

Seek First the Kingdom

The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew

Session One: Ash Wednesday

Introduction to the Study

Opening Prayer

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (Collect for Proper 20, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 234).

Introduction to the Study

This biblical study is planned for the period of Ash Wednesday through Easter Week 2017, though it could be used at any time as an eight-week series. The eight sessions are appropriate for either a small-group study, a congregational study, or for a person using the series at home. The questions for reflection can be used either as a guide for group reflection or as prompts for meditation or journaling for a person doing the study at home.

One of the main purposes of the Gospel of Matthew is to serve as a guide for Christians in living fearlessly into the ways of Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew's characteristic way of speaking of the Kingdom of God) is the vision that anchors this teaching. Lent is a perfect season for aligning our lives with the purposes of the Kingdom of Heaven, as we prepare our hearts to receive the mystery of Resurrection at Easter.

Introduction to Today's Study

If you were going to perform the Gospel of Matthew as a stage-play, you would need some very clever carpenters to create a three-tiered stage.

- The middle layer would show the earth as we know it, populated in the setting of Matthew, with disciples and beggars, Sadducees and tax collectors, governors and lepers. There you would see the Sea of Galilee, small villages, Bethlehem, Jerusalem and the Temple Mount.

- Below this would be the place of the unfaithful dead, a dark place of regret and remorse.
- And up above would be the realm of God, a place of light, peace, and loving relationship.

In ordinary life, all that we see is the middle stage, the dramatic place where the creation unfolds over time.

- One of the main purposes of the Gospel is to open up the other two *invisible* dimensions of human life, so that we can gain access to wisdom concerning the purposes of life, purposes that lie hidden in the mind and heart of God.
- One of the most difficult aspects of the Gospel of Matthew is that it opens up the bottom tier (in Hebrew, called *sheol*), the place where a negative divine judgment results in pain and regret. The point of that lower stage is to help people see and feel the urgency of choosing to live by the reign of God in this very moment, without hesitation, among the commitments, people, and things of this world (the middle tier).

This study begins on Ash Wednesday, a day for opening up our vision of life to include all of its dimensions, both material and spiritual. All of the Lenten season offers us the chance to live in this expanded view, to cultivate seeing not only with our eyes, but also with insight and wisdom.

Historical Context of the Gospel of Matthew. While Matthew is compiled from earlier oral accounts, written sources, and experiences unique to Matthew's church, scholars are mainly in agreement that the Gospel achieved the form we have it at some point between 80 and 90 CE (or AD), or about fifty to sixty years after the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is thought that this church had witnessed and been scarred by the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome during the Jewish War of 66-70 CE (AD), and had fled to northern Galilee or southern Syria. To imagine what they had been through, you might call to mind the images of pulverized cities in Syria today, and the desperate flight of refugees for safety. Rome's tactic in the destruction of Jerusalem was to obliterate the Jewish people, among whom were the early followers of Jesus.

One of the remarkable characteristics of Matthew's community is that they maintained Torah observance later in the first century than Paul's churches or those of Mark or Luke, and they sustained the hope that they could convince the mainstream Jewish culture to accept Jesus and his teachings as authoritative. Their debates and outright hostility with the local synagogues in northern Galilee are evidenced in some of the harsh language in this Gospel in relation to Jewish leaders whom they had failed to convince.

The Kingdom of Heaven. Under harsh Roman rule, both during the lifetime of Jesus and continuing later, when the Gospels were being written, the Jewish people developed the

sense that a great divide had opened up between God's purposes and the purposes of those in power around them.

- The purpose of an empire is to reap a financial harvest from its client states.
- In the case of Palestine, Rome ruled by using the local elites (government leaders, literate professionals and wealthy landowners) to carry out the system of "harvesting" the wealth of Palestine to send back to Rome.

No doubt, the Jewish people felt far from the purposes of God, far from the justice and righteousness of God, and powerless to do anything about it.

But Jesus' followers felt that in him they saw with their own eyes and touched with their own hands the living embodiment of God's purposes for humankind. Jesus embodied God's justice and righteousness. In Jesus, they saw what the rule of God would look like, a kind of living Torah.

The Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew's characteristic way of speaking of the Kingdom of God) is like a kind of blueprint of God's intentions for the creation, and especially for the role of human beings in the well-being of the creation.

- When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven, he is opening a window into that world above this one in our stage-play.
- Where Rome had forged a *separation* between the purposes of God and their way of ruling, Jesus makes the moral standards of the Kingdom of Heaven *clear*, and brings the Kingdom of Heaven *near* by embodying it, so that God's purposes may be known and lived by ordinary human beings.

Human beings do not create the Kingdom of Heaven. We do not help to bring it close. But God's invitation to *enter* the Kingdom is as near as our breath, moment by moment. The purpose of this study is to help us see how to answer that invitation, how to *be* one of the places where the Kingdom has a chance to flow into our world, for the flourishing of all.

Passages for Study

[The background of this passage is that Jesus has been born in Bethlehem, and the family has fled to Egypt in order to escape the murder of young children that Herod the Great had ordered out of fear of the prophecy of the wise men, that one of these young children was God's Messiah...]

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 2:19-3:2)

Brief Comments on the Passage. When Matthew says, "*In those days John the Baptist appeared,*" he is referring to the same historical situation he has just described (the rule of Archelaus in Judea and Herod Antipas in Galilee), which extended into the ministry of Jesus as a young adult. It is in this political context that John the Baptist proclaims a completely different rule, the rule of God.

After his baptism by John, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness [see the passage below], where he is tempted by the devil. The third temptation the devil puts before him involves the chance to rule over "all the kingdoms of the world," if Jesus will only fall down and worship the devil. It may be that the people around Jesus considered the government of Herod Antipas and others to be in service to the devil (in contrast to ruling in service to God). But Jesus refuses to be bought off by riches or power or security.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written,
Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him."

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. (Matthew 4:8-11).

Do not be misled by the fairy-tale quality of the three temptations – this passage is highly sophisticated in its portrayal of the spiritual dimensions of worldly power. In Jesus' day as in ours, people are easily co-opted by appeals to our physical well-being, safety, and power. It is hard for a hungry person not to do whatever it takes to have food, or for a person in danger not to reach for safety, no matter who we have to bargain with to get these things. This is where the reality of the top-tier of the stage is so important. God's rule is real. Are we willing to stake our lives on it? To live by its laws rather than those of the world around us?

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea.... From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 4:12-13, 17).

After the arrest and imprisonment of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas, Jesus picks up John's provocative proclamation of the rule of God. In doing so, he shows that nothing earthly will keep him from the mission of making clear that the Kingdom is right here, a threat to Rome and consolation to all who are willing to live in right relationship with God and their neighbor.

So what have we learned so far about the Kingdom of Heaven?

- While the Kingdom has its origins with God in heaven, it is intended for the earth.
- The Kingdom is a social reality. The Kingdom of Heaven is "God's blueprint" for the earth, for how the creation may flourish when human beings and every other element of the creation are living in right relationship with God and one another.
- The Kingdom is near, and the Kingdom is now.
- As we try to live in such a way that we answer the invitation to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, we may be tested by the lure of earthly power, security, and material well-being. But these things cannot actually deliver on their promises, because our true well-being lies in the purposes for which we were made by God.

For Conversation and Reflection

If you are participating with others in this study, the most important thing to do in the first session is get to know one another a little bit. The following questions may help you do that:

1. What do you hope for from this study? Are there any ways in which you hope to be changed by engaging the scriptures in this way?
2. When did you first hear about the Kingdom of Heaven, and what did you think it was? Has your understanding changed over time?
3. What similarities and differences do you see between the historical context of Jesus and ours? Between the social status of Jesus and yours?
4. Can you tell a story about a recent time (preferably in the last week) when you encountered the Kingdom in its social dimension, a time when there was a

surprising movement of reconciliation or self-giving for the good of someone else?

5. Look back at the opening prayer. The prayer seems to assume that we are easily distracted by things that are merely passing. What are some of those things? What are the things that endure? Do you have any habits or practices that help you stay focused on the things that endure?
6. During the next week look for instances when the Kingdom of Heaven is near, not merely in the beauty of the creation, but in a human interaction. What does it take to notice such things? What is the ongoing effect of what you encountered, on your life going forward?

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Seek First the Kingdom

The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew

Session Two: First Sunday in Lent

The Lord's Prayer: Cultivating Desire for the Kingdom

Opening Prayer

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (Collect for Proper 20, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 234).

Introduction to this Week's Study

In the first session, we spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven as God's "blueprint" for living faithfully on earth. As we will see more clearly as this study continues, the ethics of the Kingdom require wholehearted dedication and the courage to not just go along with generally-held values. People of the Kingdom aspire to love their enemies, to seek God's justice over personal gain, and to endure even persecution if necessary, in order to serve as channels of God's grace and mercy. Not everyone is ready to embark upon this path, but those who do have made the decision that it is the most important thing in life, indeed that there is no real life apart from the path that Jesus marked out for us. In this session, we ponder how to cultivate our heart's desire for the Kingdom.

Biblical Passages

The Lord's Prayer

In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus brings up the subject of practices of piety: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Over and over again, he stresses the virtues of simplicity and humility when engaging in these practices, as he recognizes the human tendency to seek others' approval of our spiritual dedication.

"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Pray then in this way:

*Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name.
 Your kingdom come.
 Your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
 And do not bring us to the time of trial,
 but rescue us from the evil one.*

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 6:7-15).

Comments on the Passage

- The Lord's Prayer comes in the midst of Jesus' teaching on spiritual simplicity and humility, and those themes are clearly heard in the Lord's Prayer. Jesus stresses coming before God in all simplicity, humbly acknowledging our dependence on God's provision ("daily bread") and our vulnerability to both evils without and temptations within. God already knows all of this about us. Are we willing to acknowledge our neediness and frailty and to accept the great mercy of God that already envelops us? The Lord's Prayer does not allow us to live by the fallacy of total independence and self-support.
- When Jesus speaks here of the forgiveness of debts, he is alluding to the Jubilee of God described in Leviticus 25. Many of Jesus' followers saw his ministry as evidence of a long-delayed Jubilee. The Jubilee was supposed to function as a kind of 50-year re-set button, when lands were returned to people who had had to sell them, a time when the whole community lived into God's vision of justice for all. Even the land itself and foreign workers living among the Israelites were to participate in the Jubilee. The Lord's Prayer calls for us to acknowledge that we are all debtors, and that we are also people who hold the power to forgive others their debts, both material and relational. As followers of Jesus, we are invited to participate in God's Jubilee.
- But the Jubilee is needed only when the world is not living according to the reign of God. When God's justice and righteousness are being lived out, when God is truly reigning on earth, then there is no need for a re-set button.
- God's Kingdom (the fully realized reign of God) is summoned right at the beginning of the prayer, as we move from praising God ("hallowed be your name") to expressing our commitment to God's vision of the Kingdom here and now: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Stating this desire for God's Kingdom to come on earth is not only a petition for God to do something, but also a prayer of oblation, a prayer of self-offering for God's purposes.

For Reflection

- What issues (global, local, or familial) pull on your heartstrings already? These are the places and situations where you may begin to develop a desire for God's Kingdom. How do you think God sees the situation that concerns you? What does God want for each person involved? Why does this issue grab your attention and your emotional involvement? This is a place where God wants to begin cultivating a desire for the kingdom in your heart. If you are doing this study alone, you may want to write about this issue and close by praying that your desires may be more and more aligned with God's desires. If you are in a group, you may want to gather your petitions and oblations into a group prayer.

Making God's Kingdom the Foundation

While the Lord's Prayer helps us to get in touch with our desire for God's Kingdom, Jesus soon thereafter makes it very clear that desire for the Kingdom is not just one good thing among many: it is *the* thing, the foundational value, the priority for followers of Jesus. Shortly following the Lord's Prayer, Jesus gives this teaching:

"No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the

*field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. **But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.***

So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today” (Matthew 6:24-34).

Comments on the Passage

Note the themes in Jesus’ teaching above:

- The importance of single-heartedness.
- Frank acknowledgment that our concerns about our material vulnerability lie at the root of our distraction from desire for God’s Kingdom (double-heartedness).

Right here, we come up against very basic norms of our society: that being a responsible adult means placing *material provision* for ourselves and our families at the top of our list. And the wider culture is only too eager to show us how many *things* we “need” in order to feel that we have properly cared for ourselves and those close to us.

Jesus never makes fun of these concerns, or belittles us for having them. In fact, he says that *God cares* that we have food, clothing, and shelter. Awareness of God’s care for these things is intended to free us to not be consumed with providing them, **so that we can focus on the Kingdom, the well-being of all.**

For Reflection

This passage has formed the basis of Christian practices of simplicity and frugality for centuries. Frugality is not a virtue on its own. It isn’t about saving money so that you’ll just have more of it. Rather, simplifying our material wants and needs is a practice in service to a much larger vision: the Kingdom of God. What has been set forth in the Sermon on the Mount is the importance of sparking a deep *desire* for the Kingdom, so that all of our other attachments and concerns can find their proper place.

1. Have you ever experimented with living more simply? What was your experience? Are you still living that way, or have you gone back to your earlier practices?
2. An experiment you might want to try this week is to refrain from buying anything new in a particular category (clothes, books, music, household items, even food if you have a lot in your pantry!), and simply concentrate on receiving the bounty of what you already have in that category. Shift your attention away from what you are not getting to what you already have. What do you learn about God in this process? What do you learn about yourself?

3. What concerns, worries, and anxieties present the most difficulty for you in being single-hearted toward God's Kingdom? Offer these concerns to God, and see what happens.

Seek First the Kingdom

The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew

Session Three: Second Sunday in Lent

Important Clues to Kingdom Living

Opening Prayer

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (Collect for Proper 20, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 234).

Introduction to this Week's Study

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus lays out a pattern of living intended to nurture and form disciples in his community of followers seeking the kingdom of heaven. This Gospel is less about conveying information to readers about the life of Jesus and more about presenting Jesus as God's ultimate teacher and model to follow in living daily life. Jesus provides the community with encouraging and compassionate instructions that shape the behavioral life of people in the church. In fact the Gospel of Matthew is the only one of the four canonical Gospels to use the word "church" (a translation of the Greek word *ekklēsia*) to refer to the Christian community. No doubt, Matthew uses "church" to characterize the gathering of the messianic community committed to Jesus in order to distinguish it from local "synagogues" that rejected the teaching of Jesus and his status as the Jewish Messiah.

The Sermon on the Mount

Most of today's passages for reflection come from what is known as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:29). The mountainside setting for this block of teaching by Jesus reminds readers then and now of the first delivery of the Law by God to Moses and the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. This parallel association of Jesus with Moses continues a theme Matthew introduced in his narrative about the birth and early life of Jesus: he is the new Moses who has come out of Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15) to lead God's people out of bondage and oppression and to form them as God's own people.

But, as the Gospel develops, Jesus proves to be far greater than the original lawgiver Moses. In the sermon Jesus provides people with a vision for daily living in the

kingdom of heaven. As biblical scholar Warren Carter puts it, the sermon describes a way of life that *enacts* God's life-giving reign in our world.

Living into this vision of the kingdom, however, requires ongoing discernment of God's will as a regular practice in the community. Thus, in the sermon Jesus instructs his disciples: "*Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened*" (Matthew 7:7-8). God desires that we know the divine will for our daily lives; God answers our prayers that seek to know God's will for life in the kingdom.

The sermon's teachings on daily life form the dependable foundation for life in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus makes this clear in the final sentences of the sermon:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall!" (Matthew 7:24-27)

Over time, daily living discerned and shaped by the contours of the Sermon on the Mount forms Christ-like character in faithful disciples. Though this way of life may be hard at times (see Matthew 7:13-14), and result in opposition from the wider world (see Matthew 5:10-12), the sermon calls us repeatedly to cooperate with God in making the kingdom of heaven a reality on earth.

Biblical Passages

1. The Beatitudes

The Sermon on the Mount begins with a series of short sayings called the Beatitudes. They define authentic discipleship and reflect particular actions or dispositions that demonstrate God's favor. In Jewish tradition beatitudes often serve as an expression of the connection between a person's actions and attitudes and what happens to that person. In the sermon the Beatitudes are written with an acute awareness of the present suffering of God's people, while raising the hope of their future liberation from the oppressive forces of Roman rule made worse by collaborating Jewish leaders. Disciples must live with one eye on the present and one eye on the future, recognizing that through Jesus the freedom of the future is already breaking into the world now, even if it is not yet complete.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10)

Comments on these two Beatitudes

- The “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3) are those who patiently experience the heavy burden of their present impoverished and oppressive life, longing for God to intervene on their behalf.
- The “poor in spirit” include not only those who are economically poor, but those whose spirits are being crushed by the economic oppression, sickness, hunger, and demonic spiritual possession that prevail among those who live under Rome’s harsh rule.
- Notice the *present* tense of the verb in 5:3: theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven *now*; God *is* now intervening in the person of Jesus to inaugurate a reversal of the present status quo, providing these faithful disciples with hope for the future.
- The disciples’ prayer that “God’s kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10, discussed in Week 2) is already being partially answered for disciples who remain faithful even in the midst of their present suffering; the completion of God’s reign on earth, when there will no longer be any “poor in spirit,” nevertheless still lies in the future.
- The Beatitude in 5:10 characterizes those who are persecuted because they are trying to live by the righteous norms Jesus sets out for them: those who mourn (5:4); those who are meek/gentle (5:5); those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6); those who are merciful toward others (5:7); those with pure hearts (5:8); and those who are peacemakers (5:9).
- This worldly persecution actually demonstrates a disciple’s fidelity to God through his or her enduring commitment to the way of life taught by Jesus; the Kingdom of God often breaks in by means of enduring faithfulness.

For Reflection

- Describe a recent time when you have been “poor in spirit” as Jesus describes it here. Did your enduring faithfulness help you experience the kingdom of heaven in some way?
- Who are the people in your local community who seem to be “poor in spirit,” oppressed by current economic conditions, sickness, hunger, or some other kind of spiritual affliction? In what ways do you see the kingdom of heaven present among them?
- Have you recently experienced pushback from someone or some group in response to actions you took that were meek/gentle? Or experienced pushback when you had mercy on someone rather than insisting on justice? How does the beatitude in 5:10 help you interpret your experience?

2. Entering the Kingdom Requires Intentional Discernment

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers’” (Matthew 7:21-23).

Comments on the Passage

- To enter the kingdom of heaven requires that a person live with integrity, acting out of a pure heart (Matthew 5:8) and taking righteous actions (Matthew 5:6, 10).
- Jesus confirms here the importance of living with integrity to enter the kingdom. Simply acknowledging and confessing Jesus as “Lord” is not enough. One must also *do* the will of God.
- On the surface it might seem puzzling that the actions Jesus describes in v. 22 (*prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name*) are just the kinds of things Jesus carries out in his own ministry. Why would he now call someone an “evildoer” who is doing these very same things?
- Jesus may be challenging our hearts, asking us to discern whether we are doing otherwise good things for personal advancement or public attention; if so, we would not be acting with a pure heart or living with integrity.
- Jesus may also be telling us that just because we are doing otherwise good things does not mean we are actually doing God’s will in our lives; God may be calling us to something very different.

For Reflection

- Identify the ministries in which you participate. Spend a few minutes to reflect on the reasons you became involved in each ministry. With whom did you discern your potential involvement in each ministry? What were the criteria or factors you used in deciding to get involved? Go through the same set of questions for some of the ministries carried out in your congregation.
- What criteria or factors help you and your congregation discern whether you are doing the will of God in and through a particular ministry?

3. Become Like Children to Enter the Kingdom

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes

humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me (Matthew 18:1-5).

Comments on the Passage

- In the Mediterranean culture of antiquity, a child was someone who was insignificant and vulnerable, without any status and power, holding a very low and subordinate place in the household.
- The disciples are looking in the wrong direction, asking who is the “greatest” in the kingdom of heaven. To enter the kingdom they must change and become like children, embracing a position of insignificance and vulnerability, lacking status and power in the countercultural church community centered on Jesus.
- The Greek verb translated as “change” literally means to “turn around”; disciples must look in an entirely different direction – they must look away from the criteria of “greatness” in the world – and measure “greatness” by the standards of the kingdom of heaven.

For Reflection

- What are some of the ways our modern culture defines “greatness”? Do any of these criteria tempt you or your congregation?
- What steps do you and your congregation take to try to remain humble and vulnerable, always subordinated to the teaching of Jesus?

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF WEST TEXAS

Seek First the Kingdom

The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew

Session Four: Third Sunday in Lent

Putting the World's Values Into Reverse

Opening Prayer

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (Collect for Proper 20, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 234).

Introduction to this Week's Study

The passage for this week's study could easily find its way onto any list of the hardest teachings of Jesus. Many people tell us that they don't like this story, or don't understand it, or that they worry over it without ever feeling satisfied that they have a sense for what Jesus wants them to learn from it. Perhaps it will make more sense to us in the context of a whole season devoted to studying the Kingdom of Heaven.

Note that we are giving you the immediate literary context for the parable, with the verses that come just before and after it. Perhaps those passages will give you some clues to the story of the landowner and the laborers.

Matthew 19:27 Then Peter said in reply, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" 28 Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about

nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

*[While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; **19** then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised"] (Matthew 19:27-20:19).*

Before we go any further in discussing the parable, let's pose a few basic questions:

- How does this teaching fit with some of what we have seen in previous weeks about the Kingdom of Heaven?
- What are the first laborers grumbling about? Is there some anxiety or fear beneath their grumbling?
- What would it feel like to be the manager?
- How would it feel to be the last-arriving laborers, when everyone is paid?
- Where is God in this story?
- Are *you* somewhere in this story? Does your identification with one character or another affect your interpretation of the story?

Look at the passages that come just before and after the parable.

- How does 19:27-30 relate to the parable?
- How does the Passion prediction in 20:18-19 relate to the parable?

Notice that the Kingdom of Heaven is not taking place in a celestial afterlife; it is concerned with mundane things and relationships, like workplaces and paychecks; employment, unemployment, and underemployment; sweat and tears.

- For this reason, it is important to remember the historical context of this story, even before we try to apply it to issues in our time and place.
- At this point in Matthew, Jesus and the disciples are involved in ministry in and among the small villages of Galilee.
- These were some of the places hardest hit by Roman oppression and greed. They were also places where the value of local community had traditionally been extremely important. Though the fabric of these small towns and villages was unraveling under the pressures of heavy layers of taxation, many of them still had a sense that the well-being of all the people in a locality was deeply interwoven.
- It was considered dishonorable for a wealthy landowner simply to stockpile wealth for himself and his family. The wealth of a landowner should also mean prosperity for a whole community through employment.
- These traditional values, embedded in the Torah, were under siege during Roman rule, when people were kept hungry enough to be in constant competition with one another for the basic provisions of life.
- Knowing the historical context causes us to wonder what the backstory might have been for the hiring of workers on that particular day. Did the landowner not really have enough work for the whole pool of laborers? Had the people hired last been waiting all day without luck, steadily growing more desperate? How many people in a household were depending on those workers to bring home enough money for dinner?

Part of how this parable functions on us as faithful listeners is that it causes us to walk around in the shoes of each character in the story: the landowner, the various waves of workers hired at different times, the manager, the village full of people for whom this vineyard may be the most important piece in their economic well-being. The parable schools us in the Christian virtue of empathy, of imagining the world from other people's point of view.

Even while the sense of the parable is embedded in Jewish traditions of social relationships based upon the Torah, it is still shocking. The first-arriving laborers are deeply offended at the decision of the landowner. The landowner's behavior turns upside down their (and our) conventional understandings of justice.

- We usually think of justice in terms of people receiving exactly what they deserve, based on their effort and skill.
- But the parable focuses justice not on what the *laborers* have done, but on the *landowner's* practice of giving each person equal pay.
- What is the landowner paying attention to?

- If the vineyard owner is a model for the behavior of God, what does that tell us? Where does it tell us to look for justice?

Parables can often mean more than one thing, or spark more than one arena of meaning.

- Some people have heard in this story a reference to the acceptance of Gentiles (the late-arriving laborers) into the people of Israel (the original laborers in the vineyard). The vineyard was a long-standing metaphor for Israel.
- In that case, the grumblers could be the longstanding faithful Jewish community who did not want to accept God's inclusion of the Gentiles who did not share their history of faithfulness.
- But whatever the context, the parable always forces us to acknowledge that our habitual ways of thinking of justice look paltry compared to the generosity of God's justice. And the parable also insists that we acknowledge that the whole world is God's. Nothing that we earn is really *ours*, because we are merely laborers in God's fruitful vineyard.

How might we experiment practicing the wisdom of the parable in our own lives?

- St. Benedict's Workshop, the ministry we are both involved in in San Antonio, has experimented for fifteen years with making our offerings free of charge, while encouraging participants to give generously if and when they can. As in the parable, this practice means that there is no strict justice in the cost of our events, from the participants' point of view. And yet there has always been the financial means for the work to continue. This practice has also meant that we have had to be attentive to where God is calling us from month to month.
- The Society of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has a similar financial practice. They give their teaching away online (see ssje.org), and yet they are far and away better funded now than when they ran a publishing house and retreat center with standard fees.
- We are not suggesting that these non-profit models be applied haphazardly in the economic sphere, but we do see them as **an invitation to pay attention to what God is doing in your life through every aspect of your material well-being. Allow the surprise of God's ways to inform and perhaps alter your usual sense of justice.**

For Further Reflection

1. Why do you think Jesus told this story?
2. How is this story "like the Kingdom of Heaven"? What blueprint for human life on earth does it describe?

3. Now that you have spent more time with the story, how do you think it connects with the crucifixion of Jesus (the passage that follows the parable)?
4. Have you had any surprising experiences of God's justice as distinct from human justice? Have you ever grumbled because God's justice was being done, rather than yours?
5. Do you hear a particular call to you in this parable? What is your reaction?
6. If you wanted to make room for God's justice to flow forth from your life into your community, what actions or new practices might you experiment with?

Seek First the Kingdom

The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew

Session Five: *The Kingdom and Discernment*

Opening Prayer

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (Collect for Proper 20, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 234).

Introduction to this Week's Study

Life would be so much easier if we experienced the kingdom of heaven every day. But even though the scriptures tell us that Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven and bring it near to us, he did not exactly leave us with photographs or drawings of what the kingdom looks like. Instead, he leaves us with a kind of roadmap for encountering the kingdom, teaching us a pattern of life that leads us to see the kingdom emerging from time to time. But it's hardly a clear roadmap. He often speaks to us about the kingdom in parables, which require us to become a group of discerning navigators, discussing with one another and deciding as a community which of the twists and turns to take in the road that leads to life.

Today's first passages for reflection come from chapter 13 in Matthew's Gospel. It's a chapter that deals mostly with Jesus' teachings in parables about the kingdom of heaven. According to one biblical scholar, Donald Senior, "parables are extended metaphors or comparisons designed to draw the hearer into a new awareness of reality as revealed by Jesus, yet their artful nature adds a special twist of paradox and unexpected challenge" (from *Matthew: Abingdon New Testament Commentary*, 1998, pg 146). C.H. Dodd, another prominent biblical scholar from an earlier generation, defines a parable as "a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought" (*The Parables of the Kingdom*, 1962, pg 5).

The parables of Jesus are designed to be opaque, with the capacity to perplex and challenge his listeners. Consequently, they require disciples to spend time together actively searching for their meanings and discerning collectively how to embody the

teaching of the parables in particular circumstances of daily life. The followers of Jesus who engage in this kind of community discernment and practice begin to understand, recognize, and experience the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

The next passages also highlight the need for disciples to be part of a community of discernment, but for different reasons. The way of life taught by Jesus includes both traditional Jewish scriptural interpretation and application, as well as innovative new biblical interpretation and application by Jesus. Those who seek to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and his teaching on the kingdom of heaven must be able to discern when a situation calls for conformity to the old traditions and when it calls for embracing the new ones.

Biblical Passages

Understanding the Parables of the Kingdom of Heaven

Then the disciples came and asked Jesus, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away....blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear (Matthew 13:10-12, 16).

Comments on the Passage

- Look closely at what Jesus "gives" to his disciples: knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. And knowledge of these mysteries leads to abundance.
- In other words, those who "have" and those to whom "more will be given" are the disciples who are beginning to understand the mysteries of the kingdom reflected in the parables and who seek more and more often to shape their lives by their knowledge of these mysteries.
- As their knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom grows and shapes their daily lives, disciples are given even more understanding of the mysteries, which leads them in turn to live and experience an even more abundant life.
- Disciples of Jesus are thus open to seeing and hearing about life in new ways; they change their way of life and actions in response to his teaching.

For Reflection

- Describe one or two of your favorite parables in the teaching of Jesus. How have you changed your pattern of living or acted in new ways in response to these parables? What have you learned about the mysteries of God's kingdom through these changes in your life?

- Describe one or two parables of Jesus that are hard for you to hear or understand. In what specific ways do these parables challenge you to change the way you see, hear, or understand your life? What does the passage above suggest to you about these more troublesome parables you've identified?

Discerning the New and the Old in the Kingdom of Heaven

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been disciplined for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matthew 13:51-52).

Comments on the Passage

- Understanding how the parables call us to see, hear, and act in new ways is an essential aspect of discipleship in the Gospel of Matthew.
- "To disciple" someone for the kingdom of heaven means walking side by side with that person over time to demonstrate the pattern of life taught by Jesus.
- In first-century Judaism, a scribe was a person learned in the scriptures and the Law of Moses. This passage most likely refers to a group in Matthew's community who were experts in interpreting the scriptures, but who have been disciplined by Jesus to apply the scriptures as Jesus taught them. The goal of their biblical interpretation is to help people enter and experience the kingdom of heaven in their daily lives.
- The pattern of living Jesus teaches includes both old and new ways of interpreting and living by the scriptures.
- The community and its scribes must practice discernment regularly to determine whether the particular situation at hand calls for the application of "old" treasure contained in the scriptures or the application of "new" treasure that comes from an innovative interpretation or prioritization of scripture and tradition.

For Reflection

- Who are the important people who have disciplined you over the course of your life? In what specific situations did they apply the "old" treasure contained in the scriptures? What fruit did this discipling bear? In what ways did these mentors suggest "new" ways of understanding and applying scripture? What fruit did this discipling bear?
- Are there one or two parables that now mean something different to you than when you first heard them or were first taught them? What is the "new" treasure you now bring out of the parable(s) you've identified?

“Binding and Loosing”: Practicing Discernment about the “Old” and the “New”

Jesus said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:15-19).

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:15-20).

Comments on the Passages

- In the first passage Jesus gives Peter a place of priority in leadership of the community of disciples.
- Jesus gives Peter the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” as part of his new authority. This is a metaphor that depicts the kingdom as a city entered through a gate that must be unlocked by Peter the gatekeeper (you can hear in this metaphor the origins of the imaginative stories about Peter meeting people at the “pearly gates” after death).
- Jesus directly links the keys to the kingdom of heaven to the authority he gives Peter to “bind and loose.” Jesus is drawing on the rabbinic practice of making judgments about the applicable scriptures in a particular context and what actions are permitted or forbidden. Depending on the situation, the rabbi either “binds” the community to the application of a particular scriptural command or “looses” them from its demands.
- Peter is given the authority to speak for God; the decisions Peter makes about the applicable scriptures and appropriate behavior are deemed acceptable to God.
- In 23:13 Matthew contrasts the teaching and biblical interpretation of the Pharisees: “woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.”

- Peter's authority, however, is not unlimited; Peter exercises this "binding and loosing" only as he has learned to do so from the teaching of Jesus.
- Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus utilizes this same rabbinic practice of "binding and loosing." For instance, several times in Matthew 5:21-48 we hear Jesus not only "binding" the community to particular commandments prohibiting such things as murder and adultery, but also binding them to an even more rigorous standard prohibiting anger and lust. Conversely, in Matthew 12:1-14 we find Jesus "loosing" his disciples from the commandment prohibiting work on the Sabbath in favor of approving their behavior that results in the feeding of hungry people and healing a man with a withered hand.
- In the second passage above, Jesus gives this same authority to "bind and loose" to the *entire congregation*. Having learned from the risen Christ who is present among them whenever they gather (see v. 20), the entire church serves as a deliberative body to bind people to certain scriptures while loosing them from others, depending on the context; their decisions are also backed by God in heaven.

For Reflection

- Describe a time when you were conflicted about whether a particular passage of scripture prohibited an action you were contemplating. Who did you consult about your decision-making? Did you consider the impact of any other scriptures on your decision about whether to act? How did you reach a decision about what to do?
- Describe a time when you were considering a particular action and you realized that there were conflicting passages of scripture, one of which seemed to prohibit the action you were considering and one of which seemed to approve the action. Who did you consult about your dilemma? How did you reach a decision about what to do?
- Do you find this authority for "binding and loosing," given to the church, troublesome or freeing? Why?

Seek First the Kingdom

The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew

Session Six: *Living as a Kingdom Community*

Opening Prayer

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (Collect for Proper 20, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 234).

Introduction to this Week's Study

In today's passages we continue to reflect on parables of the kingdom of heaven. We will consider two more parables that are unique to the Gospel of Matthew. They appear nowhere else in the New Testament, so they tell us quite a bit about Matthew's view of living as a kingdom community.

Biblical Passages

Addressing Destructive Forces in the Community

Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

...Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who

sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!" (Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43)

Comments on the Passage

- The opening verse picks up the theme of discernment we considered in our last session. When Jesus says "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to..." he is leaving it to the Christian community to discern the connections between life in their world and life in the kingdom as depicted in the parable.
- This particular parable and its explanation anticipate a Christian community where good and bad coexist side by side – in the community and in the world.
- The parable urges the Christian community to exercise restraint and patience with their brothers and sisters who stumble, rather than uprooting them from their relationships and established place in the community. Jesus even suggests at another place in the Gospel – Matthew 18:10-14 - that we should go after a community member who has gone astray and help restore that person to the community.
- By practicing patience and restraint with an evildoer the Christian community lives into one of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount: "*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy*" (Matthew 5:7; see also 15:22; 17:15; 18:33; 20:30-31).
- Similarly, showing mercy to an evildoer aligns with other major themes in Matthew's Gospel, such as the strong admonition against judging others (7:1-5); the instruction to seek reconciliation, even with an enemy (5:21-26; 5:43-48); and practicing forgiveness (6:12, 14-15; 18:21-22).
- In other words, Jesus warns us to be aware of evil in our midst, but encourages us to leave to God the judgment and punishment of the evildoer. On the day of final judgment, God will prevail over all the causes of sin and with those doing evil in God's kingdom, leaving behind all those doing good to shine in the world.
- Jesus clearly warns us here about the harm we can do to families, friends, relationships, and to our Christian community when we fail to practice mercy and, instead, assume the role of judge expressly reserved for God.
- Living as a kingdom community means always continuing to disciple one another in the life-giving ways of Jesus.
- In our last session, we looked at Matthew 18:15-20. There, Jesus sets out a pattern of action for discipling a wrongdoer in the community.
 - First, we engage the person in a face-to-face conversation, speaking clearly to that person about the perceived offense.
 - If that doesn't restore the wrongdoer to right relationship with us, we take two or three other people with us to confront the person.

- If that doesn't bring the wrongdoer to recognize the wrongness of the action, we present the offense to the whole community. The purpose of this pattern for action is twofold: we try to avoid shaming the wrongdoer publicly, while helping that person recognize their transgression and restoring them to right relationships in the community.

For Reflection

- What spiritual disciplines have shaped you to become more merciful to those who stumble? What are some of the obstacles that hinder you from practicing mercy?
- When we are tempted to judge someone for what they have done, or even consider asking them to leave our community, we are usually doing so for what we think are good reasons. Reflect on the times you have thought about taking such actions. What were the good reasons you had for doing so? What do you hear in this passage that might influence your future decision-making about how to respond?
- Have you ever participated in some of the conversations contemplated in 18:15-20? Describe your experience. What obstacles might be preventing you from participating in the kind of discipling conversations described here?

Being Prepared to Enter the Kingdom of Heaven

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour (Matthew 25:1-12).

Comments on the Passage

- The contrast of the bridesmaids as “wise” or “foolish” echoes the exact same labels used to contrast the wise man who built his house on rock and the foolish man who built his house on sand at the close of the Sermon on the Mount (7:24-27).

- The five foolish bridesmaids who came late to the banquet and cried “Lord, Lord” echo the same exact cry as those who fail to do the will of God in 7:21-23.
 - In both cases the people crying “Lord, Lord” do not enter the kingdom.
 - Jesus fails to recognize them because they were not ready to enter the kingdom.
- The admonition to “stay awake” reflects a stance of thoughtful preparation for the expected but unknown time that Jesus will return.
- Being “ready” or “prepared” for the return of Jesus means, among other things, having all your relationships in good order by practicing mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation.
 - Being wise or foolish represents one of two different states of readiness that will be evident on the day of final judgment, just as the distinction between wheat and weeds will be evident at the time of divine judgment.
 - Matthew offers other metaphorical examples of being unprepared for the return of Jesus, such as: not wearing a proper wedding garment (22:11-14) and being led astray by false prophets (24:4-5, 11, 24).
- This last parable can also be read as an allegory that addresses another important aspect of Christian discernment: making sure our lamps remain brightly lit at all times
 - The parable builds on Jesus’ saying in Matthew 5:14-16: *“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”*
 - In other words, to be the light of the world we must imagine ourselves as lamps burning brightly at all times and in all places.
 - To burn brightly at all times and in all places means always having enough oil for our lamps to burn brightly; it means having our lamps never grow dim for lack of fuel.
 - All of us, however, at various times in our lives say “yes” to too many requests or demands on our time and energy.
 - The more overworked and overcommitted we become, the more and faster we consume the oil that keeps our lamps burning brightly.
 - In such circumstances the lamp that is our life grows dimmer and dimmer before finally burning out.
 - So, being “prepared” or “ready” for the return of Jesus, means always having enough oil in our lamps by being careful not to overcommit or allow ourselves to be overworked.
 - When we maintain sufficient oil for our lamps, they continue to burn brightly, so that when Jesus returns he will recognize us as shining lights that brighten the world.

For Reflection

- “Staying awake,” “being prepared,” and “being ready” are three metaphors that describe the fruit of the practice of Christian discernment in a community of disciples. Tell a story about a recent time that your Christian community helped you stay awake or get yourself prepared for the return of Jesus.
- Describe a recent time in your life when, speaking metaphorically, your lamp grew dim because you didn't have enough oil. What were some of the causes for you not having sufficient oil to trim your lamp brightly?
- Describe a recent time in your life when you said “no” to a request to do something. Did anyone help you reach that decision? Did your “no” help you to keep sufficient oil on hand so that you were able to say “yes” to another and maybe better request that came later? Explain.
- Share with one another some of the various ways that each of your lamps illuminates your community and the wider world around you.

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Seek First the Kingdom

The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew

Session Seven: Palm Sunday

Living as a Kingdom Nation

Opening Prayer

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (Collect for Proper 20, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 234).

Introduction to this Week's Study

The parable we are studying today is familiar not only to Christians, but to many people in western culture more generally, who recognize the image of the separation of the sheep from the goats. But familiarity can dull our sensibilities both to the scriptures and to the ways in which God is seeking to address us in a new and fresh way through the words that Jesus spoke two millennia ago. If a parable doesn't seem to challenge you any more, that's often a sign that it's time to open yourself up to new layers of interpretation.

The parable of the sheep and the goats is the third in a string of parables about divine judgment, the first two being the parable of the bridesmaids and the parable of the talents. All three prepare the hearer of the Gospel to receive what Jesus will tell the disciples directly afterwards: "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified" (Matthew 26:2). Some of those who are using this biblical study are encountering this teaching in Holy Week, when its full resonance may perhaps be heard.

The main thing to pay attention to as we go forward is the emphasis upon the judgment of the *nations*, not the judgment of individuals. In a society organized around individual preference, individual rights, and individual responsibilities this emphasis upon whole nations may sound strange. But perhaps it is a strangeness that we need.

The Passage:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified” (Matthew 25:31-26:2).

Commentary on the Passage

The title “Son of Man” is a complicated one.

- In Aramaic (the first language of Jesus and his disciples), it can simply mean “I.”
- Modern readers of the Gospels are often confused by the titles Son of God and Son of Man, thinking that they refer to Jesus’ heavenly origin (Son of God) and earthly incarnation (Son of Man). But within the context of first century Jewish thought, the meaning of these two titles is almost exactly the opposite of this. Son of God was a term used to refer mainly to the people of Israel as a whole, and sometimes to a faithful person.

- Son of Man, however, was used a reference to a *heavenly figure* whom God has appointed to carry out God's justice. This figure is known from such apocalyptic texts as Daniel 7 and 1 Enoch.
- The context here – the divine judgment – would suggest that it is this latter understanding that prevails here. The Son of Man is a heavenly being authorized by God to carry out judgment. Note the various terms used interchangeably with Son of Man (King, Lord).
- Prior to the development of the creeds in the fourth century, early Christians used every bit of their traditions to try to understand the fullness of Jesus' identity. The Gospels witness to the words of Jesus and the reflection of the first generations of Christians combined to clarify his identity without taking away the mystery that forces the readers and hearers of the Gospel up to our own day to wrestle with our own understanding of Jesus, our own relationships with him.
- In this passage, we see evidence of the understanding that Jesus was involved in preparing people to come face-to-face with God, an encounter that always implies judgment. Coming into the presence of God with complete transparency will always imply a sharp awareness of our shortcomings, hardness of heart, lack of sustained focus on the things of God. In short: awareness of our sinfulness, the ways in which we habitually wander away from God.
- The intention of this parable is to show us quite clearly what God requires, so that we can come into God's presence with joy and thanksgiving, not remorse. If repentance and change is needed, this passage encourages us to get on with it.

But notice that the parable is not focused on individual accountability, but rather on the accountability of whole nations.

- If you are doing this lesson during Holy Week, listen for how the story of Jesus' crucifixion implicates whole groups of people: the Roman governmental personnel who just want to contain Jewish unrest; the soldiers, who as a group decide to mock Jesus, whom they see as someone beneath them; the Jewish leadership who want to stay in good graces with their Roman overlords, and who manipulate the crowds of ordinary people to go along with them.
- Much of what goes wrong in the story of Jesus coming before the political powers of his day is a failure of any of the leaders to take the reality of God's justice seriously.
- What the passion narratives make clear is that almost everyone, for one reason or another, has chosen to acknowledge Roman power and to give in to it, rather than realize that ultimate power belongs to God. Rome has only the power to destroy. God alone has the power to create, to bless, to

bring about true freedom, life, and peace. But it would take courage to stand up for the things of God in the face of Roman oppression.

The parable pulls away the distractions of everyday life, and opens up an unvarnished view of ultimate reality. Looked at from that point of view, what does God care about most? What does God notice?

- Ironically, what God is paying attention to are not large-scale actions, but small, unselfish acts of care for the least, for the most vulnerable people whom society would rather forget: prisoners, the hungry, the destitute, the sick.

What *is* large-scale is the level at which judgment is taking place. It is nation by nation.

- Care for the most vulnerable is not a private choice, but a community obligation.
- The question for us is, are we encouraging everyone around us to cultivate habits of *seeing* and *moving toward* the most vulnerable in our society? Are we aware at all times that the power of God, the reign of God, is more to be acknowledged than earthly powers?

Can you put the parable into the language of our modern-day national decisions, using language such as incarceration, access to healthcare, economic justice, food insecurity? **What is God asking of us? At the scale of national policy, how would we do these things both *wisely* and *well*?**

For Reflection

1. How does it *feel* to make the move from hearing this parable as concerned with your private decisions to hearing it as a warning addressed to our nation as a whole?
2. One way to begin to experiment with living into the parable more faithfully might be to begin at the individual level and work gradually toward the implications at a national level. For instance, how are you *personally* paying attention to what is important to God (your most vulnerable neighbors)? How is your *church* responding to the needs of its neighbors? How is your *town* or *city*...? Your *State*? Your *nation*? The *world* as a whole?
3. A benefit of seeing this parable from the point of view of an entire nation is that it implies that you are not called to do *everything* yourself. What part of care for the most vulnerable is *yours* to do? What skills and gifts do you have? What

needs really tug on your heart? What kind of time do you have? What kind of monetary resources do you have? What programs and people might help you enter into this kind of neighbor-love? In brief, where is God *calling you* to serve, and *whom* is God calling you to serve? Who might help you live into more significant care for your neighbor?

4. If you are even just beginning to inquire about what is important to God, then you are on the right track. The parable is intended to bring about a sense of remorse in light of the ultimate values of God, so if you feel remorseful, you are hearing the parable as Jesus intended. He did not mean for his hearers to say, “Oh, I’m already doing all of that, so I’m just fine. No worries.” How can you balance a sense for the fathomless love of God that surrounds you and holds you in life at the same time that you acknowledge that you still have a way to go in terms of living into God’s equally fathomless love for your neighbor? What daily practices might help you keep both of these dimensions of the reality of God in view?
5. If you do feel a call to deeper service, another dimension of the meaning of the parable will become important to you. Notice that Jesus is never just focused on what he is doing; he is focused on what *God* is doing through and around him. In this parable, he makes God’s priorities known. Whenever you have engaged a neighbor’s need, take a few moments afterward to reflect. Where did God show up in your encounter? In how many ways was God present? What did you learn about God in this experience? How are you different? How is your neighbor different?

This parable brings us face to face with the truth that the Kingdom of Heaven – the rule of God – is now. Do you have the courage to live that truth day by day?

Seek First the Kingdom

The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew

Session Eight: *Entrusted with the Proclamation in Word and Deed*

Opening Prayer

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (Collect for Proper 20, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 234).

Introduction to this Week's Study

Today's session brings to a close our study of the kingdom of heaven in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus empowers his first followers with the same authority he was given by God. He entrusts to them his same mission to be carried out in word and deed. They are to proclaim the nearness of God's kingdom and minister to people in concrete ways that demonstrate the reality of the kingdom of heaven on earth. People are made whole and restored to the fullness of life that God desires for them. The followers of Jesus enact God's peace to a broken and divided world. Just as Jesus entrusted his first followers to go out and proclaim the nearness of God's kingdom, Jesus sends us out to do the same.

Biblical Passages

Proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness....These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will

be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town" (Matthew 10:1, 5-15).

Opening Comments on the Passage

- The initial focus of the disciples' mission is just to Israel and not to Gentiles and Samaritans. This limitation is only temporary. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, his followers engage in a worldwide mission to everyone.
- The phrase "lost sheep of the house of Israel" continues an important theme in Matthew: Jesus understands that there has been a failure of leadership in Israel that leaves most ordinary Jews vulnerable to the forces of evil. His mission responds to that vacuum and leads people into a richer life with God.
- Proclamation of the kingdom of heaven involves action both in word and deed.
 - Proclamation through deeds means carrying out ministries through which other people *experience* the kingdom when the sick are healed, demons are cast out, lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, and peace is brought to situations where this is discord and division.
 - The oral dimension of proclamation involves pointing out to people where God is working to make people whole and the kingdom of heaven becomes manifest for all to see.
- Nevertheless, proclamation of the kingdom of heaven demands a decision from each person who hears and experiences the kingdom: whether to receive the proclamation and accept it for what it is – the life-saving work of God – or reject it and remain subject to the forces of evil that continue to work in opposition to God's will for the world.

For Reflection

- Identify some of the glimpses of the kingdom of heaven you see taking place in your own world. Describe your own role in proclaiming the kingdom of heaven you see breaking into in your world.
- What parts of proclamation are you most comfortable with? What parts of proclamation make you uneasy?

Additional Comments on the Passage

- Jesus sends out his disciples with some very specific instructions:
 - As imitators of the Lord Jesus, disciples must travel as simply, inconspicuously, and vulnerably as they could ever imagine.
 - They must rely *completely* on the hospitality of those to whom they proclaim the kingdom of heaven.
 - They can't even take a staff to defend themselves against potential trouble on the road or in the towns; disciples are first and always peacemakers, as the Beatitude at 5:9 reminds us, "blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."

- Disciples must not receive compensation for their work; God’s generosity means the good news of the kingdom is free of charge to everyone.
- With these specific instructions, Jesus establishes a critical process of formation for his disciples; they must be formed in the ways of simplicity and vulnerability if they are to proclaim the gospel with authenticity and authority.
- As we saw in an earlier session, however, disciples are also always engaged in the practice of discernment; they must discern the proper time to move on when a house or a town rejects proclamation of the kingdom after disciples have made a faithful offering.

For Reflection

- Why do you think Jesus emphasizes simplicity and vulnerability in the proclamation of the gospel by his followers?
- How do you feel about the instruction of Jesus to go out into the world defenseless as you proclaim the gospel (“take no staff”)? How might you embody this discipline in your own life?
- What is to be learned by someone who relies entirely on the hospitality of others in the proclamation of the gospel? How might you embody this discipline in your own life?
- Describe a situation or event in your own life where you “shook off the dust from your feet” and left a relationship, workplace, or other setting because you didn’t see people accepting the good news you were proclaiming? Who helped you in this particular process of discernment?

Remaining vigilant in our proclamation

“Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come (Matthew 24:9-14).

Comments on the Passage

- There are many people in the world who reject the good news of the kingdom of heaven and even persecute the followers of Jesus:
 - There are people who exercise power over others in ways that are often destructive and divisive;
 - They reject the gospel of nonviolence and peacemaking;
 - They have no interest in losing or giving up their power, prestige, and privilege;

- We find these people among nations, governments, workplaces, families, and sometimes even in churches.
- Jesus encourages us to trust God in the face of this kind of opposition:
 - By remaining steadfast and energized in our commitment to follow Jesus;
 - And by continuing to proclaim the nearness of God's kingdom to people in our own world.
- Once again we also hear Jesus reminding us to practice discernment in our lives:
 - We must recognize there are always false prophets trying to lead us astray;
 - So we must regularly reflect on the fruits of our actions that are influenced by others: are we spreading peace and helping to make people whole and healthy again? Or are we acting in ways that are proving destructive and divisive?
 - Discernment means having the humility to recognize and acknowledge our sinfulness, and correct our patterns of living.

For Reflection

- Where do you see people in your sphere of influence rejecting the gospel of God in Christ? In what ways might they be influencing your own attitudes and actions? How do these people intimidate you? How are you responding?
- Can you tell a story about a recent time when you or someone you know was influenced by someone else to act in a way you later determined was inappropriate? Who helped you recognize that the action was unhelpful or destructive? How did you respond?

Jesus calls us "to disciple" everyone we encounter

Go therefore and disciple all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20).

Comments on the Passage

- This is the "Great Commission" Jesus gives his followers to proclaim the gospel in word and deed throughout the world.
 - This passage was inscribed in the stained-glass window over the altar in the chapel of my seminary;
 - The passage is also inscribed in Arabic in the stained-glass window over the altar of Christ Church, an Anglican congregation in Nazareth, Israel.
- The English translation of the Greek in most Bibles reads "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations;" but we have translated the verb a little differently; Jesus sends us out "to disciple" others:

- Discipling others involves baptizing them and teaching them to obey all the things Jesus has taught us;
- Discipling means walking side by side with others, demonstrating for them how to walk in the life-giving ways that Jesus teaches;
- Discipling others takes time, commitment, practice, patience, discipline, and discernment.
- Jesus promises each and every one of us, though, that he will remain with us in this process of discipling others until the end of time. Thanks be to God!

For Reflection

- In what ways are you intentionally discipling others within your sphere of influence? How does your congregation engage in the work of discipling people?
- In what specific ways do you experience the risen Christ as being with you in your daily life? In what specific ways do you experience the risen Christ's presence in the life of your congregation?

This concludes our Lenten study of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew's Gospel. We pray you will continue to see and experience God's kingdom in your life and ministry!