazareth in Galilee. Do you think this was a wise move?

Reread Matthew 1:22-23, 2:5-6, 2:15, 2:17-18 & 2:23.

- (20) Fourteen so-called “fulfillment passages” are scattered throughout this gospel, seven in the opening section (Matthew 1:1-4:6), five in this subsection. Examine carefully how Matthew uses—or misuses?—passages from the Jewish scriptures.

Matthew 1:22-23 quotes **Isaiah 7:4**, which says that a young woman of marriageable age will give birth to a son and name him “Immanuel” to indicate that “God is with us” when Israel’s enemies retreat. How does this relate to Jesus’ birth? Is it about Mary’s virginity? Or about naming her child “Emmanuel”? Or both?
- (21) Matthew 2:5-6 quotes from **Micah 5:2** and **2 Samuel 5:2** to connect Jesus with Bethlehem, the city of David (see 1 Samuel 16:1 & 13). But it also suggests he will play the role of a shepherd. See whether and how this plays out later in the story.
- (22) Matthew 2:15 quotes **Hosea 11:1**, which refers to the ancient Israelites’ *exodus from* the land of slavery. Matthew relates this to Jesus—as he *goes into* Egypt! What is the connection?
- (23) Matthew 2:17-18 quotes **Jeremiah 31:15**, which imagines the ancestress Rachel weeping from the traditional site of her tomb north of Bethlehem (see Genesis 35:19-20; Ramah is actually located north of Jerusalem in Benjaminite territory, see 1 Samuel 10:2) as her descendants are led into exile. We imagine this resonates with the feelings of the parents of the massacred children. Does this appeal to your emotions draw you into the story?
- (24) Matthew 2:23 asserts that “the prophets” connect the title “Nazorean” with Jesus’ new home town of “Nazareth.” However, there is no passage in any biblical book, in the apocrypha, or in the Jewish pseudepigraphal books which actually says, “He shall be called a Nazorean”! What do you think of that?
- (25) Some people hold that the passages Matthew quotes are predictions of events which have come true in Jesus’ life. Others maintain that the ancient texts have been “filled up” with new meaning in the context of Jesus’ ministry. Which approach do you think is most helpful?

THE PERSON OF JESUS THE CHRIST (1:1-4:16)

3. Preparation (3:1-12)

John the Baptist - preaching in Judean desert

Almighty God, by your gracious providence your servant John the Baptist was born to Elizabeth and Zechariah. Grant to your people the wisdom to see your purpose and the openness to hear your will, that the light of Christ may increase in us, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #203)

Read Matthew 3:1-6.

- (26) Jewish tradition included a number of washing ceremonies in which people could bathe themselves and become ritually “clean” (see Leviticus 15 & Numbers 19). John adds a new twist to this custom: He washes the people who come to him. Hence he becomes known as “John the Bather,” or “John the Baptizer.” (The Greek term *baptizo* means “to wash” or “to bathe.”) Does the distinction between actively “washing yourself” and passively “being washed by someone else” make a real difference? If so, in what way?
- (27) The sixth “fulfillment passage” in this gospel relates to John. Matthew 3:3 quotes **Isaiah 40:3**, which says that a prophetic voice tells the people to prepare a road through the wilderness of Arabia in order that the Lord God can escort Jewish exiles in Babylon back to Judea. Matthew treats this as a voice in the wilderness crying to the people to prepare a way for the Lord Jesus to arrive. In other words, “A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way....” is changed to “A voice cries in the wilderness: Prepare the way....” How about that?
- (28) John’s camel’s-hair-and-leather-belt wardrobe and his locusts-and-honey diet and his out-in-the-wasteland locale mark him as an ascetic prophet, like Elijah of old (see 2 Kings 1:8). With this background, do you think his message—“Repent, heaven’s kingdom is near!”—is positive or negative?

Read Matthew 3:7-12.

- (29) The Pharisees were a pious movement within Judaism intent on observing the ancient traditions and observing the Law of Moses as scrupulously as possible. The Sadducees were a powerful upper-class family which made accommodations with the Roman occupation forces. They were not allies! Yet throughout Matthew they are often linked as opponents of Jesus. Here John calls them “snakes” and rejects their desire to be baptized. Is this fair?
- (30) John calls his a baptism with water for repentance, but he predicts a “more powerful one”—an obvious reference to Jesus—will come with holy spirit and fire to burn...whom? The Pharisees and Sadducees? The unrepentant? Did Jesus ever actually do this?
- (31) Some would like to contrast John’s baptism for *repentance* with the Christians’ baptism for *forgiveness*. Is this distinction helpful? Is it accurate? Does it reflect your own understanding of your own baptism?

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THE PERSON OF JESUS THE CHRIST (1:1-4:16)

4. Inauguration (3:13-4:16)

baptism by John – testing by the devil – move to Capernaum

O God our Father, at the baptism of Jesus you proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized into Christ faithful to their calling to be your daughters and sons, and empower us all with your Spirit, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #24)

Read Matthew 3:13-17.

- (32) Jesus' baptism by John must have been something of an embarrassment for the early church. **Mark (1:9-11)** closely links his baptism and temptation. **Matthew** here all but apologizes for it. **Luke (3:21-22)** gives the impression Jesus was baptized after John's arrest, and doesn't even mention the Jordan River. **John (1:29-34)** names the Baptist and the Spirit's descent, but omits the actual baptism! How do you react to the idea that Jesus needed to be baptized? Or did he?
- (33) Jesus' first word in this gospel is his insistence that being baptized is part of his agenda "to fulfill all *righteousness*?" It's an ethical term (see item #10 on a previous page) related to one's conduct and behavior. What could this mean? To fulfill a Scripture? (It's the same term as in the "fulfillment passages.") To obey the law? To make John's prediction come true? To identify with sinful humanity? What?
- (34) Jesus—only Jesus?—sees the sky open up and the pigeon fly down. But the Voice addresses whom? John? The crowd? Us? And what does it mean for God to identify Jesus as his "beloved Son"?

Read Matthew 4:1-11.

- (35) Note that it is the Spirit who takes Jesus into the wasteland to be tempted or tested by the devil (*diabolos*). His forty days of fasting reminds one of the ancient Israelites' forty years wandering in the wilderness. They failed their tests; Jesus passes his.
- First, the Israelites complained because they were starving (see Exodus 16:1-4). In the wilderness Jesus quotes a line from **Deuteronomy 8:3** to affirm that _____.
- (36) Next, at Massah the Israelites doubted God's protection and complained of thirst (see Exodus 17:1-7). Atop the temple, Jesus' counters the devil's use of **Psalms 91:11-12** and quotes **Deuteronomy 6:16** to insist that _____.
- (37) Finally, at Mount Sinai the Israelites worshiped a golden calf. On another mountain Jesus sends "Satan" away and quotes **Deuteronomy 6:13** to emphasize that _____.
(By the way, the term "Satan" occurs only one more time in this gospel. Look for it!)
- (38) The devil's offer of the "kingdoms of the world" is an obvious contrast with "kingdom of heaven." Highlight this key term in the rest of the gospel.

3:2	8:11, 12	13:11, 19, 24,	18:1, 3, 4,	22:2
4:17, 23	9:35	31, 33, 38,	25	23:13
5:3, 10, 19, 20	10:7	41, 43, 44,	19:12, 14,	24:7, 14
6:10, 15	11:11, 12	45, 47, 52	23, 24	25:1, 14, 34
7:21	12:25, 26, 28	16:19, 28	20:1, 21	26:29

Read Matthew 4:12-16.

(39) Note the progression. Jesus returns from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north and to his hometown of Nazareth. But then he moves to Capernaum! Do you think he was disloyal to his family?

(40) The seventh “fulfillment passage” reflects on this change in geography.

Matthew 3:15-16 quotes **Isaiah 9:1-2**, which originally was recited at the coronation of a new king, one who might restore the provinces captured by the Assyrians. In reference to Jesus, they suggest that he will be a great light dawning on people who live in the dark shadow of death. Wow! What a vision! What do you suppose will happen when the story of Jesus continues?

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (4:17-16:20)

5. Initial ministry in Galilee (4:17-25)

four disciples called – teaching and healing throughout Galilee

FIRST DISCOURSE: Teachings on discipleship (5:1-20)

beatitudes – salt & light – greater righteousness

Holy Father, you confound the world's wisdom in giving your kingdom to the lowly and the pure in heart. Give us such a hunger and thirst for justice, and perseverance in striving for peace, that in our words and deeds the world may see the life of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #33)

Read Matthew 4:17.

- (41) The phrase “from then Jesus began to...” marks a major turning point in the narrative. Highlight it here and again in Matthew 16:21.
- (42) The theme of Jesus’ preaching is the same as the Baptist’s (see Matthew 3:1-2). The Greek word *metanoia*, usually translated as “repent,” really means “turn around” or “change your mind.” Is this negative, “look out, the Kingdom is coming, so turn away from evil”? (See item #28 above.) Or is it positive, “turn toward the approaching Kingdom”?

Read Matthew 4:18-22.

- (43) Jesus calls two sets of brothers: Simon Peter and Andrew as they toss their throw nets, and James and John ben Zebedee as they repair their dragnets. They immediately forsake everything—fish, nets, boat, and father!—and follow Jesus. Is this extravagant, exaggerated response required of all disciples? Is it required of us?
- (44) Jesus turns them into “fishers of people.” Fish do not like to be caught. Do people?

Read Matthew 4:23-25.

- (45) This first summary of Jesus’ ministry also seems extravagant and exaggerated. Check the locales on a map: Galilee, Syria, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and Transjordan.

What follows is the first of the five major discourses which make up the bulk of Jesus’ teaching in this gospel. Although we call it the “**SERMON ON THE MOUNT**,” it is really mostly instruction, not proclamation. Four things to remember:

- This is parenetic material, that is, instructions for proper behavior.
- These are not universally valid ethical principles; they are intended specifically for followers of Jesus.
- They are not personal or individual directives; they are communal, intended for life in the community.
- They may be difficult to observe, but all are expected to obey them, not just an especially devoted elite class within the church.

Read Matthew 5:1-12.

- (46) Significant things happen on a mountain (see Matthew 3:8, 17:1, 24:2, 28:16). Here Jesus is seated in the posture of a rabbi. He “opens his mouth and teaches, saying...” (He couldn’t very well speak without opening his mouth!) This overly redundant phrase emphasizes the gravity of what

follows. What do you expect to hear when someone is about to deliver an important speech? When Jesus addresses crowds and/or disciples?

- (47) First comes a series of eight blessings or BEATITUDES. Some English versions mistranslate them as “Happy are those who...” However, these are not conditional requirements for being “happy,” as though Jesus were saying, “*If* you are poor in spirit, *then* you will have the kingdom,” or “*If* you are meek, *then* you will inherit the earth,” etc. Rather, they are pronouncements, in which Jesus asserts that God does bless those who are poor in spirit, or merciful, etc. A popular televangelist once called these the “Be Happy Attitudes”; would you agree?
- (48) Notice how well balanced they are. Four *conditions*—poor, mournful, meek, hungry—are followed by four *actions*—merciful, devoted, peacemakers, persecuted. The last in each foursome relates to “righteousness.” The entire series is bracketed, first and last, with references to “the kingdom of heaven.” Try to outline them in parallel columns.
- (49) Jesus here pronounces God’s blessing on the kinds of people who do not appear to be blessed, much less happy. It’s as though he wanted everyone in his audience of Galilean peasants to find their place and hear his good word. Do you identify with any of these eight situations?
- (50) An additional blessing—addressed to “you” who are reviled and persecuted—expands on the eighth beatitude. This may reflect the opposition which was being felt within Matthew’s own community. Does this represent the situation of the church in our day?

Read Matthew 5:11-16.

- (51) The beatitudes are followed by a COMMISSIONING. “You *are* salt and light,” says Jesus. A hill-top city or a lamp on a pole cannot help but be seen. Salt and light exist to benefit others. How can we function like salt or light?
- (52) This is the first mention of “your heavenly Father.” Matthew seldom refers to “God”; more often than not it’s “the heavenly Father.” Highlight these other references:

5:16, 45, 48	7:11, 21	12:50	18:10, 14,	25:34
6:1, 4, 6, 8,	10:20, 29,	13:43	19, 35	26:39,
42, 53				
9, 14, 15,	32, 33	15:13	20:23	28:19
18, 26, 32	11:25, 26, 27	16:17, 27	24:36	

Read Matthew 5:17-20.

- (53) The commissioning is followed by Jesus’ AGENDA: He will not annul the least part of Torah or Nebiim, the Law and Prophets, but will fill them up. By obeying the Scriptures? Or by enhancing them?
- (54) In the next section, watch how the behavior of Jesus’ followers should surpass the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (4:17-16:20)

6. FIRST DISCOURSE, continued (5:21-6:18)

Scribal teachings: murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, love – Pharisaic piety: alms, prayer, fasting

Holy God of compassion, you invite us into your way of forgiveness and peace. Lead us to love our enemies, and transform our words and deeds to be like his through whom we pray, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. (ELW #41)

Read Matthew 5:21-48.

- (55) Jesus deals first with “the RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE SCRIBES” in a series of half a dozen antithetical statements: “You have heard that it was said such-and-so.... But I say to you this-and-that....” Rabbinic records contain thousands of discussions in a similar pattern: “Rabbi Shammai said this.... But Rabbi Hillel said that....” What does Jesus’ version (“But *I* say to you....”) imply about his authority?
- (56) Also, he typically begins his sayings with “Truly I tell you....” Actually the Greek is *Amen*. “Amen,” usually comes as the response to a prayer or statement, to confirm the speaker’s agreement with what has been said by someone else. What does Jesus’ practice (“Amen, I tell you....”) imply about his authority?
- (57) First Jesus brings up the commandment against **murder** (see Deuteronomy 5:17) and argues that insulting one’s brother or sister is just as bad. Is it really? If you call someone a “fool” or a “fathead,” should you really be hauled before the Supreme Court and thrown into the garbage burner?
- (58) With the image of debtors’ prison, Jesus says that reconciling with your brother or sister is more important than your offerings in worship? Do you agree? Would your church treasurer agree?
- (59) Two laws related to marriage follow. According to the commandment on **adultery** (see Deuteronomy 5:18), a man should not have sex with another man’s wife. Again Jesus exaggerates. Is fantasizing about an attractive woman really as serious as actually having sex with her?
- (60) Obviously your eye or hand cannot actually *cause* you to sin; although you can sin *with* your eyes and hands. The word here is *skandalizo* (the basis of “scandalize”), usually translated as “cause to sin” or “cause to stumble or “offend.” Highlight it here and elsewhere throughout Matthew.
- 5:29, 30 13:41 16:23 17:27 18:6-9 (7 times!)
- The term for “sin” (*hamartano*) is altogether different:
- 1:21 3:6 9:2, 5, 6 12:31 18:15, 21
- (61) The law on **divorce** (see Deuteronomy 24:1-4) applied only to men; there were no provisions in the biblical code for women to divorce their husbands. Does Jesus’ revision protect the rights of wives? How so?
- (62) Jesus seems to think that the matter of taking an **oath** or making a **vow** (see Deuteronomy 5:11 & 20, 23:21) is entirely unnecessary. So, should we *not* swear to tell the truth, etc. in a court of law?
- (63) Then Jesus gives a radical twist to the law of **retribution** (see Deuteronomy 19:21)! He was not asking his followers to be patsies or to let others take advantage of them. If someone insults you with a back-handed slap on the right cheek, he insists, turn the other cheek and make him hit you

like a man. If your creditor takes your suit, give him your underwear, and see if the judge will enjoy being embarrassed like that. If a soldier forces you to carry his duffle bag for a mile, go two miles and get him in trouble. For subservient peasants in Jesus' day (who could not give armed resistance to "evildoers") this was one way to stand up to their oppressors. Would it work today?

- (64) The command to **love** one's neighbor (see Leviticus 19:18) does not actually have a corresponding hate clause; that was a later interpretation. Thus "love your enemy" may be the most profound thing Jesus ever said. There's nothing quite like it in the Jewish scriptures, and the early church apparently didn't repeat it. How good are we at obeying it?
- (65) In short, says Jesus, "Be perfect." Or does he mean, "Be complete"? Or, "Have integrity"?

Read Matthew 6:1-18.

- (66) Jesus now takes up what, after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, became the three main types of PHARISAIC PIETY. These, he says, are not to be done just for show. The first is **almsgiving**. How would this affect the way we today recognize those who make generous charitable contributions?
- (67) **Prayer**, too, should be a private matter, with no long pretentious babbling, and with an accent on forgiveness. The sample he gives is addressed to "*our* Father in heaven." The plural "our" sounds like a communal prayer, not a private devotion. Is there a contradiction here?
- (68) The first half of the prayer is three petitions about God—his name, his kingdom, his will. It is thoroughly Jewish, almost like the traditional Jewish *Kaddish*. Are we asking *God* to keep his own name holy and advance his realm and accomplish his will? Or are we praying that *we ourselves* will do these things?
- (69) The second half is three petitions about us, all from the perspective of lower-class peasants, who cannot always be sure if they will have enough food for the next day. Can people who live from paycheck to paycheck identify with this?
- (70) The petition about canceling debts is indeed about financial matters, not about forgiving sins or trespasses. The idea is: "If God will forgive the temple tax I haven't paid lately, I will forgive the jug of olive oil my neighbor owes me." How would a society of mutually suspicious peasants change if they took this seriously? How would our society change?
- (71) "Lead us not into" is the equivalent of "bring us out of." The idea is: "When bad things happen—and they will—help us out and save us." Is this a realistic expectation?
- (72) By the way, the DOXOLOGY "for thine is the kingdom," etc. (see 1 Chronicles 29:11) is not part of Jesus' original prayer. It was added later when the prayer was used in worship services. OK?
- (73) **Fasting** as a religious discipline is no longer as popular as it was in ancient times. Again, says Jesus, this should be done inconspicuously. How does fasting differ from going on a diet to lose weight?
- (74) Each of these pious practices—almsgiving, prayer and fasting—contain a promise: "Your Father who sees in secret will reward you." What kind of reward are we talking about?

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (4:17-16:20)

7. FIRST DISCOURSE, continued (6:19-7:27)

treasures – seeing & serving – worry – judging – asking & receiving – two gates, trees, builders

God of tender care, like a mother, like a father, you never forget your children, and you know what we need. In all our anxiety give us trusting and faithful hearts, that in confidence we may embody the peace and justice of your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #45)

Read Matthew 6:19-24.

- (75) After dealing with six scribal legalisms and three Pharisaical pieties, Jesus offers a series of INSTRUCTIONS FOR DAILY BEHAVIOR in the life of the community, beginning with remarks about getting one's priorities straight. "What you treasure is your heart's true measure," reads one modern translation. Note the order: you heart follows your money, not *visa versa*! Would this make a good slogan for a congregation's annual financial stewardship appeal?
- (76) The ancients mistakenly thought that a person's eyeball contained a mini-lamp. What is the point of this passage about light and darkness?
- (77) "Wealth" (a.k.a. "mammon") competes with God for our worshipful service. Is this still the truth in our economic situation today?

Read Matthew 6:25-34.

- (78) If Jesus was addressing peasant crowds in Galilee, for them life *was* all about food and clothing. Would they have agreed with him? Would we agree with him today?
- (79) Birds, flowers, Solomon—all were common familiar figures. Arguments *a minori ad maius*, "from the lesser to the greater," are not always convincing. Some might think that Jesus' advice is too simple and naïve. How about you?
- (80) "Don't worry about tomorrow; we have enough trouble for today." Does this sound like an encouraging word? Or is it sort of fatalistic and depressing?

Read Matthew 7:1-12.

- (81) Brothers and sisters within the community may not nit-pick at each other! The humorous exaggeration of a 2x4 in one's own eye *versus* a bit of sawdust in the other's makes the point, don't you think?
- (82) So (A¹) don't feed temple food to dogs or (B¹) toss pearls to hogs, or (B²) they'll just trample your jewels and (A²) bite off your hand. Obviously! But just what could this possibly mean exactly?
- (83) Back to the subject of prayer: People give to those who ask; things are found by those who seek; doors are opened for those who knock. And parents give bread and fish, not rocks and snakes, to their hungry children. Again, obviously! So, again *a posteriori*, God will do even better by us. Agreed? So keep on praying confidently.
- (84) The so-called GOLDEN RULE is found in one form or another in many religious traditions; it didn't originate with Jesus. But it makes an excellent concluding summary of Jesus' ethical principles. Note that this is a rule of empathy, not a rule of reciprocity. Can you tell the difference?

Read Matthew 7:13-27.

- (85) The first discourse ends with a trio of WARNINGS, each containing a pair of opposites. The wide gate and easy road to destruction *versus* the narrow gate and difficult road to life—it's a popular ancient comparison. Would those who try to live by the Sermon on the Mount feel like they were taking the difficult, narrow route?
- (86) Note that the false prophets will be judged by their fruits, that is, their actions, not by their teachings. In the Greco-Roman world in which Matthew's community lived, fake philosophers and prophets—most of them out to fleece their flock—were a familiar phenomenon. Do we have such people in our communities today? If so, how can you decide who they are?
- (87) Apparently merely honoring Jesus as Lord is not enough. What else is required?
- (88) The final anecdote is structured with perfect parallelism:

hear & do	wise man	built on rock	rain, flood, winds	did not fall	it's on rock
hear & not do	fool	built on sand	rain, flood, winds	fell down	a great fall!

The point is clear. Jesus is not concerned about what we believe or think or even teach, as much as he is interested in how we behave with our brothers and sisters within the circle of his disciples. This is an ethic for the Christian community, intended to define our praxis, our habitual behavior toward each other. Do you think these principles would also be helpful for those outside our fellowship?

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (4:17-16:20)

8. Demonstrations of Messianhip (7:28-9:1)

leper, centurion's boy & Peter's mother-in-law healed – storm calmed – Gadarene demoniac freed

Almighty and ever-living God, throughout time you free the oppressed, heal the sick, and make whole all that you have made., Look with compassion on the world wounded by sin, and by your power restore us to wholeness of life, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord Amen. (ELW #111)

Read Matthew 7:28-29.

- (89) The phrase “And it happened when Jesus completed....” begins the paragraph which follows each of the five discourses. Highlight it here and elsewhere.

7:27 11:1 13:53 19:1 26:1

- (90) The authority of Jesus' teachings will now be backed up by a series of ten miracles, mostly healings. Before you read them, become clear about how you would define “miracles.” If you think of them as “divine interventions which defy the laws of nature,” do you imagine they actually occurred in Jesus' day? Do they occur today? If that's not your definition, what is the value of these stories?

Read Matthew 8:1-17.

- (91) Whether **leprosy** in Jesus' day was the same as Hanson's disease today is not clear. In any event, it was a debilitating affliction which excluded a person from life in the community or family (see Leviticus 13 & 14). The leper here prostrates himself before Jesus and calls him “Lord,” which in Matthew is the respectful way to address him if you need help. Highlight it here and elsewhere.

7:21, 22 9:28 15:22, 25, 27 18:21 28:6
8:2, 6, 8, 13:51 16:22 20:30, 31, 33
21, 25 14:28, 30 17:4, 15 21:3(?)

- (92) Notice how often Jesus' healing touch **cleanses** and restores a person to wholeness and community. (The priests served as the “Board of Health” in such matters.)

8:3, 8, 15 9:20, 21, 29 14:36 17:7 20:34

And imagine how many people in your life would relish a loving touch or even a hug.

- (93) The Roman officer knows it is not kosher for a Jewish healer to offer to enter his home, even if it is to heal the **paralysis** of his boy-toy. Jesus is flabbergasted by his “faith,” and **heals** the boy from a distance with just a word. The Greek term (*pistis*) is often translated by two different English words, “faith” or “belief.” They both mean “trust,” or in some cases “trustworthy,” which you can substitute wherever you find it.

6:30 14:31 17:17, 20 23:23 25:21, 23
8:10, 13, 26 15:28 18:6 24:23, 26, 45 27:42
9:2, 22, 29 16:8 21:21, 25, 32

- (94) The opposite of life in the kingdom of heaven is “outer darkness with howling and grinding of teeth.” This judgmental theme, too, figures prominently throughout Matthew. Highlight it.

8:12 13:42, 50 22:13 24:51 25:30

Does this harsh judgmental tone conflict with the gospel's message of hope and forgiveness?

- (95) The malarial **fever** of Peter’s mother-in-law—a potentially fatal affliction—*flees* at Jesus’ touch. Then she can resume her proper role as the one who prepares and serves the meals in her household. (If you’re not familiar with the church’s anti-malaria campaign, now would be a good time to check it out at www.elca.org/malaria.) After supper, Jesus *kicks out* demons and *cures* sick people. Which leads to the eighth fulfillment passage.

Matthew 8:17 quotes **Isaiah 53:4**, which says that the servant of the Lord suffered the afflictions and sicknesses which were ours. Matthew twists the idea to suggest that Jesus carries away our infirmities and diseases. This certainly fills up the old words with new meaning, doesn’t it?

Read Matthew 8:18-22.

- (96) Strangely, whenever someone tries to enlist and join Jesus’ entourage, he rejects them. He only admits those whom he calls. Both his responses to the scribe and to the unnamed disciple are exaggerations. Jesus *does* have a place to sleep, namely, his home in Capernaum. And attending a parent’s funeral would only delay a person by one day. Do you think he was serious?

Read Matthew 8:23-9:1.

- (97) Sudden **squalls** on the Sea of Galilee are not uncommon. Jesus scolds the winds, and *calms* the storm, and thus “saves” his perishing disciples. Here is another key term (*sozo*), which is sometimes rendered as “save” or “deliver,” sometimes as “heal” or “make well.” Highlight it here and elsewhere.

1:21	9:21, 22	14:30	16:25	24:22
8:25	10:22	14:36	19:25	27:40, 42, 49

- (98) Jesus’ disciples in the boat wonder what sort of person he might be. A pair of **demoniacs** know the answer; they call him “Son of God.” Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?
- (99) Gadara (or is it Gergesa? or Gerasa?) was a center of trade and philosophical inquiry. Jesus is met, however, by two demented men who live in the cemetery (an unclean place for Jews), and he *drowns* their demons *via* a herd of pigs (unclean animals for Jews). This is obviously foreign territory. Didn’t Jesus resolve to limit his ministry to “the house of Israel”?
- (100) Normally if someone begs Jesus to do something, and if he does it, that’s a good thing, right? Here the demons beg him to go into the hogs, and the villagers beg him to leave. In each case he grants their request. Was that a good thing?
- (101) By the way, today some people think that the “demoniacs” of ancient times were really “crazy people,” that is, emotionally disturbed people. What do you think? And if so, does this suggest anything about how we should treat those who are mentally ill?

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (4:17-16:20)

9. Demonstrations, continued (9:2-34)

paraleptic healed – Matthew called – fasting – dead daughter, bleeding woman, blind men & demoniacs healed

O God, you are the source of life and the ground of our being. By the power of your Spirit bring healing to this wounded world, and raise us to the new life of your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.

(ELW #113)

Read Matthew 9:2-17.

- (102) Back in Capernaum, “they” (who?) bring a **paraleptic** to Jesus, who *forgives* and heals him (which probably was not what he wanted). But this sixth miracle provides the author a chance to deal with three kinds of opposition to Jesus’ agenda. *First*, scribes accuse him of blasphemy for presuming to forgive sins. What do you think? Is forgiving sins a divine prerogative?
- (103) Note the reaction of the crowd: They both feared and glorified God “who had granted such authority to humans.” Apparently Matthew’s community understood this as their authorization to pronounce forgiveness. Is the church today authorized to forgive? If so, is this a fearful thing?
- (104) When Jesus calls Matthew—apparently a tariff collector at a toll both on a trade route—the man follows immediately and becomes one of Jesus’ twelve intimate friends (see Matthew 10:3). (Interestingly, in Mark’s parallel passage the tax man’s name is “Levi,” and he never makes it into the top twelve; see Mark 2:14 & 3:16-19.) What does this tell us about Jesus’ choice of friends?
- (105) Reclining at a dinner party with non-observant Jews, which includes toll collectors and other “sinners,” was offensive, *secondly*, to strict Pharisees who kept kosher. They complain to his men, but Jesus himself responds by quoting a proverb about how sick people, not healthy ones, need a physician, and by backing that up with **Hosea 6:6**. Then he announces his intent to call sinners, not righteous people. How does this match with his earlier decision to require a brand of righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees?
- (106) And what does this suggest about the practice of table fellowship in Matthew’s community? Or in our church circles today?
- (107) *Third*, followers of the Baptist interrogate him about why his disciples do not observe customary times of fasting. Jesus’ response suggests that he is like a groom, and wedding guests must wait to mourn until the groom leaves the party. Two proverbs about patching old clothes with new cloth and about filling old skins with new wine make the point. But what exactly is the point? That Jesus represents something new, which requires a different response? What?

Read Matthew 9:18-34.

- (108) A story about a **bleeding** woman is sandwiched inside a story about a **dead** girl. (It will help to compare the details here with the longer version in Mark 5:21-43.) First, an unnamed civic leader asks Jesus to come to his home and restore his daughter who has just died. Does this seem like a reasonable request?
- (109) On the way, a woman who has lived a dozen years with a menstrual disorder is healed when she touches the fringe of Jesus tunic. “Cheers!” Jesus tells her. “Your faith has *saved* you.” Does this sound familiar? (See items #19 and #97 on previous pages.)
- (110) Funereal flutes and keening meet Jesus when he arrives at the leader’s house, and they chuckle when he says the girl is merely “sleeping.” But again, his touch *raises* her! Wow, huh?

(111) Next Jesus encounters a pair of **blind** men who call him “Son of David,” a title used mostly by those who need healing. Highlight the title here and elsewhere.

1:1, 20 9:27 12:23 15:22 20:30-31 21:9, 15 22:42

Because of their faith, their *eyes* are *opened*. But why do you suppose Jesus doesn’t want anyone to know this?

(112) Finally, the tenth miracle: a “**dumb** [i.e. mute] demoniac.” After the demon is kicked out, the man can *speak*. Did you notice that Jesus’ action is not described here? Only the reaction.

(113) Make a list of the various harmful situations in these ten miracle stories, and name their results.

(114) Also, note the positive reactions to half of them, plus the negative reaction to the last one.

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (4:17-16:20)

10. Second DISCOURSE: Directives for missionaries (9:35-10:42)

compassion for crowds – twelve disciples – minimal supplies – harassments – fears – family troubles – rewards

God of compassion, you have opened the way for us and brought us to yourself. Pour your love into our hearts, that, overflowing with joy, we may freely share the blessings of your realm and faithfully proclaim the good news of your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #116)

Read Matthew 9:35-10:4.

- (115) “And Jesus went about...” introduces a new section. Teaching, preaching, healing—these are the typical elements of his ministry. He uses two agricultural metaphors. First, he compares the crowds to *sheep*. In what ways, do you imagine, were they harassed and helpless?
- (116) Second, he prays for workers to help with the *harvest*. Who do you suppose is “the Lord of the harvest”? God? Jesus himself?
- (117) The twelve “disciples” or “followers” are turned into “apostles” or “emissaries”—a significant shift in terminology. They are equipped with Jesus’ own ability to exorcise demons and heal diseases. Yet in Matthew’s narrative they never actually go out on their own! Why?
- (118) The twelve are listed in pairs. Simon Peter is always named first, Judas Iscariot last. We know Simon, Andrew and the Zebedee brothers were fishermen by trade. Matthew was a pro-Roman revenue agent; the other Simon, an anti-Roman Zealot. Little is known about the other eight. What does this suggest about the makeup of Jesus’ entourage?

Read Matthew 10:5-23.

The larger purpose of this second major discourse, with its *INSTRUCTIONS FOR MISSIONARIES*, is to outline how those within the Christian community are to relate to those *outside* their community. It has its counterpart in the fourth discourse (Matthew 18:1-35), which outlines how Christians are to relate to each other *within* their community.

- (119) The several dozen instructions, warnings and promises which make up this discourse are sometimes more suggestive or provocative than they are clear directives. The twelve are to replicate Jesus’ activities, but only with fellow Jews. How does this compare with Matthew’s overall agenda? (See Matthew 28:16-20.)
- (120) Without any money or bag or shoes or club, not even an extra undershirt, they would be vulnerable, poor and defenseless. They would have to depend upon the hospitality of those who welcomed their ministrations. If this is how missionaries in Matthew’s community operated, do you think they would have been successful? Would this work today?
- (121) The apostles bring with them *Shalom*, the peace of God. Those who welcome them receive this blessing; those who refuse them will be worse off than Sodom and Gomorrah, two notoriously evil towns. Would this have been encouraging to missionaries?
- (122) Sheep, wolves, snakes, pigeons—the images suggest danger and the need for caution. Public floggings and trials, betrayal by family members—this may have been the experience of members of Matthew’s community. We don’t have issues like that today, do we?

- (123) This is the only place in Matthew's gospel where Jesus promises to give the Spirit to his people, namely, when they have to testify in court. Would this quiet your worries if you were on trial?
- (124) When persecuted, they are to escape to another town, confident the Son of Man will arrive. Did this actually happen? Or is Matthew mistaken here?

Read Matthew 10:24-42.

- (125) The relationship of a student and its teacher, or a slave and its owner illustrates the relationship of Jesus and his men. What is the point of this comparison?
- (126) Fear is a natural reaction to a dangerous situation. Go ahead and preach boldly, suggests Jesus. Don't be afraid of human opponents. You're more valuable to God than a two-cent sparrow. Etc. Etc. Is this argument *a minori ad maius*, "from the lesser to the greater," persuasive?
- (127) Confessing or denying Jesus is a crucial issue, with heavenly implications. Can we be more specific?
- (128) Jesus claims to bring a saber, not peace, and to disrupt normal family relationships. Does this contradict the 7th beatitude (see Matthew 5:9) or item #121 above? This, of course, runs contrary to normal social norms. Is this what happened in Jesus' historical situation? Is this what happened in Matthew's community? Does it happen in our social environment today?
- (129) It is hard to imagine how obscene the idea of "lifting a cross" would have sounded in Jesus' and in Matthew's day. And the oxymoron about finding and losing one's "soul" or "life" is equally perplexing. How would you understand the impact of this pair of pronouncements?
- (130) In spite of difficulties, says Jesus, there will be some successes, with their attendant "rewards" (mentioned three times). A cool drink of water in a semi-arid land was a real treat! What kind of reward would be a treat for us today?
- (131) One could summarize the instructions for missionaries like this:
Travel Light – Anticipate Opposition – Don't Be Afraid – Pay the Cost – Expect a Reward
Would that be a useful agenda for missionaries today?

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (4:17-16:20)

11. Israel's rejection of Jesus (11:1-30)

John's doubts & Jesus' responses – condemnation of Bethsaida & Capernaum – prayer to the Father

You are great, O God, and greatly to be praised. You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Grant that we may believe in you, call upon you, know you, and serve you, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #125)

- (132) As usual, after a major discourse the phrase “And it happened when Jesus completed...” begins a new section, a section full of controversies which mark the start of a crisis, a break with Israel. The chapters include a series of warnings, ostensibly addressed to characters in the narrative, but obviously intended for those who are reading the story.

Matthew 11:6 is a beatitude for all (including the readers) who are not scandalized by Jesus. Matthew 11:15 calls on “those with ears” (those who are listening to the story) to pay attention. Matthew 11:19's proverb about wisdom's children or deeds includes the readers of this gospel. Matthew 12:8 makes “the Son of Man” (humans? see item #103) “lord of the sabbath.” Matthew 12:36-37 says that “you” (plural; humans? disciples?) will be judged by your words. Matthew 12:38 & 45 reference “this generation” (Matthew's community? and ours?). Matthew 12:50 promises that whoever does the Father's will is a member of Jesus' family.

Are these warnings addressed to you? And if so, what should you do about it?

Read Matthew 11:1-19.

- (133) Matthew 4:12 & 9:14 told us that the Baptist had been arrested, and that his disciples had confronted Jesus. Now they demand clarification: Is Jesus really the promised Messiah? Jesus' reply is a non-answer; he invites them to consider his deeds. How many of the feats Jesus lists were performed in Matthew 8-9?
- (134) You can find everything in the wastelands from a common weed to one of Herod's vacation homes. John was something else again, a super-prophet. Notice how Jesus adjusts the quotation of **Malachi 3:1**.
- (135) Jesus compares John to the ancient prophet Elijah, who was expected to reappear before the Messiah would arrive (see Malachi 4:5). Note the logic: Whoever is “least in the kingdom” is greater than John, and John is greater than the ancient prophets. But what is the reference to violence all about?
- (136) Jesus compares his generation to a bunch of whiney kids, who refuse to play either (A¹) a game of “wedding” or (B¹) a game of “funeral.” Similarly, John came as (B²) an ascetic; Jesus comes as (A²) a *bon vivant*. Both are rejected! Historians love this passage because it shows that Jesus enjoyed festive meals in the company of undesirables. Isn't that great?

Read Matthew 11:20-30.

- (137) “Oy! on you!” says Jesus about three fishing villages, including his adopted home town, because they rejected his call to repent. In the end, they will fare worse than the Phoenician seaports and notorious Sodom (see item #11). Or do you think the issue is that these towns failed to support the missionaries from Matthew's church?

- (138) The prayer of thanks, called a *Todah*, with its preference for the simple over the wise and with its Father-to-Son-to-humans chain of revelation, sounds like something from the fourth gospel (see John 5:19-20, 14:6-7, 17:25). What does it add to Matthew's gospel?
- (139) A "yoke" is a common symbol for wisdom or for the teachings of the Torah. In other words, the "yoke" Jesus invites us to carry is his teaching on how to live as his disciples. But earlier he said he would not relax the demands of the Law (see item #53). Here he says that his teachings are easy. What do you think? Do they provide rest from our weary burdens?

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (4:17-16:20)

12. Rejection, continued (12:1-50)

harvesting & healing on sabbath – demoniac healed & Beelzebul controversy – request for signs – Jesus’ true family

Faithful God, most merciful judge, you care for your children with firmness and compassion. By your Spirit nurture us who live in your kingdom, that we may be rooted in the way of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #131)

Read Matthew 12:1-21.

- (140) Eating was permitted on the sabbath, but not harvesting. Why Pharisees would be around to see the disciples picking a few grains of wheat or barley is not clear. But when they object, Jesus refutes them with three arguments. *First*, David broke the law when he ate holy loaves dedicated to the Lord (see 1 Samuel 21:1-6). Would this be as bad as using Communion wafers for a snack?
- (141) *Second*, the law allows priests to work in the temple on the sabbath. Arguing *a minori ad maius*, Jesus affirms that “something greater than the temple” is here. Is he referring to himself?
- (142) *Third*, he quotes **Hosea 6:6** (for the second time; see item #105), and affirms that “the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.” Is he referring to himself? And/or to humanity? And/or to the church?
- (143) We have encountered the phrase “the Son of Man” several times. Actually it is an inelegant Greek phrase “the son of the man.” Scholars argue whether this refers to a heavenly figure (as in Daniel 7:13, where one like a son of man arrives with the clouds of heaven) or to a mortal human (as in Ezekiel, where the phrase describes the prophet over ninety times). Assuming that in Matthew the phrase is a title for Jesus, see if you can detect any pattern which would explain its significance.

8:20	11:19	16:13, 27, 28	19:28	25:13, 31
9:6	12:8, 32, 40	17:9, 12, 22	20:18-28	26:2, 24, 45, 64
10:23	13:37, 41	18:11	24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44	

- (144) Next in “their” synagogue—from the perspective of Matthew’s community—a man with a stiff, dried up hand, obviously not a life-or-death affliction, becomes a test case for healing on the sabbath. Another *argumentum a minori* makes the point: If it’s OK to rescue a sheep on the sabbath, and if people are more valuable than sheep, it must be OK “to do good” on the sabbath. On the other hand, rescuing a sheep *is* a life-or-death matter, isn’t it?
- (145) Previously the reactions to Jesus’ healings were positive. Notice the difference this time!
- (146) In reaction to plots against him, Jesus leaves, but still keeps on healing! The ninth “fulfillment passage” identifies a turning point in Jesus’ ministry.

Matthew 12:17-21 quotes **Isaiah 42:1-4**, which promises that the Servant of Yahweh will bring justice to the nations, i.e. to the Gentiles. Matthew adds a closing line: “And in his name the Gentiles will hope.” Do you think Jesus will do any more healings within Israel?

Read Matthew 12:22-37.

- (147) Well, he does, this one a blind, mute demoniac. Note how physical disabilities are seemingly evidence of demonic activity. Note also the two kinds of reactions. The crowds are _____ and wonder if Jesus is “the Son of David” (see item #111).

- (148) But his opponents suggest he is in collusion with the prince of demons (likely a charge leveled against Matthew's own community)! Jesus' rebuttal is effective: A divided house or kingdom will fall, and besides, the Pharisees themselves have exorcists. But if this is the Spirit of God at work, then "the K _____ of G _____" is present. Notice anything unusual about this phrase?
- (149) The so-called "unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit" is a difficult and controversial subject. What do you suppose this is all about? And why is it so terrible? And have you committed it?
- (150) We have heard Jesus talk about trees and their fruits before (see item #86). What, if anything, does this angry word to a "bunch of snakes" add to the discussion?

Read Matthew 12:38-45.

- (151) Jesus takes his opponents' demand for a "sign" as evidence that they are a wicked generation, and he rejects them with three arguments. *First*, he refers to the story of Jonah, who (A¹) was swallowed by a fish for three days and nights when he originally refused to preach to wicked Nineveh, but who (B¹) later preached there and the city repented. Likewise, (A²) the Son of Man will be buried for three days and nights, and (B²) "you" will be condemned because you did not repent like the Ninevites. Does it make a difference that Jesus was actually in his grave for only two nights and parts of three days?
- (152) *Second*, Jesus references the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (see 1 Kings 10:1[-13]). In both these cases, he argues *a minori ad maius* that something greater than Jonah or Solomon has arrived. We assume Jesus is referring to himself, isn't he?
- (153) *Third*, Jesus says that an exorcised demon will eventually return with seven more unclean spirits to its host victim, who will be worse off than ever before. How do you suppose this applied to Jesus' original situation? How would it apply to Matthew's community? How does it apply to us today? Or does it?

Read Matthew 12:46-50.

- (154) We expect Jesus to reject his opponents, but his own family? "Whoever does what my heavenly Father desires" is now part of Jesus' family. Does this sound encouraging to you?
- (155) Note that Jesus' fictive family does not include a *pater familias*, a father figure. And he specifically adds a "sister" to the list of a "mother" and "brother." Do either of these details suggest anything about Jesus' own entourage? Or about Matthew's community? Or about our fellowship?

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (4:17-16:20)

13. THIRD DISCOURSE: Parables on the Kingdom (13:1-52)

seed & soils- weeds in wheat – mustard – yeast – buried treasure – pearl – dragnet – plus various explanations

Almighty God, we thank you for planting in us the seed of your word. By your Holy Spirit help us to receive it with joy, live according to it, and grow in faith and hope and love, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #128)

The third discourse focuses on **PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM**. These “parables” (mentioned a dozen times) give insight into life in “the kingdom of heaven” (also mentioned twelve times): They are not merely illustrations of deeper truths. Certainly not “earthly stories with a heavenly meaning,” as we learned in Sunday School. Rather, they are more like riddles. They are striking metaphors which tease our imaginations and force us to make a decision. The effect is due in large part to the way Jesus tells them. He usually starts a story innocently enough, with an ordinary introduction: “A farmer went out to sow his seed,” for example. But before he finishes, he introduces an anomaly, and gives the story a twist, and forces us to think about what has happened, and to decide on what we have heard.

Read Matthew 13:1-9 & 13:18-23.

- (156) Jesus was a carpenter, not a farmer. Does his story ring true to what you know about ancient farming methods? How would you describe the farmer’s method as overly generous: throwing seed everywhere, on paths, on rocky soil, among thorns? Or as wasteful?
- (158) Is the harvest—100- 60- 30-fold—bountiful? Or ordinary? Or mediocre?
- (159) When Jesus explained the seed-and-soils story privately to his disciples, he described the *negative effects* which “the evil one” and “persecution” and “cares of the world” can have on “the word of the kingdom.” But he didn’t describe what “bearing fruit a hundred-fold,” etc. was all about. What do you think a *positive response* would look like?

Read Matthew 13:24-30 & 13:36-43.

- (160) Jesus apparently ignores what every farmer and backyard gardener knows, namely, that you *do* pick weeds before they grow too big. Also, why did the farmer, not his slaves, do the sowing? And how did he know an “enemy” sabotaged his field? And why would other “harvesters,” not his own slaves, bring in the crop?
- (161) When Jesus explained the wheat-and-weeds story privately to his disciples, he treated it as an allegory, where each item equals something else. The farmer is “the Son of Man.” The field is the world—not the church. The wheat are “sons of the kingdom,” and the weeds the “sons of evil.” Where do you fit in this equation? Does this sound like good news or bad news for you?

Read Matthew 13:31-33 & 44-46.

- (162) The two parables which have allegorical explanations are interspersed with a handful which go unexplained. In one the kingdom is compared to a bush, not a cedar of Lebanon (see Ezekiel 7:22-24). Mustard is a self-seeding annual which never grows into a tree and is not strong enough to support birds nesting in the spring. Is God’s kingdom this mediocre and unpretentious?

- (163) Another imagines a woman baking bread. Three measures of flour (a *saton* equals 2½ pints) is about a bushel and a peck, and would make enough dough to feed a small army! Yeast, of course, is a fungus, and women don't normally "hide" it in the dough. So how is this like God's rule?
- (164) In a third story, a man stumbles upon buried treasure, sells all his assets, and cheerfully buys the field. Is "finders, keepers" an ethical approach to real estate transactions? Or is this really about the joy and risk of discovering the reign of God?
- (165) Similarly, a trader in precious commodities searches for jewels and finally finds a single perfect pearl worth more than his entire inventory. So he sells everything to make the purchase. Is this about the value of God's dominion? Or the virtue of investing all to be in it?
- (166) Finally, a fishing scene. Dragnets pulled behind a boat catch all kinds of creatures. Back on shore someone has to separate the edible fish from the throwaways. This, suggests Jesus, is like dividing the wicked from the righteous at the final judgment. Have we heard this theme before?

Now go back and read Matthew 13:10-17, 13:34-35, & 13:51-52.

- (167) The answer to why Jesus teaches in parables has something to do with the "insiders" who are given the "secret of the kingdom" *versus* the "outsiders" who have not. Which is explained in the tenth "fulfillment passage":
- Matthew 13:14-15 quotes **Isaiah 6:9-10**, part of the majestic vision of Isaiah's call to be a prophet. In the smoking temple he saw the Lord sitting on a throne, sending him to a people who are doomed to misunderstand and to fail to comprehend. Do you think this is Jesus' *purpose*? Or is this the *result* of his ministry? And the result which Matthew's community experienced?
- (168) This negative assessment is followed by a positive beatitude, a benediction for "you" who *do* see and hear. Does this include you?
- (169) Another summary of Jesus' parabolic teaching introduces the eleventh "fulfillment passage."
- Matthew 13:35 quotes **Psalms 78:2** (not a prophetic oracle as Matthew suggests) which is a long poem celebrating God's goodness to the ancient people of Israel and decrying their failure to respond faithfully. Does this reflect the ministry of Jesus and the peoples' response?
- (170) Finally Jesus asks whether his disciples comprehend this. So, he says, a "scribe trained for the kingdom" (i.e. a Christian theologian?) produces treasures new and old. Could this refer to the "old Torah" and the "new Gospel"? And if so, what does this suggest about our preaching today?
- (171) By the way, did you notice that this chapter is somewhat disconnected? Jesus starts out in a boat with the crowds on shore (v. 2). Then his disciples come to him (v. 10). While he's still in the boat? Did they swim out to him? Although he seems to be sharing more parables alone with his disciples, suddenly he's with the crowds again (v. 34), but then he leaves them and goes indoors (v. 36)! The confusion is evidence that Matthew's arrangement is artificial, but skillfully woven to read like a single discourse.
- (172) So, back to the beginning. Did these parabolic riddles surprise you into experiencing some of the delight of living within the kingdom of heaven? Or were you put off by these stories? Either way, how do you feel about this? How do you feel about Jesus?

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (4:17-16:20)

14. Withdrawal from Israel (13:53-14:33)

rejection at Nazareth – John the Baptist murdered – 5,000 fed – walk on water

O God our defender, storms rage around and within us and cause us to be afraid. Rescue your people from despair, deliver your sons and daughters from fear, and preserve us in the faith of your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #140)

Read Matthew 13:53-58.

- (173) The usual “And it happened when Jesus completed. . . .” begins another section which finds him back in his old hometown synagogue (presumably Nazareth, not his new hometown Capernaum) for the last time, never to return. All rabbis practiced a trade, but a carpenter is such a low-class fellow—probably a farmer who lost his land and was reduced to cobbling furniture on a day-to-day basis—the congregation was dumbfounded at the quality of Jesus’ teaching. Does this implication that Jesus’ family occupied a low spot on the socio-economic scale surprise you?
- (174) So Mary and Joseph (who is not named!) had five sons—Jesus, James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas—and at least two daughters. Or do you think, as some do, that Jesus’ siblings were from Joseph’s first marriage (of which there is no evidence)? Or that they were really cousins?
- (175) Jesus’ neighbors are scandalized, and because of their distrust he performs only a few miracles. The proverb about prophets not being honored in their home territory could apply in many situations. Can you think of a contemporary application of this principle?

Read Matthew 14:1-12.

- (176) The murder of the Baptist is told as a flashback, to explain why Herod Antipas (see item #19) thought Jesus was John *redivivus*. Contrary to the text, Antipas’ wife, Herodias, was his niece (the daughter of his half-brother Aristobulus) and had never been married to his half-brother Philip (who, by the way, was the son of Herod the Great and Cleopatra!). Does this sound like a soap opera?
- (177) And did you know this is the only birthday party mentioned in the Bible? Herodias’ daughter by her first husband (another half-brother named Herod) dances for the guests. (Note that there is no mention of the girl’s name, “Salome,” or of any alleged “dance of seven veils.”) Scantly clad (?) dancers at such men-only affairs were likely to be prostitutes, not princesses. Is it any wonder John had denounced this family?
- (178) To keep his oath (see item #62) Antipas has John executed. Note the sequence: First, the request goes from the mother to the daughter to Herod to the prison; then John’s head—like a piece of meat served up on a platter—goes from the prison to Herod to the daughter to the mother. Isn’t this kind of gory? So his disciples bury John’s corpse and report to Jesus . . .

Read Matthew 14:13-21.

- (179) . . . who escapes to safer territory, out of Antipas’ jurisdiction. How a crowd of people on foot could beat Jesus in a boat to another shore is a mystery. Nevertheless, a key idea in this story is Jesus’ “compassion,” which he demonstrates by healing and feeding. Think of ways the church today uses medicine and food to demonstrate God’s care for sick and hungry people.

- (180) The dialogue is interesting: The disciples say, “Send the people away to buy food.” Jesus says, “No, you feed them.” They say, “We only have a little lunch.” He says, “Let me have it.” And before you know it, 10,000 people eat more than enough with a dozen baskets of leftovers! Can you believe that?
- (181) Some have “explained” this story to suggest that when Jesus shared the fish sandwiches, he inspired others in the crowd to share their sack lunches with the result that all had more than enough to eat. What do you think? Could this, too, have been a miracle?
- (182) Jesus’ actions at this meal—he took the loaves, looked up, blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples and the people—are similar to his actions at the Last Supper (see Matthew 26:26). Conversely, do our everyday table manners reflect the spirit of our Holy Communion meals?

Read Matthew 14:22-33.

- (183) The disciples leave by boat, the people go by land, and Jesus is left on a mountain top again. Other than in Gethsemane (see Matthew 26:36-45), this is the only time in Matthew where Jesus actually prays. What do you suppose he was praying about?
- (184) Meanwhile the disciples are making little progress against a strong headwind (compare item #97). But around 5:00 a.m. they see a ghost walking toward them over the sea. Technically, it is not a salt-water “sea” but a fresh-water “lake,” smaller than Mille Lacs. Does calling it a “sea” make it sound more dangerous? What dangers do sailors encounter on the sea?
- (185) The “wind” is mentioned three times; the “sea,” twice in relation to Jesus; “water,” twice in relation to Peter. “Cheers! I am! Fear not!” says Jesus. “Lord,” Peter calls him, twice. “If it is you. . .” And then, when he gets scared, “Save me. . .” Do these details resonate with previous stories? What do they imply?
- (186) When it’s all over the disciples worship Jesus and call him “the Son of God.” Or is it “a son of a god”? Or “a god’s son”? We’ve heard this title before. Highlight it throughout the gospel, and note who uses this title.

3:17 (?)	8:29	14:33	17:5 (?)	27:40, 44, 54
4:3, 6	11:27 (?)	16;16	26:63	

Does this correlate in any way with “Son of man” or “Son of David”? Is “Son of God” an appropriately positive description of Jesus? Or not?

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (4:17-16:20)

15. Withdrawal, continued (14:34-15:20)

sick healed at Gennesaret – controversy on kosher traditions – defilement

God of all peoples, your arms reach out to embrace all those who call upon you. Teach us as disciples of your Son to love the world with compassion and constancy, that your name maybe known throughout the earth, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #143)

Read Mathew 14:34-36.

- (187) When they finally land at Genessaret, the people recognize Jesus and the sick come to touch his cloak. And all are “saved.” A nice beginning for a new stage of the story, right? . . .

Read Matthew 15:1-9.

- (188) . . . except that he’s back in trouble with his opponents, who travel all the way from Jerusalem to complain that his disciples do not observe traditional rituals of cleanness. Hand washing before meals was not about personal hygiene; it was about kosher religious practices. Is it still OK for us to make our kids scrub their knuckles before they eat?
- (189) Jesus counterattacks by accusing them of using a human tradition about *corban* (that is, declaring that your money is dedicated as an offering to God and therefore exempt as a resource for supporting your parents) to circumvent divine commands to honor your parents (see Deuteronomy 5:16 and Leviticus 20:9). Can you think of other loopholes in the law which people use today?
- (190) Hypocrites! Phonies! It’s a strong accusation, which Jesus backs up by quoting **Isaiah 29:13**. Who are today’s most notorious hypocrites? Are we among them?

Read Matthew 15:10-11 & 15-20.

- (191) When Jesus addresses the crowd and then explains things to his disciples, he resorts to a little scatological sarcasm (i.e. bathroom humor). What goes into your mouth passes through the alimentary canal and comes out the other end into the toilet. That stuff (i.e. shit) is not what profanes a person in God’s sight. Are you surprised to hear Jesus talking like this? Does it change your picture of him?
- (192) Rather, the profanities which come out of a person’s heart are the culprits because they harm other people: wicked thinking, homicide, adultery, promiscuous sex, stealing, perjury, blasphemy or slander. Not to get too personal, but are you guilty of any of these seven sins? Or would you rather not say?

Read Matthew 15:12-14.

- (193) Why do you suppose Jesus’ opponents were offended? Because he called them “hypocrites”? Because of his potty mouth? Because he contradicted them?
- (194) Proverbial expressions about “weeds get uprooted” and “blind leading the blind” were commonplace. How would this have applied in Matthew’s community? Do they apply in today’s religious community?

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THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (4:17-16:20)

16. Ministry outside of Israel (15:21-16:20)

Canaanite woman's daughter healed – many healed & 4,000 fed – request for sign – warnings against yeast/teachings of Pharisees & Sadducees – Peter's declaration at Caesarea Philippi

Almighty God, you inspired Simon Peter to confess Jesus as the Messiah and Son of the living God. Keep your church firm on the rock of this faith, so that in unity and peace it may proclaim one truth and follow one Lord, your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen. (ELW #193)

Read Matthew 15:21-28.

- (195) In Matthew's narrative, Jesus restricts his ministry to the people of Israel (see item #119), and thus refuses to respond to the plea of a non-Jewish woman. Matthew's community, however, was in the business of sharing the Gospel with Gentiles. A story like this would have given them permission to do so. How does this incident inform our church's mission today?
- (196) Matthew insult the woman by calling her a "Canaanite," people whom the Israelites had eliminated centuries before. Jesus insults her by comparing her to a dog, rather than to a human child. Are you surprised to find Jesus so insulting? Why?
- (197) Some take the woman as an example of devout *humility*. Others see her as an example of trusting *faith*. Others, as an example of arrogant *impudence*. Does she serve as an example for you? If so, would you be inclined to imitate her humility, or her faith, or her impudence? Which?
- (198) Interestingly, most of the female characters in Matthew's gospel are "strong women":
- the hemorrhaging woman who touched Jesus' hem (Matthew 9:20-22),
 - the Canaanite woman who refused to be insulted (here),
 - the mother of James and John who requested special honor for them (Matthew 20:20-21),
 - the woman who anointed Jesus' head at Simon the leper's house (Matthew 26:6-7)
 - Mary Magdalene and the others who went to Jesus' tomb (Matthew 27:55-56, 28:1),
 - Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, in Jesus' genealogy (Matthew 1:3, 5, 6), and
 - his mother Mary, Joseph's wife (Matthew 1:16, 18).

Does this suggest anything about Matthew's estimate of the value of women? About Jesus' attitude toward women? About the way we today should regard women?

Read Matthew 15:29-31.

- (199) This summary of Jesus' healing ministry offers nothing new. But note that the lists—lame, maimed, blind, mute *versus* mute, blind, maimed, lame—are given in opposite order. Interesting, isn't it? Also, notice who gets the credit—"the God of Israel"—at a time when Jesus is withdrawing from Israel. Hmmm....

Read Matthew 15:32-38.

- (200) This looks like a repeat of the first miraculous feeding of a multitude (see items #181-184). But some of the details are different: The crowds have been with Jesus for three days this time (*versus one day the first time*); seven loaves and a few fish here (*versus five loaves and two fish there*); seven baskets of leftovers here (*versus twelve there*); 4,000 men here (*versus 5,000 there*). Do you get the impression the disciples do not quite catch on to what is going on? Do you understand the wider implications of this?

- (201) In other words, do you get the impression that food for hungry people is an important theme for Matthew? For Jesus? For us? (If you're not familiar with the Christian advocacy movement known as *Bread for the World*, now would be a good time to google it and get on board.)

Read Matthew 15:39-16:4.

- (202) Back at Magadan (or is it Magdala?) Jesus' opponents again demand "a sign from heaven" (see item #151). What sort of cosmic apparition could be more persuasive than health and food?
- [(203) Note that some ancient manuscripts add another line here, vv. 2b-3, a nautical maxim: "Red skies in the morning, a sailor's delight; red skies at night, sailors take flight." Is this true? What, if anything, does it add to the story? And, for that matter, what did Jesus know about sailing?]
- (204) Again, Jesus' only response to a "wicked and adulterated" generation is the "sign of Jonah." Whatever that means. Does it have anything to do with "Simon bar *Jonah*?" (See Matthew 16:17.)

Read Matthew 16:5-12.

- (205) On the other side of the lake (without a boat?), Jesus and the disciples seemingly talk past each other in a strange conversation about bread. Jesus (A¹) warns against the "leaven" of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The disciples (B¹) think this somehow refers to their lack of "bread." He (B²) then berates them for not recalling the miraculous feedings. So finally they (A²) understand he was talking about the opponents' "teachings." Does this make sense to you? The point is that the opponents' teachings are not *Jesus'* teachings!

Read Matthew 16:13-20.

- (206) At Caesarea Philippi near the headwaters of the Jordan River, Jesus two questions move from the merely intellection ("What are *they* saying about me?") to the intensely personal ("What do *you* think about me?"). So, what *are* they saying? And what *do* you think?
- (207) Public opinion, including King Herod, has it wrong: Jesus is not the Baptist *redevivus*, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or some other prophet. Only the disciples *via* Peter get it right: Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God." So Peter receives a beatitude for his heaven-sent revelation. The question is: Is this still an adequate confession of faith for us today? And why not tell anyone?
- (208) *Petros* means "stone"; *petra* means "rock." On this solid foundation Jesus promises to establish his "church (*ekklesia*)." Note (a) that it is not called it a "synagogue," which would be significant for Matthew's community, (b) that the term occurs only here and in Matthew 18:17, and (c) that this is an anachronism, because Jesus' followers weren't called "church" until years later. What is the preferred term for your group of believers?
- (209) Roman Catholics often quote this passage to show that the bishop of Rome, as the successor of Peter, is the supreme pontiff in the church. Others, Lutherans among them, argue that Peter's confession of faith, not his person, is the rock on which the church is founded. Where do you stand on this?
- (210) In his *Smalcald Articles* Luther has in mind this passage when he says: "The keys are an office and authority given to the church by Christ to bind and loose sins—not only the crude and notorious sins but also the subtle, secret ones that only God knows." Do you find this encouraging? Or threatening?

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

17. Anticipation of suffering in Jerusalem (16:21-17:27)

1st passion prediction – transfiguration – epileptic boy healed – 2nd passion prediction – temple tax

O God, we thank you for your Son, who chose the path of suffering for the sake of the world. Humble us by his example, point us to the path of obedience, and give us strength to follow your commands, through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #149)

Read Matthew 16:21-28.

- (211) Once again, the phrase “from then Jesus began to…” marks a major turning point in the narrative (see item #41). Note that Jesus *must* travel to Jerusalem to be tormented, killed, and raised. Is this his own idea? Or God’s? Are suffering and death ever a *necessary* part of God’s intentions?
- (212) Peter’s rejection of Jesus’ agenda earns him the title of “Satan” (see item #37) because he is not thinking God’s thoughts. That’s quite a reversal from being “blessed” and impervious to “the gates of Hades,” isn’t it? (See item #207.)
- (213) Conditions for being a follower of Jesus include passive self-denial and actively (and obscenely; see item #129) “lifting a cross.” Today what words would we use if we wanted to express the scandal of the cross in our Christian living?
- (214) Exaggerated contradictions about saving and finding *versus* losing or forfeiting one’s “soul” or “life” (*psyche*, not *zoe* or *bios*) define discipleship. But what *exactly* does this imply for us?
- (215) Jesus says that some of his companions would not die before his return in glory to repay those who abused him. Did this prediction come true? If so, how? If not, why not?

Read Matthew 17:1-20.

- (216) The next sequence has three parts: Jesus’ transfiguration (literally, a *metamorphosis*) on an unnamed mountain before his three main followers (17:1-8), their conversation about Elijah during their descent (17:9-13), and his encounter with an epileptic boy back on level ground. Does this sequence—peaks, descents, and valleys—suggest a pattern for your own life experiences?
- (217) *First*, on the mountain top, Jesus’ shining face, his dazzling clothes, the bright cloud, the heavenly voice—all suggest that he is changed in a godly way. What significance does this glimpse of glory tell us about the shape of his ministry from here on?
- (218) Moses and Elijah, two figures who did not die in the usual way (see Deuteronomy 34:5-6 and 2 Kings 2:1 & 11) and who are named in the last verses of the Old Testament prophets (see Malachi 4:4-6), confirm that this is a special event. What do you suppose makes it so special?
- (219) Peter’s word of appreciation and his offer to erect a trio of shrines may be well intentioned, but they seem somehow inappropriate. Why?
- (220) Note the similarity between the heavenly announcement here and at Jesus’ baptism (see item #34; Matthew 3:17). In both cases he is called “God’s beloved Son.” Do you think this is for his benefit? Or for the disciples? Or for Matthew’s first readers? Or for us?
- (221) Notice how Jesus *touches* his prostrate fear-filled followers. Is this a kind of healing? (See item #92.)

- (222) *Second*, during their descent, Jesus forbids his men to relate this “vision” until after the resurrection. But they are more interested in questions about Elijah, whom Jesus equates with the Baptist. If Elijah must come before the (resurrected) Son of Man, and if Elijah equals John, and if John was mistreated, then Jesus (the Son of Man) must also be mistreated. Does all this add up?
- (223) *Third*, at the base of the mountain, a man presents his “moon-struck” son who has symptoms of *grand mal* epileptic seizures, whom the other disciples could not cure. Initially Jesus berates his stubborn and faith-less contemporaries, but then he scolds the demon and effects an instant cure! Is this a healing, or an exorcism?
- (224) Or is this really about faith, or the lack thereof?

Read Mathew 17:22-23.

- (225) This is the second of three so-called “passion predictions” (see items #221 for the first, and #270 for the third).” They should really be called “passion *and* resurrection predictions,” but the disciples apparently only hear the “passion” part. How can you tell?

Read Matthew 17:24-27.

- (226) Back in Capernaum, an issue arises over paying the “double-drachma,” which was a voluntary Jewish contribution raised to cover expenses of the temple in Jerusalem (not to be confused with a similar Roman tax for the Capitoline Jupiter). Peter affirms that Jesus does indeed pay this tax, but why would the collectors have doubted that in the first place?
- (227) Jesus implies that they are children (of God?) and therefore exempt from paying tribute. But to avoid scandal, he sends Peter to catch a fish which will (miraculously?) produce a “stater” (worth two “didrachmas”) to pay the tax. But his comparison of “children *versus* others” is not clear. Is it “sons *versus* strangers”? Or “princes *versus* commoners”? Or “citizens *versus* foreigners”? Or “Jews *versus* Christians”? Or “Christians *versus* Jews”?
- (228) In any event, this would suggest that it was OK for Jesus’ followers to support the temple. But for Matthew’s community this would have been a moot point since the temple had been destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. At this point in the story Jesus does not seem to be opposed to the temple cultus. Watch and see whether this changes later on.

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

18. FOURTH DISCOURSE: Instructions on life in the church (18:1-35)

welcoming a child – offenses – parable of the lost sheep – sinning brother – parable of the unforgiving slave

O Lord God, merciful judge, you are the inexhaustible fountain of forgiveness. Replace our hearts of stone with hearts that love and adore you, that we may delight in doing your will, through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #155)

The fourth sermon on **HOW CHRISTIANS RELATE TO EACH OTHER** within the community is not connected to anything in the story line at this point, but it does correspond to the second discourse (Matt 10: 5-23), which was about how we relate to people *outside* our community. The discourse is carefully crafted:

Care for one another: Childlike Humility in the Church (positive, vv. 1-4)

Receiving *versus* Offending (negative, vv. 5-6, 7-9)

Parable of the Lost Sheep (positive, vv. 10-14)

Here's how: The church's treatment of a sinning brother or sister (vv. 15-20)

The individual's treatment of a sinning brother or sister (vv. 21-22)

Here's why: Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (vv. 23-35)

(229) In short, life in the church can be summed up in one word:

_____.*

Read Matthew 18:1-4 & 10-14.

- (230) If the question is about greatness *inside* the kingdom, Jesus' non-answer suggests you have to be small just to get *into* the realm. He uses a child as a visual aid because children are lowly (not "humble"), that is, of little or no status. And, of course, to welcome no-accounts into your group lowers your own status. Doesn't this run contrary to normal human standards?
- (231) This is the only passage in the Bible which suggests that children have "guardian angels" (who in Jewish lore occupy a rank or two below archangels, etc.). So, if you don't despise these "little ones," what *do* you do with them?
- (232) Jesus introduces the parable of the Lost Sheep with a question to his disciples, which is really addressed to us readers: "What do you think?" The answer, of course, is: "Not a chance!" Twenty sheep was an average good-sized flock. A man with five times that was one wealthy sheep herder! Would he risk 99% of his assets by leaving them in the hills—instead of returning them to the sheep fold—while he searched for the one lost beast? Would you? Would God?
- (233) Jesus uses this obviously exaggerated story to make a point about the value of the "little ones" to his heavenly Father. What is the point?

Read Matthew 18:5-6 & 7-9.

- (234) Sandwiched in between two positive passages about how we *are* to behave towards the little ones are two negative passages about how we are *not* to behave. Catapontism (look it up) would be a gruesome fate. Why such a harsh punishment for scandalizing a little believer?
- (235) "Scandals" (i.e. stumbling blocks, causes of sin, see item #60) are mentioned seven times here. Jesus is realistic; we *will* encounter sin-inducing scandals. But cursed is the one who brings it on! Who could he be thinking of? Who could we be thinking of?

- (236) Obviously your own hand or foot or eye cannot force you to stumble into sin (see item #60), and chopping off an appendage or plucking out an eyeball will get you nowhere. What is the point of Jesus' exaggerated rhetoric?
- (237) You get the impression that the issue has changed. It's not just about offending "little believers"; now it's about your own ultimate fate, the difference between "life" and "Gehenna"? What does all this mean in a sermon about life within the community of the church?

Read Matthew 18:15-20.

- (238) Jesus initiates a discussion of how the church treats its members who commit sins. (Note: the words "against you" should **not** be included here!) Some think these are the three steps for excommunicating unrepentant sinners. Others think they are the three steps for reclaiming lost members. It depends on whether "Gentiles and tax collectors" are outsiders as far as the church is concerned, or special objects of the church's mission. What do you think?
- (239) Talk to the offending party one-on-one; then back it up with one or two others; if all else fails, go to the entire congregation. Is this practical? Have you ever tried it?
- (240) Twice Jesus begins with "Amen, I tell you..." Binding *versus* loosing—does this refer to forgiving *versus* not forgiving sins? (See item #210.)
- (241) In your experience, does God actually do everything you and your partner agree upon? If not, what can Jesus be driving at?
- (242) "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" sounds like something the risen Christ would say, doesn't it? Would this be an "Emmanuel" experience? (See item #20.)

Read Matthew 18:21-35.

- (243) But what if it's personal, a fellow-Christian sinning *against you*? Peter's offer to forgive seven times a day is overly generous. Jesus' insistence on seventy-seven times (or is it 490 times?) is outrageous. As a general principle, unsurpassable forgiveness sounds good, but is it realistic?
- (244) Jesus' story about an unforgiving debtor—skillfully told in three parallel scenes—is equally as outrageous. A large coin weighing a talent represented about 15 years' wages. So a debt of 10,000 talents x 15 years per talent x \$40,000 a year, would represent about \$6 trillion in today's economy! Who could possibly rack up that size of a debt?
- (245) The slave begs for the king's *patience*, so he can have extra time to raise the funds. Yeah, right. Instead, the king takes *pity* on him and mercifully cancels the debt! Isn't this preposterous?
- (246) A smaller denarius was one day's wage. Thus the second slave owes the first only three months' pay, about \$10,000 today, a pittance compared to \$6 trillion. So when the king learns the first guy refused to pity the second guy, he throws him into debtors' prison and has him tortured until his family can come up with some cash. How exactly does this reflect life in the kingdom of heaven?
- (247) Today we think of the heart as the seat of our emotions and the head as the place for thinking and reasoning. The ancients, too, located thinking in the head; emotions, however, were located in the viscera (the "bowels of compassion," for example). For them *the heart was where decisions were made*. So to "forgive someone from your heart" means to make a cold-blooded decision and just do it. That's still easier said than done, isn't it? (* The word, of course, is "forgiveness.")

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

19. Journey to Jerusalem (19:1-29)

teaching in Transjordan: divorce – children blessed – rich man departs – riches

Sovereign God, you have created us to live in loving community with one another. Form us for life that is faithful and steadfast, and teach us to trust like little children, that we may reflect the image of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #165)

Read Matthew 19:1-2.

- (248) Once again the phrase “And it happened when Jesus completed...” begins the passage which follows a major discourses (see item #90) as Jesus moves from Galilee into Transjordan. Notice that his is still a ministry of healing. The three sequences which follow focus on a trio of ethical issues: divorce, children, and money. These are still three big issues today, aren’t they?

Read Matthew 19:3-12.

- (249) What Pharisees are doing east of the Jordan is anyone’s guess, but there they are, testing Jesus (like the devil? see item #35) with a question about divorce, which of course was a man’s privilege in biblical law, not a woman’s (see item #61). In all fairness, their question is not whether a man can divorce his wife “for just any reason at all,” but whether “there is any possible reason for a divorce.” That makes it better, doesn’t it? Or does it not?
- (250) Jesus’ non-answer quotes **Genesis 1:22 & 2:24** to assert that when a man and women are married the two become “one flesh.” In other words, sexual union cements what God has yoked together, and no mere human should separate them. Is this really about sex? Or about a civil union?
- (251) The Pharisee’s follow-up question references a Mosaic regulation (see Deuteronomy 24:1-4) which apparently *does* allow for the possibility of divorce. But Jesus counters that this was a concession necessitated by male stubbornness. Does this imply that even Torah does not overrule God’s intention?
- (252) The bottom line is that no man can play “revolving wives” unless, of course, his first wife was sexually unfaithful. How does this square with what he said in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5:31-33 and item #61)?
- (253) The disciples seem to over-react. Is marriage really so hard that it would be better to stay single?
- (254) Castrated eunuchs were despised and ridiculed; they could not serve in the worshiping assembly (see Deuteronomy 23:1). The term does not refer to unmarried men or male virgins, or to those who cannot or choose not to have children. Surely Jesus is not suggesting that some men should emasculate themselves for the sake of God’s kingdom, is he? If not, what is he driving at?
- (255) So, does Jesus value marriage? Does he value celibacy? Or celibacy after a first marriage?

Read Matthew 19:13-15.

- (256) Jesus actually touches and prays for children, contrary to the disciples’ expectations. Who, do you suppose, brought those youngsters to him? And why would his men have disapproved? (Do you realize there are both a church-related ministry as well as an international organization named *Cherish Our Children*? You can check out the former at www.cherishchildren.org, and the latter at www.cherishourchildren.org.)

- (257) We wonder whether this fondness for children was unique to Jesus. Apparently eunuchs and children have a special place in the kingdom. If so, what does that mean for the rest of us?

Read Matthew 19:16-22.

- (258) Notice the progression: We learn that “someone” is actually a “young man,” who is wealthy, and who ultimately rejects Jesus. But he begins with an honest question: “What good thing can I do to *possess* eternal life?” “Only God can determine what is truly ‘good,’” suggests Jesus, “but you need to keep the rules just to *enter* life.” If this seems too much like “good works will get you into heaven,” go back and review the Sermon on the Mount (see item #53 in particular).
- (259) Specifically, Jesus names the commandments in the so-called second table of the law, dealing with how we treat other people (see items #64 & #84), rather than the first table, which is about our relationship with God. Does this seem significant?
- (260) “If you want to be perfect (or “complete,” see item #65),” says Jesus, “sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor.” St. Francis of Assisi took this advice literally. Did Jesus’ followers? Did Matthew’s community? Should we?

Read Matthew 19:23-29.

- (261) “A camel through a needle’s eye” is an exaggerated way of referring to something which is obviously impossible. (This is **not** about a camel kneeling down to squeeze through a small gate in the city wall. **Nor** is it about a rope or cable.) Praying, fasting and giving alms are the three chief acts of piety (see items #66, #67 & #73). Anyone can say their prayers, and anyone can go without food for a time, but only wealthy people are in a position to give money to the poor. No wonder the disciples are astonished. If rich people cannot get into the kingdom, then who can?
- (262) Answer: No one can get into the kingdom *via* their own performance! But God can do the impossible. God can get you—as well as obscenely rich people—into the kingdom. Get it?
- (263) Peter’s rejoinder—“We’ve abandoned everything to follow you; so what do we get?”—sounds as obtuse as some of his other comments (see items #212 & #219), but Jesus promises them future rewards “in the new world” or “in the age of renewal” which are all out of proportion to their present deprivations. The question is whether this refers to present rewards “after the revolution,” so to speak, or whether it refers to eschatological blessings after the resurrection.
- (264) Notice that the list of things abandoned—houses, siblings, parents, children, fields—does not include spouses. Doesn’t this seem strange in light of Jesus’ appreciation of marriage?
- (265) Rewards a hundredfold, plus eternal life, it doesn’t get any better than this! (Here is where we started with the young man’s inquiry.) Is this another exaggeration?

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

20. Journey, continued (19:30-20:34)

parable of vineyard workers – 3rd passion prediction – Zebedees' mother's request – two blind men healed

Almighty and eternal God, you show perpetual loving kindness to us your servants. Because we cannot rely on our own abilities, grant us your merciful judgment, and train us to embody the generosity of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #158)

Read Matthew 19:30-20:16.

- (266) Jesus' parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is bracketed by sayings about the first being last and *vice versa*. In the story itself, which is which? In Jesus' day? In Matthew's community? Where do we fit in that equation? Will we end up first or last?
- (267) The story unfolds in two sequences. First, the owner of the vineyard hires unemployed day laborers at 6:00 a.m., at 9:00 a.m., at 12 noon, at 3:00 p.m., and finally at 5:00 p.m. The fact that willing workers are not able to find meaningful employment likely reflects the economic reality of Jesus' day. Does this describe the reality in our day, especially in minority communities?
- (268) In the second sequence, the landowner's paymaster doles out their wages in reverse order, and the one-hour workers receive the same reimbursement as those who worked twelve. No labor union would use this story as a model for negotiating a contract! The landowner is obviously not playing fair. If the owner is somehow like God, is Jesus suggesting that God does not play fair?
- (269) The owner addresses the complainant as "friend," reminds him of their contract, and insists this is a fair deal. "Are you giving me the evil eye because I'm a good guy and choose to give away what is mine?" Perhaps Jesus is suggesting that God is generous and gives us benefits which we have not earned. What do you think?

Read Matthew 20:17-19.

- (270) The Son of Man "will be handed over" and "will be raised," says Jesus. The passive voice in this third prediction of his passion and resurrection implies that this is all God's doing, although the Jewish leaders will bring the charges and the Romans will handle the execution. Notice how closely this outlines the actual events in later chapters.

Read Matthew 20:20-28.

- (271) Mrs. Zebedee requests special honors on behalf of her two (here unnamed) sons, but Jesus replies to the sons themselves as he dismisses their petition, just as he discounts their brash assertion that they can "drink from his cup"—a symbol of death. What do you think of their chutzpah?
- (272) Even though Jesus rebuffs the brothers, the other ten are indignant. So Jesus deals with them by insisting that it will not be with them as it is with foreign rulers who tyrannize their subjects. Those who want to be great and occupy first place must become servants and slaves. It sounds like an oxymoron. How does one do that?
- (273) The final verse, about "the Son of Man" (see item #270) serving and giving his life (literally, his *psyche*) as a ransom (i.e. the price which gains one's freedom) for many" serves as an interpretation of Jesus' impending fate. What kind of theology does this express? If Jesus' life is the payment, to whom is it paid? And are we among "the many"?

Read Matthew 20:29-34.

- (274) Jericho, located below sea level in the Jordan valley, is the last stop on a pilgrimage up the mountains toward Jerusalem. As Jesus and his men exit the city, a pair of blind men holler twice: “Take pity, Lord, son of David!” (See items #111 & #147.) This is the last time Jesus’ compassionate touch will help someone. Do you think these men who follow Jesus with their eyes wide open are meant to be models for those who are reading this story?

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

21. Entrance into Jerusalem and the temple (21:1-17)

parade into city – temple desecrated

*We praise and thank you, O God, for the great acts of love by which you have redeemed us through your Son, who entered the holy city of Jerusalem in triumph, and was acclaimed Son of David and King of kings by those who scattered their garments and branches of palm in his path. Grant that we may ever hail him as our Lord and King and follow him with perfect confidence; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (LBW #33) **

Read Matthew 21:1-11.

- (275) At Bethphage, a suburb of Jerusalem, Jesus orders two of his men to go into town and borrow a donkey and her foal on the grounds that “the Lord needs them.” Do you think “the Lord” refers to Jesus himself? Or to the Lord God? And who would allow their animals to be loaned out on such a flimsy pretext?
- (276) All this is explained with the 12th “fulfillment passage”:
Matthew 21:4-5 quotes **Zechariah 9:9** (perhaps modified by **Isaiah 62:11**), but omits Zechariah’s line about a victorious king, to show that Israel’s messiah is gentle and kind. Is that what it means to be “humble”?
- (277) The disciples follow Jesus’ instructions and mount him “on them.” On both animals at the same time? Compare Matthew’s account with Mark 11:1-10, which has only one animal, the foal of a mare. Doesn’t it look as though Matthew has modified the story to make it match the Old Testament prophecy?
- (278) The crowds, perhaps traveling with Jesus’ group, give him a “red carpet” treatment. (Note that there is no mention of palm branches.) They recite **Psalms 118:25-26**, verses which were regularly chanted by priests during the festival of Booths (not Passover). “Hosanna!” (literally, “save us, we pray”) here acclaims Jesus as “the Son of David” (see item #274 again) who enters Jerusalem “in the name of the Lord.” Compare this with the reaction of those in the city, which follows.
- (279) The entire city is shaken up (*seismos*), and now the crowds identify Jesus as “the prophet from Nazareth.” Does this sound like a demotion, compared with “Son of David”?

Read Matthew 21:10-17.

- (280) Jesus then marches into the temple courtyards. (Was he alone? The disciples are not mentioned.) There he does two things, and explains each of them by quoting a scripture passage. *First*, he expels the animal traders and pigeon sellers, and upsets the cashiers’ counters. Their commercial enterprises were necessary, of course, if pilgrims were to be able to purchase kosher sacrifices with non-Roman coins. This incident is often mistakenly called “the *cleansing* of the temple.” Actually, it was more like a *desecration* of the shrine. What would you call it?
- (281) He defends his outrageous behavior by quoting **Isaiah 56:7** and **Jeremiah 7:11** to accuse them of turning God’s “house for prayer” into a “cave for brigands.” Would you apply this to churches which sponsor bake sales or car washes or lutefisk dinners or bingo nights?

- (282) *Second*, Jesus angers the temple authorities by healing blind and lame people (who were not allowed in the temple courts in the first place; see Leviticus 21:18-19) and by accepting the Hosannas of children (who probably shouldn't have been there either). Do we ever exclude handicapped people or youngsters from our religious activities?
- (283) Again, he defends his actions by quoting **Psalm 8:2** before he escapes to the suburbs for the night. Sometimes children *do* get it right, don't they?

* This prayer is from the *Lutheran Book of Worship: Minister's Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), p.135.

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

22. Controversies in the temple (21:18-22:14)

fig tree cursed – authority questioned – parables of two sons, tenant farmers, and royal wedding

Lord of the feast, you have prepared a table before all peoples and poured out your life with abundance. Call us again to your banquet. Strengthen us by what is honorable, just, and pure, and transform us into a people of righteousness and peace, through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #167)

Read Matthew 21:18-22.

- (284) So far Jesus' miracles have all been helpful and healing. However, this one—the final miracle in Matthew's story—seems unusual and unfair. Just because he's hungry, he zaps a fruitless fig tree! This is so completely out of character for Jesus, no one knows what to make of it. Do you?
- (285) On the other hand, if the fig tree represents the people of Israel (see Jeremiah 24:1-10, for example), then this could be a symbolic rejection of the Jewish temple. Is that interpretation any better? Would it have supported Matthew's community a decade or two after the Romans had destroyed the temple?
- (286) Interestingly, however, Jesus' interpretation of this tree-cursing episode does not focus on its destruction but on the effectiveness of faith-filled prayer, which can transplant mountains into the ocean. But is it really true that you will receive whatever you pray for if you have enough faith?

Read Matthew 21:23-32.

- (287) What follows is a series of **FIVE CONTROVERSIES**, all within the temple precinct. In the *first* case, the priests and elders, that is, the aristocrats, challenge Jesus about the source of his authority to disrupt the temple business and to heal there. This is important. Is authority something you earn? Or is it something given to you? And if so, by whom?
- (288) Jesus' trick question about John the Baptist puts his opponents in a dilemma. Have you ever been caught on the horns of a dilemma? If so, how did you get out?
- (289) Jesus' parable of the Two Sons has an obvious moral. When their father asks them to work in his vineyard, one son says "Yes," but does "No." The other says "No," but does "Yes." The point is that actions count, not words. Which is why low class tax agents and prostitutes, who trusted the Baptist and repented, will enter the kingdom before the aristocrats. The question, as always, is, "Which son are we?"

Read Matthew 21:33-46.

- (290) The parable of the Wicked Tenants is entirely improbable. That leaseholders working the estate of an absentee landlord would abuse the owner's rent-collectors and murder his son is preposterous, of course. But Jesus exaggerates to make a point: What will happen to them? The aristocrats answer correctly: They'll be destroyed and others, who will *produce fruit* at the right time, will get to work the vineyard. Which proves the point: Actions, not mere words, are what count. Right?
- (291) Many people interpret this parable allegorically. The vineyard is Israel (see Isaiah 5:1-10), and the landlord obviously is God. The tenants are the leaders of Israel, the aristocrats. The two groups of slaves who come to collect the rent are the former and latter prophets, many of whom were beaten, stoned and/or killed. The owner's son, of course, is Jesus himself. The replacement tenants, then, represent the Christians. Does this make sense in Jesus' day? In Matthew's day? In our day?

- (292) Jesus quotes **Psalm 118:22-23** to suggest that a rejected stone (himself? his teachings?) will win and crush the opposition. Is it any wonder the aristocrats realized he was attacking them?
- (293) By the way, did you notice that this is the third of three parables in a row which all have to do with vineyards? See the parables of the Workers in the Vineyard (item #266) and the Two Sons (item #289).

Read Matthew 22:1-14.

- (294) The next story, the parable of the Wedding Banquet, is worse; it's twice as improbable. For nobles to refuse their king's invitation to the crown prince's wedding would be an act of treason. To receive personal reminders, twice on the festival day, was unthinkable—as was their litany of lame excuses. So the king sends his troops to destroy the traitors and burn their cities—all while the food is on the table in the banquet hall! Is this story plausible? No. Does it have political implications for Jesus' day? Maybe. For Matthew's day? For our day?
- (295) Again the king's messengers go out and invite commoners—the good, the bad, the ugly; it makes no difference—to fill the hall and join the marriage festivities. This, suggests Jesus, is what the kingdom of heaven is like. If so, how so?
- (296) However, one hapless guest—who apparently didn't bother to change from his work clothes into his good suit—gets tied up and thrown out into the darkness where the damned howl and grind their teeth! This shows that while unworthy people like us are invited into the kingdom, we're still expected to behave appropriately. Agree? Disagree?
- (297) “Many are called, but few are chosen.” So what is the difference between being called by God and chosen by God?

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

23. Controversies, continued (22:15-46)

taxes to Caesar – resurrection of the dead – great commandment – David’s son

O Lord God, you are the holy lawgiver, you are the salvation of your people. By your Spirit renew us in your covenant of love, and train us to care tenderly for all our neighbors, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #173)

Read Matthew 22:15-22.

- (298) In the *second* controversy, Jesus’ opponents are followers of the Pharisees, aligned with supporters of King Herod. The former were super-pious in their observance of Torah, and preferred not to compromise with Roman standards; the latter favored policies of *aggornamento* with the empirical authorities. They represent both sides of the issue about paying taxes to the occupation forces. However he answers, Jesus can’t win, can he?
- (299) When one of his interlocutors produces a denarius with the emperor’s image and inscription, it shows that they *do* pay taxes, and that they have also violated the sacred principal of not allowing images in the temple! So, says Jesus, give the emperor what belongs to him and pay God his due. But he doesn’t tell us which is which! And he never answers their question! How would you answer it?

Read Matthew 22:23-33.

- (300) The *third* controversy is with Sadducees, members of the conservative ruling families who, unlike Pharisees, do not promote a doctrine of the resurrection, which is not taught in the Torah. The law of “levirate marriage” (see Deuteronomy 25:5-6) *is* in the Torah and requires a man to beget a child with his sister-in-law if his brother dies childless, to protect his brother’s inheritance. So, if seven brothers in turn marry the same woman and they all die childless, who gets her in heaven?
- (301) Jesus ignores their clever story and simply insists that they don’t understand (A¹) the Bible or (B¹) God’s power, because (B²) people don’t get married in the resurrection; they’re like angels. And furthermore, (A²) if according to **Exodus 3:6** God is God of the patriarchs, and if he is “a God of the living,” then the patriarchs must be alive, and if so there must be a resurrection! Jesus’ audience is astonished at his clever argument. But is it convincing?

Read Matthew 22:34-40.

- (302) For the *fourth* controversy, the Pharisees are back, this time with a lawyer, to test Jesus’ knowledge of Torah. Which is “the great commandment”? He correctly recites the great *Shemah* from **Deuteronomy 6:5**, and then adds **Leviticus 19:18** (see items #259 & #64). Does this mean “love God *and also* your neighbor”? Or, “love God *by* loving your neighbor”?
- (303) What does it mean that the law and the prophets all “hang on” these two commands?

Read Matthew 23:41-46.

- (304) Jesus goes on the offensive in the *fifth* controversy. If David wrote **Psalms 110:1**, how could he call his messianic son “Lord”? Again, he squelches his opponents, but is his argument convincing?
- (305) So Jesus wins. Priests, elders, Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, scribes—all have to shut up after Jesus is finished with them. They’ll never get him now, right?

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THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

24. Condemnation of religious leaders (23:1-24:2)

Moses' seat – woes for hypocrites – Jerusalem mourned – temple abandoned

O God, generous and supreme, your loving Son lived among us, instructing us in the ways of humility and justice. Continue to ease our burdens, and lead us to serve alongside of him, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #176)

Read Matthew 23:1-12.

- (306) You get the impression that while Jesus is arguing with the aristocrats and authorities, his disciples and crowds of ordinary people are watching everything. So now he addresses them with warnings about the scribes and Pharisees. By the time Matthew was written, the temple had been destroyed, so the aristocratic priestly families and the supporters of King Herod were no longer important players in Jewish religious life. But the influence of the scribes and Pharisees continued on in the rabbis and their synagogues (see items #54 & #66). Follow their teachings, but do not imitate their actions, says Jesus. Have you ever been warned, “Do what they say, not what they do”? If so, who were they talking about?
- (307) Ostentatious phylacteries, elongated tassels, choice seats, public recognition, fancy titles—all are marks of those who prosper at the expense of others. You know anybody like that?
- (308) You can't address anyone (A¹) as “rabbi” or (B¹) as “father” because (B¹) God is our only Father and (A²) Christ is our only instructor. That may have been important in Matthew's day, but does it still apply in our day?
- (309) Great ones become servants, and the exalted are humbled and *vice versa*. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? (See item #272.)

Read Matthew 23:13-33.

- (310) Jesus directs a series of **SEVEN WOES** to the scribes and Pharisees, whom he calls “hypocrites.” A “woe” (literally, *Oy!*) is almost like a curse. Hypocrites are actors who perform behind a mask, then, by extension, people who pretend to be something they're not. Do you know any?
- (311) Look at the list of Jesus' accusations:
- First*, they lock people out of the kingdom.
 - Second*, they recruit proselytes, only to consign them to Gehenna.
 - Third*, they play fast and loose with their oaths.
 - Fourth*, they tithe their garden herbs but ignore more important matters.
 - Fifth*, they keep kosher dishes but remain unclean inside.
 - Sixth*, like whitewashed tombs, they look good outwardly but are dead interiorly.
 - Seventh*, they build monuments to the martyred prophets, but are just as bad as their ancestors who did the killing.

Which of these is most serious? Do we have modern counterparts to these hell-bound snakes?

- (312) “I, Jesus, am sending you prophets, wise men and scribes,” he says. From Matthew's perspective, these would have been the apostles and missionaries. “But you will kill, crucify, flog and hound them.” Do you think this actually happened?

- (313) So, says Jesus, they will be guilty of all the innocent blood ever spilt, from Abel, who was killed by his brother Cain (see Genesis 4:8-10), to Zechariah ben Barachiah (rather, Zechariah ben Jehoiada; see 2 Chronicles 24:20-21), who was murdered in the temple. Again, from Matthew's perspective, Jesus' **JUDGMENT** on "this generation" came true when Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE. How does all this apply to us today?

Read Matthew 23:37-24:2.

- (314) Jesus' **LAMENT** shows compassion over Israel's fate. Just as a hen protects her chicks from a hawk, so he would protect the nation. But that is not to be, for the people's "house"—that is, the temple—is to be flattened. The Romans did the actual razing, of course, but we get the impression this is really God's doing. So Jesus abandons the temple, permanently. Is there a lesson here for our own places of worship?
- (316) One more thing: This entire chapter is unrelieved doom for the leaders of the Jewish people. It is the sort of thing that has stoked anti-Semitic prejudice and persecution every century since then and continues into our own day. Is this fair? No. Is this biblical? No really. What should we do to make sure Matthew's anti-Jewish rhetoric does not poison our communities today?

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

25. FIFTH DISCOURSE: Prophecies of the End Time (24:3-51)

warnings: wars & persecution, Daniel's horror, the Son of Man, fig tree – unknown hour – faithful & unfaithful slaves

Righteous God, our merciful master, you own the earth and all its peoples, and you give us all that we have. Inspire us to serve you with justice and wisdom, and prepare us for the joy of the day of your coming, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #182)

The fifth discourse, which like the first is located on a mountain, has partial parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21. It focuses on the future, a future after Easter, beyond the horizons of Matthew's story. Jesus' followers and Matthew's community may have imagined his prophecies anticipated events in the near future, perhaps before they would die. After 2,000 years, however, we are more inclined to project some of these events into the distant future, at the end of time, perhaps millions of years from now.

Speeches such as this *APOCALYPTIC DISCOURSE* envision a two-story universe, in which events in the heavenly realm shape similar events on the earthly level. Mysterious demonic and angelic figures, enigmatic numbers, astronomical portents, geological disasters—all are part of the weird language typical of apocalyptic speech. The reader, then, must figure out which details refer (a) to up-coming historical events, or (b) to “eschatological” events at the end of time, or (c) to the way we should behave in the meantime.

Read Matthew 24:3-14.

- (317) On the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley east of the temple mount, Jesus holds a private conversation with his disciples, who have two questions: When will the temple fall? And when will he return at the end of the age? Notice that Jesus never actually answers either question! Do you think they thought the two would be simultaneous events? Do you think Matthew's church, ten to twenty years after Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE, would have thought the End was near? Today, when do we imagine the End will arrive? Within our own generation?
- (318) Jesus warns them about pseudo-christs who would mislead them. How would this warning have sounded to Matthew's community? How does it sound to us?
- (319) International conflicts, famines and earthquakes are signs that the End is approaching. Has there ever been a decade when we didn't experience these things?
- (320) Under the pressure of persecution and pseudo-prophets, the community will experience betrayal and apostasy. Isn't this always the way it is?
- (321) But before the End arrives, the gospel will be preached throughout the world. Is this an encouraging sign?

Read Matthew 24:15-31.

- (322) The “wasting horror” of Daniel 9:27, 11:31 & 12:11 was undoubtedly the statue of Zeus which Antiochus IV Epiphanes installed in the temple around 170 BCE (see 1 Maccabees 1:54 & 6:7). Perhaps Matthew's community understood it to refer to the Roman standards which Titus brought into the temple in 70 CE. When this occurs, says Jesus, escape to the mountains! Don't turn back! Sleeping on the roof, working in the fields, pregnant or nursing, wintertime, Sabbath—makes no difference. Get out! What should we make of this? Does it apply in any way to us today?

- (323) Does this refer to war? And do you think refugees from war zones experience this kind of terror?
- (324) On the other hand, the lightning-like arrival of the Son of Man (see item #143) will signal hope and escape for “the elect.” The question, as always, is: Are we among God’s elect?

Read Matthew 24:32-41.

- (325) The lesson of the fig tree and the “Amen, I tell you” saying is simply this: The End will come before Jesus’ generation will “pass away.” He was wrong about that, of course; they had all died fifty years later when Matthew was written. The encouraging note is that “my words will not pass away.” What would that have meant for Matthew’s church? What does it mean for us today?
- (326) But, says Jesus, the exact time of the End is known *only* to the Father. What does this tell you about people who insist on predicting that the end of the world will occur in our present generation?
- (327) “One will be taken and one will be left” is misinterpreted by the Rapturists who think that the saved will be taken to heaven and the unsaved left here on earth. Rather, this is a picture taken from the experience of warfare where the enemy takes or captures some as prisoners (the unsaved), while those who escape the enemy are left behind (the saved). In other words, it is better to be left behind, than to be taken away! Do you agree?
- (328) The bottom line is “keep awake and keep ready,” like a homeowner who keeps alert for thieves. Do you find this warning encouraging or discouraging? Why? Is the unannounced arrival of the Son of Man a good thing, or not?

Read Matthew 24:45-51.

- (329) The comparison of a smart slave who gets blessed *versus* an evil slave who gets dismembered makes an obvious point. Which is. . . ?

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

26. FIFTH DISCOURSE, continued (25:1-46)

parables of ten bridesmaids, talents, sheep & goats

O God of power and might, your Son shows us the way of service, and in him we inherit the riches of your grace. Give us the wisdom to know what is right and the strength to serve the world you have made, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #185)

- (330) Only Matthew's version of Jesus "apocalyptic" discourse contains the three parables in this chapter. If the previous paragraphs were all but impossible to understand, these three stories offer clearer directions on how Jesus' followers should behave while they wait for the End to arrive. Note that they all offer a comparison between the wrong way and the right way, not unlike the "two ways" teachings which conclude the Sermon on the Mount (see items #85 & #88).

Read Matthew 25:1-13.

- (331) The parable of the Ten Bridesmaids apparently reflects the custom where a groom would escort his bride from her parents' house to his own, in a procession with their friends and family. The wedding banquet would have been the groom's affair (not like today, where the wedding reception is hosted by the bride's family). Can you imagine why the groom would be late? The story doesn't give any clues.
- (332) The bridesmaids would have been carrying torches, dipped in oil and lighted. All ten fell asleep, so the moral of the story is *not* a warning to "keep awake." Only five, however, were smart enough to bring extra oil. So when the groom finally arrived, and their torches had gone out, the other five had to scramble to try to buy more fuel. The moral of the story, then, is like the Boy Scout motto: "Be prepared!" Agreed?
- (333) Jesus exaggerates. The doors to the banquet are locked. The not-so-smart girls arrive and call out the appropriate greeting, "Lord, lord!" But the groom pretends he has no idea who they are! So Jesus concludes with a warning to "keep awake." Oops! Does this contradict the previous item?
- (334) Some interpret this parable allegorically: Jesus is the groom. His belated arrival is the Last Judgment. We are like the bridesmaids. The oil is . . . what? Our faith? Our good works?
- (335) By the way, did you notice that there is no mention of a bride in this story?

Read Matthew 25:14-30.

- (336) The parable of the Talents is as exaggerated as the preceding story. But first, note that a "talent" is a unit of money equal to thousands of dollars; the term does not refer to one's "abilities" or to our "aptitudes." In phrases like "she has musical talent" or "he is a talented speaker" the term is used figuratively.
- (337) It is entirely improbable that any businessman would entrust his slaves with five, two or even one talent (\$3 million, \$1.2 million and \$600,000 respectively, see item #244) and expect a quick return on his investments, unless it came *via* shady real estate deals in which properties were bought cheaply and "flipped" for sale at higher market values. How would this story sound to low class peasants? How does it sound to us today?
- (338) The first two slaves, who double their stake and get invited to the party, are a positive example for us. Who wouldn't want to hear, "Excellent! Enter into your master's joy"?

- (339) But the narrative emphasis is on the third slave who doesn't invest his collateral and is denounced. This sounds like a warning. But to whom? And about what?
- (440) "I was afraid," says the third slave. Fear would have been a powerful motive for Jesus' peasant audience, living at the bottom of the social scale, kept in place by outside forces, largely powerless, subject to retaliation if they got out of line. Does his story resonate with our own fears?
- (441) Matthew's audience may have thought of Jesus as the master and themselves in the role of the slaves. If so, this could have been a warning to keep on working, not just keep on waiting, as they anticipated his return "after a long time to settle accounts." But is Jesus really like "a harsh man who reaps and gathers where he does not sow or scatter seeds"?
- (442) Finally, how are we to understand Jesus' conclusion that those who have will receive more, but those who have nothing will lose what they do have? Is this a realistic statement of fact? Or is it warning of some kind?

Read Matthew 25:31-46.

- (443) The parable of the Sheep and the Goats pictures the Final Judgment of all the nations of the world. Or is it the judgment of all the Gentiles? Notice how the central character morphs from "the Son of Man" to a "shepherd" to "the king."

- (444) The contrast is stark and absolute between:

those on the right – sheep – blessed – come – kingdom – righteous – eternal life

versus

those on the left – goats – accursed – depart – fire – devil & angels – eternal punishment

Are the differences between good people and bad people really so drastic and unrelenting?

- (445) The list of good deeds is repeated four times:

feed the hungry	welcome strangers	care for the sick
quench the thirsty	clothe the naked	visit prisoners

Are there any other good deeds you would like to add to this list?

- (446) Notice that the recipients are all lower-class marginal people. Does this suggest anything about Jesus' audience? About Matthew's community? About our churches today?
- (447) Also, these are not personal virtues (e.g. honesty, integrity, celibacy, "Minnesota nice"); rather, they are social behaviors. In other words, it's not about your personal integrity, but about how you treat other people. Agreed?
- (448) The clincher is the fact that how you treat "the least of my brothers" is how you are treating Christ. Are you OK with this?
- (449) Everyone before the throne recognizes the king and calls him "lord." But ultimately what counts is not what you believe or how your worship, but how you act towards others. Which was the concluding insight in the Sermon on the Mount (see items #87 & #88), wasn't it?

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

27. Arrest during the Passover (26:1-56)

priests' plot & Judas' betrayal – anointing at Bethany – supper in Jerusalem – warning of desertion on Mt. of Olives – prayer in Gethsemane – capture by crowd – disciples escape

Lord Jesus, you have called us to follow you. Grant that our love may not grow cold in your service, and that we may not fail or deny you in the time of trial, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (ELW #72)

Read Matthew 26:1-5.

- (450) Again the phrase “And it happened when Jesus completed...” marks the end of a major discourse and the start of a new stage in the narrative (see item #89). The account of Jesus' last week flows smoothly with one scene leading seamlessly into another, each marked by a change in location. Throughout, Jesus seems to be in control of the events. Was he really? Or is this the author's bias?
- (451) The Passion narrative has a two-part introduction. *First*, Jesus takes the initiative and predicts again that “the Son of Man” will be “handed over” and “crucified.” The same Greek term *paradidomi* can mean “to give over” or “hand over” (implying God's action) or “to betray” (implying human complicity). How does the choice of interpretation affect the narrative which follows?
- (452) *Second*, the Sanhedrin or council of priests and elders (not the scribes and Pharisees denounced previously; see items #310 & #311) take on the role of Jesus' opponents and plot to apprehend and kill him. Their speech explains why Jesus' prediction will be accomplished sneakily and secretly. Why do you suppose they were worried about a popular riot?
- (453) The entire Passion sequence takes place in the context of the annual Passover observance, a “freedom festival” based on the Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt (see Exodus 12), which was observed on the 14th day of Nisan (March/April), the first month of the Jewish calendar. A lamb, perhaps slaughtered at the temple, was roasted and eaten in the home. Passover was coupled with the seven-day observance of Mazzoth or “Unleavened Bread.” Look for ways in which elements from these observances will impact the story of Jesus' last week at several key points.

Read Matthew 26:14-16.

- (454) The Sanhedrin's plot is abetted by one of Jesus' own followers! The gospel gives no motive for Judas' offer: “What will you give me (*didomi*) if I give him over (*paradidomi*)?” Thirty silver coins is equivalent to thirty days' wages. Is that a fair price for a man's life?

Read Matthew 26:6-13.

- (455) Sandwiched in between the priests' plotting and Judas' conniving is a strange incident featuring two otherwise unknown people, a (former?) leper named Simon and an unnamed woman. Which probably tells us something about Jesus' social standing! The gospel gives no motive for the woman's extravagant offering, sneaking up and pouring a jar of pricy myrrh over his head as he reclines at the dinner table. Why do you think she would do this? (Do not confuse this story with Luke 7:36-50 or John 12:1-8.)
- (456) The women's action provokes the men's dialogue. The angry disciples' “Why this waste?” is countered by Jesus' “Why torment her?” “You can always help the poor,” he says, “but she is readying me for my burial.” Her good deed will be rehearsed whenever “this good news” is repeated. Is this a reference to this particular gospel?

Read Matthew 26:17-30.

- (457) Again an unnamed man provides a place to eat (not an “upper room”), and the disciples prepare the meal. Whom does Jesus know in Jerusalem? Apparently this is the first time he has been there.
- (458) And again a disruption occurs during the evening meal. Jesus’ solemnly predicts (“Amen, I tell you”) that one of the twelve will hand him over. Each in turn addresses him as “lord” and asks, “It’s not me, is it?” Except for Judas, who addresses him as “rabbi” (see item #308). Oh, oh!
- (459) All thirteen of them would have dipped from the same bowl, of course. Jesus effectively curses the one who breaks this bond of table fellowship, although betrayal is precisely his own destiny. How can we reconcile individual responsibility (i.e. Judas’ act of betrayal) with the force of divine necessity (i.e. “the Son of Man goes as it is written of him”)?
- (460) The account of Jesus’ *Last Supper* back then is the basis of our *Lord’s Supper* today. Every Passover Seder includes rituals of breaking a loaf and sharing cups of wine. Do these help us understand the meaning of Jesus’ words about “my body” and “my blood of the covenant”?
- (461) Somehow this suggests that Jesus’ impending death has sacrificial overtones and signals “the forgiveness of sins” (see item #273). And another solemn “Amen, I tell you” anticipates a time when he will share wine with his men in his Father’s kingdom. Did this ever happen (see item #215)?

Read Matthew 26:31-35.

- (462) Once again Jesus and his men are on the Mount of Olives, where a few days before he had warned them to keep awake and ready (see items #317 & #328). This time, quoting **Zechariah 13:7**, he predicts they will all desert him. When Peter ignores the promise of a post-resurrection meeting in Galilee and affirms his undying loyalty, Jesus—again with a solemn “Amen, I tell you”—predicts a triple renunciation before daybreak. Is there a warning here for us?

Read Matthew 26:36-46.

- (463) In Gethsemane—apparently the locale of an olive press—Jesus’ three closest men fall asleep while he agonizes in prayer. Three times he prays that his Father will not force him to drink the cup (of suffering? see item #271), but apparently he senses that his request will not be granted. Compare this with what he actually *said* about prayer (see items #71 & #286).
- (464) “Your will be done” is an appropriate prayer, don’t you think? (See item #68; and look for other points of contact with the Lord’s Prayer.)

Read Matthew 26:47-56.

- (465) Finally Judas arrives, greets Jesus as “rabbi” again, and identifies him with a kiss. So the crowd arrests him, but not before someone (not necessarily Peter in this gospel) slices off the ear of the high priest’s slave. Jesus, however, gives three reasons for not resorting to swordplay: (a) you, in turn, will die by the sword, (b) he could summon 60-70,000 angelic warriors if he wanted help, and (c) the scripture must be fulfilled. Does this imply we should not defend ourselves if we are attacked?
- (466) In a final word to the crowd Jesus scolds them by reminding them he is a teacher, not a terrorist, and they could have got him in the temple. Interestingly, the tenth “fulfillment passage” does not actually quote a biblical text! What is the point of repeatedly emphasizing this “fulfillment” idea?

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

28. Condemnation by the religious leaders (26:57-27:10)

hearings at high priest's home – Peter's denials – Judas' remorse

Almighty God, your Son our Savior suffered at human hands and endured the shame of the cross. Grant that we may walk in the way of his cross and find it the way of life and peace, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #73)

(467) According to Matthew, Jesus was tried in two different venues. The first, inside **the high priest's palace**, includes a pair of contrasts: one between Caiaphas and Jesus, the other between Peter and Jesus. The second trial, at **the governor's headquarters**, contrasts Jesus' innocence with Pilate's capitulation. Historically, of course, it was the Roman authorities who had Jesus executed as an enemy of the state. Why do you suppose Matthew makes it look as though the religious authorities were chiefly responsible for his death? Is it fair to think of Jewish people today as "Christ killers"?

Read Matthew 26:57-68.

(468) That the Sanhedrin, a council of 71 priests and elders, would meet in an official nighttime session is historically improbable. Their deliberation is bracketed by calls for Jesus' death (vv. 59 & 66). Have you ever been part of a "kangaroo court" whose conclusion was predetermined?

(469) The trial moves through three stages. *First* perjured witnesses are not able to produce a guilty verdict. *Second*, a pair of genuine witnesses testifies that Jesus said he *could* destroy and rebuild God's temple. Did Jesus ever actually make this claim? (Remember, by the time Matthew was written, it was the Romans who had actually razed the temple.)

(470) *Third*, the high priest cross examines Jesus, but he refuses to respond to his questions. But when the high priest puts him under oath, Jesus acknowledges that he is "the Christ, the Son of God." Wow! Is this claim a capital offence?

(471) Or is it his prediction, apparently quoting **Daniel 7:13-14**, that "the Son of Man" will arrive on the clouds to sit in judgment? (See item #443.) How does this qualify as "blasphemy"?

Read Matthew 26:69-75.

(472) Although he had intended to wait inside to see the end (v. 58), Peter moves farther and farther away: first, outside to the courtyard; then to the gateway; and finally to the porch. Isn't this a natural reaction, to distance ourselves from accused felons?

(473) At each stage, Peter intensifies his responses: first, when a slave girl identifies him as a companion of the Galilean, he makes a public denial; second, when another slave girl identifies him with "the Nazorean," he takes an oath; finally, when bystanders identify him by his accent, he utters a curse. Whom do you think he cursed? Them? Himself? Jesus?

(474) Then a rooster crows, and Peter breaks down. This is the only time in Matthew's gospel where somebody actually sheds tears. Isn't that pathetic? (Unless you count the parents at Bethlehem; see item #23.)

Read Matthew 27:3-10.

(475) Only Matthew tells us about Judas' repentance. How he could have witnessed the guilty verdict is unknown, but his is the first affirmation of Jesus' innocence. Is this a case of too little, too late?

- (476) By now the priests have moved to the temple, where they reject Judas' attempt to return the coins. So he throws the money down, leaves, and hangs himself. Is this a case of despondent suicide? Or is it an appropriate punishment for such a serious offense?
- (477) The priests use the "bloody money" to buy a "bloody field" to use as a grave yard for foreigners. This brings us to the fourteenth and final "fulfillment passage."

Matthew 26:9-10 loosely quotes **Zechariah 11:13** (not Jeremiah, although Jeremiah *did* purchase land and visit a potter; see Jeremiah 32:6-15 & 18:1-4), where thirty silver shekels is the wages paid to one who is to shepherd a flock doomed to be slaughtered. How this obscure and difficult passage relates to Judas or Jesus is not clear. Does it help to know that this is also the cost to reimburse the owner of a slave who has been gored by an ox (see Exodus 21:22)?

- (478) Every list of the disciples names Peter first and Judas last (see item #118). It is interesting to compare them:

Peter	– denies Jesus	– is remorseful	– experiences Easter
Judas	– betrays Jesus	– is repentant	– hangs himself

It just goes to show, doesn't it?

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

29. Execution by the Roman governor (27:11-56)

trial before Pilate – Barabbas released & Jesus condemned – mocking by soldiers – crucifixion at Golgotha
- darkness & death - earthquake

O God of mercy and might, in the mystery of the passion of your Son you offer your infinite life to the world. Gather us around the cross of Christ, and preserve us until the resurrection, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #70)

Read Matthew 27:1-2 & 11-14.

- (479) After their night-long trial, the Sanhedrin expedites Jesus' death by delivering him to the governor. Apart from the gospels, what if anything do we know about Pontius Pilate?
- (480) Jesus' answers affirmatively to Pilate's question, but refuses to respond to the priests' accusations. So, is he, or is he not, the "king of the Jews"? Note that at this point Pilate's amazement is a positive reaction; he does not yet make a decision in the case.

Read Matthew 27:15-23.

- (481) A customary release of a prisoner of the crowd's own choosing is elsewhere unattested and historically unlikely, but it makes good theater, especially if the choice is between Jesus bar Abbas ("son of the father") and Jesus the so-called Christ. Do we know anything else about bar Abbas?
- (482) Only Matthew tells how Pilate's wife sends him a message while he is seated on the *bema* (a platform for official pronouncements). Notice how her dream, like Joseph's (see items #11 & #12), affirms that someone is *dikaios*, "innocent" or "righteous." How many times is Jesus' innocence affirmed in this chapter?
- (483) Notice also how frequently the verb "crucify" and the noun "cross" are repeated in this chapter:

27:22 27:26 27:31 27:32 27:35 27:38 27:40 27:42

Read Matthew 27:24-31.

- (484) Washing one's hands is a sign of non-culpability when blood is shed (see Deuteronomy 21:1-9). Was the governor really innocent? Why would Matthew want to let him off the hook?
- (485) All the people (not just the crowd) assume blood guilt "on us and our children," a punishment which was exacted when Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE. Have you ever heard anyone quote this passage to excoriate Jewish people today, 2000 years later?
- (486) That an entire cohort of 500-600 men would ridicule Jesus seems exaggerated, but demeaning a condemned man with mock royalty is entirely probable. He is stripped before and after. Instead of royal purple he gets a red sheet; instead of a jeweled crown, an *icanthus* wreath; instead of a scepter, a stick; instead of a kiss, spittle. Then a whack on the head. How low can you get?

Read Matthew 27:32-50.

- (487) For the second time a man named Simon (see item #455) does what Simon Peter fails to do, namely, he carries a cross and follows Jesus (see item #213). Actually he probably carries the

patibulum or crossbar to be lifted onto a permanent stake, just high enough to keep a body suspended two or three feet off the ground.

- (488) Notice the lack of detail—no hammer and nails, for example—and no mention of any pain. At Skull Hill Jesus refuses a mild narcotic; his executioners gamble for his clothes (which means he is hanging there naked); and the *titulus* identifies him as “Jesus, King of the Jews,” the one charge he had admitted to before Pilate (see item #480). Do you think the author wanted to downplay the pain? Or would it have been obvious to readers who had witnessed crucifixions first hand?
- (489) Instead of physical pain, Matthew focuses on the psychological distress inflicted by three groups. *First*, by passers blaspheme and taunt him with the same charge brought against him at the priests’ trial: “Save yourself, *if* you are God’s Son!” Do you imagine the author wants us to interpret this scene ironically?
- (490) *Second*, the priests echo the sentiment: “Can’t the King of Israel save himself?” If he did, what would be the point of believing in him?
- (491) *Third*, the terrorists strung up on either side of him join in the ridicule. Where did we ever get the idea of a “repentant thief”?
- (492) At high noon the earth falls into darkness, and three hours later death comes. Twice Jesus hollers out, first in prayer, or despair, to “*my* God, why?” (This is his only word from the cross.) And then he shouts in death, as he “releases his spirit.” Or is it, “releases the Spirit”?
- (493) Even at the end, no one makes a friendly gesture. Jesus’ appeal to *Eli* is sarcastically taken to be a desperate cry for help from the prophet Elijah. And a sponge full of vinegar adds injury to insult. It’s a sad and shameful end, isn’t it?

Read Mathew 27:51-56.

- (494) Or maybe not. A series of weird post-mortem phenomena signal something else. Is the top-down ripping of the temple veil a fulfilling of the charge that Jesus would destroy the temple?
- (495) Only Matthew tells of a boulder-splitting, tomb-cracking earthquake and the zombie-like arrival of long-dead saints in the holy city. What is the point of this extraordinary passage?
- (496) In its own strange way the centurion confirms the suspicion (see item #489) that this is a god’s son. Or do you suppose he means “God’s Son”?
- (497) Among the women who have been watching at a distance are Mary of Magdala and Mrs. Zebedee. Is the other Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, actually Jesus’ own mother (see item #174)? And if so, why doesn’t Matthew make this clear?
- (498) By the way, these women had been among Jesus’ followers in Galilee and had ministered to him all along! What does this suggest about the role of women in his group? In Matthew’s church? In our church today?

THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST (16:21-29:20)

30. Burial, Resurrection, and Commissioning (27:57-28:20)

burial by Joseph – tomb guarded – women & angel at empty tomb – guards’ report – disciples in Galilee

Almighty God, you sent your Son Jesus Christ to reconcile the world to yourself. We praise and bless you for those whom you have sent in the power of the Spirit to preach the gospel to all nations. We thank you that in all parts of the earth a community of love has been gathered together by their prayers and labors, and that in every place your servants call upon your name, for the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen. (ELW #277)

(499) Notice how the final section of Matthew’s gospel is carefully structured in a balanced fashion with a number of interconnected verbal cues:

A ¹	– Jesus is buried	disciple – women sit – tomb/grave
B ¹	– Guard is posted	grave secured – steal him away – raised from dead
C ¹	– Jesus is raised	angel sits – fear not – go – raised from dead – Galilee – disciples – tomb – great
C ²	– Jesus is seen	fear not – worship – go – brothers – Galilee
B ²	– Guard is dismissed	stole him away
A ²	– Disciples are sent	disciples – Galilee – worship – go

Read Matthew 27:57-61.

(500) A righteous man named Joseph appeared at the start of the story (see item #11); now another man named Joseph appears at its end. Unlike an earlier rich man (see item #258), this wealthy disciple appeals to Pilate and claims Jesus’ body to give it an honorable burial. Jesus is no longer naked but wrapped in a clean linen shroud and interred in Joseph’s own new rock-hewn tomb. Notice how these details all contribute to the idea that Jesus is treated royally (see items #15 & #16). Maybe he *is* “King of the Jews”! What do you think?

(501) Two of the women—both named Mary—“sit shiva” across from the grave. It is important that Jesus be treated in accordance with proper Jewish custom, isn’t it?

Read Matthew 27:62-66.

(502) Although the following day would have been a sabbath, that does not prevent the priests and Pharisees (who are back in the picture again) from meeting with Pilate to make the grave “secure” (mentioned three times). They call him “lord,” and the governor allows them to post a guard. Does it make a difference if you call it a “tomb” (27:60 & 28:8) or a “grave” (27:61, 64, 66; 28:1)?

(503) They call Jesus a “deceiver” and the disciples’ possible theft a “deception.” They will say, “He has been raised from the dead.” Who is really doing the deceiving here?

Read Matthew 28:1-10.

(504) As two Marys visit the grave early Sunday morning, the earth quakes. An angel of the Lord, lightning bright and snowy white, arrives in person (not just in a dream; see item #12), rolls the stone away and sits on it. All gospels agree that the first witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection were women, including Mary Magdalene. Many women today find this detail encouraging. How do you feel?

(505) Note the contrast: The guards quake with fear and faint dead away; the women’s fear and death itself are overcome! Jesus, the crucified one, is not here for “he has been raised.” What is the implication of the passive voice?

- (506) The women are invited to “come, see” and then told to “go, tell.” Notice how their message to the disciples (who are now brought back into the story; see Matthew 26:56) is an exact quotation of the priests’ and Pharisees’ prediction: “He has been raised from the dead.” (See item #503.)
- (507) Only Matthew reports that Jesus meets the women on their way from the tomb to the disciples. Here at the end of the story they grab his feet and worship him (literally, prostrate themselves), just as the magi did at the start of the story (see item #16). Note that this is the first and only time Jesus refers to his disciples as “brothers.” Isn’t that encouraging? For us?

Read Matthew 28:11-15.

- (508) When the guards report back to the priests and elders, they receive a generous amount of hush money (see item #454) to spread the rumor Jesus’ body was stolen by his disciples (as predicted earlier; see item #503). How likely is it that soldiers (mentioned here for the first time) would admit to sleeping while on guard duty?

Read Matthew 28:16-20.

- (509) Finally, on another mountain in Galilee (see item #46), the disciples see Jesus and worship (that is, prostrate themselves). “But some doubted.” This realistic note which admits that the resurrection is hard to believe may have been important for Matthew’s audience. Is it important for us today?
- (510) Jesus’ final utterance, often referred to as “the Great Commission,” enables his story and message to continue into the indefinite future. Notice the emphasis on “all”: “all authority,” “all the nations,” “all my commands,” “all the days.” What does “all” this suggest about the church’s mission?
- (511) Specifically, Jesus’ words contain:
- (a) an authorization – universal authority is given to me (note the “divine passive” again)
 - (b) a command – so go and disciple the nations (or the Gentiles)
 - (c) a pair of methods – by baptizing them into the name of Father, Son and Spirit, and
and – by teaching what I have commanded (e.g. in the five discourses)
 - (d) a promise – since I am with you to the very end

How did this apply to Matthew’s community? Does it apply to our community today?

- (512) Note that Jesus’ instruction is to make more “disciples,” not “church members.” What would that have meant for Matthew’s community? For our communities today?
- (513) The baptismal formula obviously reflects the ancient worship practice which continues in our sacramental ministry today. What does it mean to be washed into the name of the triune God?
- (514) Jesus’ promise to “be with you until the completion of the eons” reminds us that his first name, Emmanuel, means “God is with us” (see item #20). What a great way to end this story!

Post Script.

- (515) Now would be a good time for us to become clear in our own minds what it means when we say we believe in Christ’ resurrection, and in our own hope for resurrection and eternal life. And it would also be good for us to consider new ways in which we in our churches can continue to fulfill that Great Commission.