

“MISSING MATTHEW”

April 13, 2011

Matthew 10:16-23; 11:20-24; 12:38-42; 16:1-12

Lent Wednesday 6

Matthew 10:16-23

¹⁶See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. ¹⁷Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; ¹⁸and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. ¹⁹When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; ²⁰for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. ²¹Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; ²²and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ²³When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

Matthew 11:20-24

²⁰Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. ²¹Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²²But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ²³And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven?

No, you will be brought down to Hades.

For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.

Matthew 12:38-42

³⁸Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” ³⁹But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here! ⁴²The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!

Matthew 16:1-12

¹The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ²He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ ³And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot

interpret the signs of the times. ⁴An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” Then he left them and went away.

⁵When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶Jesus said to them, “Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” ⁷They said to one another, “It is because we have brought no bread.” ⁸And becoming aware of it, Jesus said, “You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? ⁹Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!” ¹²Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

In Matthew 10, Jesus’ words about coming persecutions follows the sending of the Twelve (10:1-15). The Matthean community must have faced a significant degree of hostility, for neither Mark nor Luke include these sayings about persecution. They speak only of some refusing to grant hospitality and to receive the good news. We know that Jesus, his message and his followers faced hostility, but we lack evidence that the disciples experienced violent persecution during Jesus’ lifetime. However, the post-Easter message did, at various times and places, receive angry and violent response. Proclaiming Jesus and following in his Way is not easy or popular.

The disciples become apostles. The followers become sent ones, emissaries, ambassadors, proclaimers and prophets. Jesus prepares them for the likelihood of rejection and persecution, hostility rather than hospitality. Jesus is already hinting at what becomes a truism, as stated by the 2nd-century church father Tertullian: “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” The kingdom, it seems, can grow through rejection. What may look like “success” is not a sign of faithfulness. The church is not called to be “significant” or “large” but rather apostolic, i.e., true to the Word—the person and message of Jesus. Faithfulness, not numbers or status, prestige or power, is the characteristic of the church and its witness.

Is there a sharp edge in Jesus’ voice, as he sends his disciples/apostles out like “sheep into the midst of wolves”? Even though “sheep”, they are to be wise, discerning and sensible “as serpents”; even though “serpents”, they are to be innocent, simple and without guile “as doves.” Jesus, most unlike the world’s proverbial wisdom, pairs wisdom and innocence. In the eyes of the world, achieving wisdom requires a loss of innocence; but the innocence the apostles are to practice and embody is not something achieved through their effort, much like those named in the Beatitudes—the poor, meek, those who mourn—receive blessing as a given. Innocence refers to living with integrity, honestly, true to Jesus and the gospel. Innocence means being vulnerable, “armed” only with “weapons” of the Spirit.

The church denies its apostolicity when it employs coercion to advance the witness of Christ’s peace. The gospel proclaims grace and faith, not dominance and security. Peace is the fruit of reconciliation, justice and righteousness, not power and control.

Jesus tells the disciples—no doubt anticipating his own treatment later—that the religious authorities will drag the apostles before the governing authorities in order to have them beaten. They are not to worry or be anxious. They will speak the truth, with the innocence and wisdom,

as the Spirit gives them utterance. With the very authority of Christ they will speak, confronting the powers and principalities. Governors and kings are familiar with those who challenge their authority with force and attempts at violent overthrow. What they cannot fathom is the power of a people who do not fear them because they righteously, in wisdom and innocence, fear God. The fear of God makes bold, truthful speech possible. Those who fear, love and trust above all else live in the power of the Spirit, able to witness to the reign of God in vulnerability. No force is more powerful against oppression than truthful speech.

The reign of God does not come without controversy and conflict. The kingdoms and ways of this world do not welcome the reign of God. Jesus warns his disciples that by following in his way they will likely experience great conflict even within their own families. The prophet Micah warned as much hundreds of years earlier:

. . . for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household. But as for me, I will look to the LORD, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me. – Micah 7:6-7

So Jesus says, “brother will betray brother to death, a father his child” and so on. We might think that the Prince of Peace would get a better reception, but in this world, not likely. A few verses later Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Mt. 10:34). Then follows the quote from Micah 7, and then these words:

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. – Mt. 10:37-38

Maybe it should not be surprising that the first controversies and divisions foment in the family. “What, are you dating a Gentile?!” “No way are you hanging out with those Irish Catholics!”

To say ‘Yes’ to Jesus also entails saying ‘No’ to others. In reality, Christ’s ‘sword’ is the cross:

The cross is God’s sword on this earth. It creates division. The son against the father, the daughter against the mother, the household against its head—all that for the sake of God’s kingdom and its peace. That is the work of Christ on earth! No wonder the one who brought the love of God to the people the world accuses of hatred toward human beings! Who dares to speak about a father’s love and a mother’s love to a son or daughter in such a way, if not either the destroyer of all life or the creator of a new life? Who can claim the people’s love and sacrifice so exclusively, if not the enemy of humanity or the savior of humanity? Who will carry the sword into their houses, if not the devil or Christ, the Prince of Peace? God’s love for the people and human love for their kind are utterly different. God’s love for the people brings the cross and discipleship, but these, in turn, mean life and resurrection. “Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.”

This affirmation is given by the one who has the power over death, the Son of God, who goes to the cross and to resurrection and takes those who are his own with him.

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*

That Christians bear the cross of Christ and not a sword does not mean, however, that we are utterly defenseless—vulnerable, yes, but not defenseless. The book of Hebrews tells us that the Word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. – Hebrews 4:12

In the book of Revelation, the “one like the Son of Man” has a tongue like a sword: “from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword” (1:16). He does battle with words (2:12), the sword of his mouth (2:16).

God’s living word speaks in Jesus, for Christ is the Word, defeats the powers of this world.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the realms and authorities, against the rulers of this present darkness, against spiritual forces of evil. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to stand on the day, overcoming all and standing firm. Stand, then, belted around the waist with truth, wearing the breastplate of justice, your feet shod with the gospel of peace. Hold onto the shield of faith to withstand the flaming arrows of evil. Take up the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

– Ephesians 6:10-17

When Jesus asks us to follow, he asks for our lives, the whole of our lives. Too often, in our time, Christianity is sold as a way of life that leads to stability and order. E.g., “The family that prays together stays together”—which sentiment may lead to an idolatry of the family. Jesus says, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Mt. 10:37). Following Jesus is no little thing. Discipling Jesus calls our favorite loyalties into question. Following Jesus may bring upon us a whole new set of troubles from the world.

In Matthew 11, Jesus acknowledges the rejection of his message, of his Way in this world. He pronounces woes upon peoples and cities which reject him. We do not know particulars about the three Galilean towns—Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum—upon which Jesus pronounces woes. Presumably his ministry there was unsuccessful and the people of those towns rejected his message. Signs or manifestations of power happened in those towns, but repentance or *metanoia* did not follow. Repentance, turning around to go in a new direction, more than believing is the issue. Jesus wants followers much more than he wants believers.

Jesus’ reference and comparison to the pagan or gentile towns of Tyre and Sidon suggests that ensconced, entrenched, established belief is a problem. Tyre and Sidon would have repented, much as Nineveh long ago to the message proclaimed by the reluctant prophet Jonah. The kind of repentance Jesus calls for requires his hearers to commit their lives to being part of God’s Way and Kingdom. Jesus refers even to Sodom in a more positive take than to Capernaum, his town of residence. These towns apparently have an ethos or culture that is unresponsive to the calling-challenging word of God.

Are we, in our own lives, our own towns, our own country, much like these three Galilean towns, failing to respond to the call of Jesus to follow in the way of the cross? Consider our cultural milieu and the spirit of our times. Do we care anything at all for the way of the cross, for the way of Jesus?

In Matthew 12, scribes and Pharisees ask for a sign from Jesus, something to demonstrate that he is from God, that they should bother giving him any heed, paying any attention. Maybe they are just yanking Jesus’ chain or maybe they really want some kind of Moses miracle, fire and smoke, rivers turning red like blood, a portent of the sun going dark, first born dying, or at least water gushing forth from a rock. Or, maybe the sign is a Scripture quote, a proof text. The healing of a demoniac (12:22-32) is not proof enough.

Again, controversy, conflict and opposition is the context. What does the religious “God-squad” want from Jesus? Perhaps this is a good paraphrase of their challenge to Jesus: “If you really are the Son of David, as some common people believe, then prove it by doing the sort of thing the Scriptures say the Messiah will do.” We are reminded of the narrative of Jesus’ temptation or trial in the wilderness. The Adversary tempts Jesus to demonstrate that he is the Son of God by turning stones into bread or by leaping from the pinnacle of the temple (Mt. 4:3, 5). A message of the temptation narrative is the conviction that the Messiah, the Lord’s humble Anointed One, cannot prove or demonstrate his status. To do so is to falsify what being the Messiah means. Only God can certify the Messiah.

Thus the reference to the “sign of the prophet Jonah.” Jonah’s three-day sojourn in the belly of the sea monster foreshadows Jesus’ days in the tomb. Both are God’s doing. Jesus being raised from the grave will be the eschatological event by which God confirms his Messiahship. Thus, Matthew 12:40 is the gospel’s first announcement of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the first “passion prediction”. Even then, on Easter morning when God raises Jesus, the enemies of Jesus will say it was a hoax (28:11-15).

Again, a pagan, gentile, foreign town (Nineveh) and pagan people (queen of Sheba) respond with more faith than the children of Israel. This “generation” is “evil and adulterous” because it lacks faith, loyalty, fidelity, integrity. It doesn’t do its covenant with the LORD God. We are reminded of the parable of Lazarus at the rich man’s gate: “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Lk. 16:31).

Perhaps the ending of this chapter helps shed light on what came earlier, particularly this missing Matthew text:

⁴⁶While Jesus was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷Someone told him, “Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” ⁴⁸But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” ⁴⁹And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

It’s not about blood relationship and Abrahamic ancestry, it’s about doing the will of God.

In Matthew 16, we come to the end of a section (13:53—16:12) in which Messianic signs are misperceived and misinterpreted. This time, not just scribes and Pharisees, but also the rulers of religion, namely the Sadducees, come to see Jesus. Remember, it is the Sadducees who must get rid of the Jesus character and his movement. In vv. 1-4, we have a reprise of our text from ch. 12. Again, they want a sign. This time, Jesus responds with proverbial wisdom about the weather (a saying we associate with sailors). Also, this time the inquisitors are putting Jesus to the “test.” It is the religious leaders’ responsibility to test the validity of a prophet, to see if such a one is truly sent from God (cf. Dt. 13:1-3; 18:14-22). On the other hand, Ps. 95:8-9 (quoted in Heb. 3:7-11) denounces Israel putting God to the test. Are these leaders testing a prophet or putting God to the test? Are they being loyal, dutiful protectors of the faith or are they hardening their hearts against God’s living, active word in Jesus, as evidenced by his deeds?

Remember, Jesus cited Deut. 6:16 – “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah” – during his own time of trial in the wilderness. The opponents of Jesus are here playing the role of Satan, the Adversary. They display their lack of faith and they put God to the test by seeking a sign from heaven, which would render faith unnecessary.

With reference to weather wisdom, Jesus tells the Sadducees that they cannot see and interpret the signs of the times. With that cutting remark, he leaves them.

What follows, in vv. 5-12, can only be interpreted in the context of vv. 1-4. With reference to the disciples having forgotten to bring bread, Jesus jumps to the metaphor of leaven or yeast. The disciples do not pick up on Jesus' comment. They are stuck on their lack of bread. Jesus would have them be stuck on having faith, saying to them, "You of little faith".

By this time, Jesus has already fed the 5000 (14:13-21) and just immediately before this the 4000 (15:32-39). He reminds them of this and then chides them for not paying attention to his words about the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The disciples are being warned against the sign-seeking skepticism of Jesus' opponents—i.e., their lack of faith. Both sections of this text, i.e., vv. 1-4 and 5-12, concern lack of faith and fidelity. The opponents' demand for a sign and the disciples' anxiety about bread have unfaith as their common denominator. Both, in a practical sense, assume the absence of God, like the people at Massah and Meribah, who asked, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Ex. 17:7). Instead of seeking certainty, as do the Pharisees and Sadducees, the disciples must remember and let the memory of God's goodness overrule the anxieties of their daily life.

Who can read the signs of the times? What insight, wisdom, faith is necessary? Who, according to John's gospel account, reads the signs of Jesus? The biggest of the signs, the raising of Lazarus, is the "last straw" that motivates the religious elite to get rid of Jesus as soon as possible. Not only Jesus, but also Lazarus who was brought back from the grave. In truth, it is not easy to read "the signs of the times." People of advanced degrees, even theological degrees, are no better at it than others. But such a reading is necessary for faithfully following Jesus. So, what does it take?

Is reading "the signs of the times" like reading the *New York Times*? Many read the "signs" as a justification for the way things are. The world is what it is and it never really changes. This is the common or proverbial wisdom:

Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow. All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. – Ecclesiastes 1:2-9

Jesus is offering and proclaiming an alternative reading, an alternative vision. To read the signs of the times the faithful church must stand against the seemingly legitimate stories of the day: might makes right, the wealthy make jobs, greed is good, etc. Americans (including Christians) think that if we had been confronted with Hitler's rise to power we would have recognized and resisted his evil. Really? Truly, the "American Church" is more "American" than "Church" just as was the case with German Christians, being more German than Christian. We tend to be so caught up in and even captured by our culture, its assumptions, illusions and delusions that we have a terrible time seeing clearly "the signs of the times", for the signs will surely judge us.

Jesus demands integrity, seeing and doing the truth—following in the way of the One who is the truth, the way and the life.