

Sermon October 22, 2023
[Matthew 22:15-22]

The Miracle of His Teachings
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator, and from Jesus, who is the Christ of God, God's life in the world, Amen.

Last week we heard about the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. A parable, as you may know or recall, is a "short story with a subversive teaching." This parable was also an allegory, or an allegorical parable.

An allegory, as you know, is a story with two different levels of meaning, the surface narrative, and then what lies beneath. To decode an allegory, you need to know two things. First, the original *context* of the writing – in this case, Matthew's Gospel, which was written about 10 years after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 AD. You also need to know something about the *audience*; that is, the people to whom Matthew was writing when he shared his version of the story of Jesus. These were primarily Jewish Christians, who were experiencing "lack of spirit" or they were "poor in spirit," as we learned earlier in Matthew, because, among other things, their central place of worship, the Temple, had recently been destroyed.

Knowing context, therefore, and audience, allows us to decode the parable, the result of which was this: Jesus tells a story about a king, who represents, at that deeper level, God; the king's son, who represents Jesus; and a wedding banquet, which represents the Messianic Era to come – or as we say at the end of the Nicene Creed, "the life of the world to come."

Remember, for Jews and early Christians at this time, salvation wasn't something *above* us in heaven; it is rather *ahead* of us as the Kingdom of God, something for which we pray every Sunday at the end of the Lord's Prayer. This Messianic Era, this age of celebration, was the focus and hope of the early Christians.

We then learn that the king sent his servants, which stands for his prophets, to invite Israel, and more specifically, the *leaders* of Israel, to the great Messianic banquet celebration feast. But they do not come. They reject the message, and then, they kill the messengers. Not exactly a good precedent for inviting people to a wedding party!

We then learn how the king gets retribution for what has been done to his servants, to his prophets. And that comes in the form of destruction, the destruction of a city, the city being Jerusalem, such that not only the people who weren't invited were destroyed, but also everyone else. God, through the Roman soldiers, destroys the city of Jerusalem and burns it to the ground; and that includes, as I mentioned a few minutes ago, the Temple.

Next in the parable, we learn how the king once more has his servants go out into the streets, and these were the riffraff, on the street corners, really; [invite] everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, good and bad. This represents the early mission of the church on the

part of the disciples and those who followed, to invite *everyone* indiscriminately to the joy of the Kingdom.

The wedding hall, in turn, is filled. Only we learn that one of the guests is not wearing a wedding robe. The wedding robe – again, deeper level – represents the acknowledgement and acceptance of what it means to live a Christian life. This man, in other words, did not come prepared. He did not take the invitation seriously, and so, in language that is admittedly quite harsh, he is expelled from the party. He is cast out into the darkness, where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” which, at a deeper level of course, represents judgment.

The parable, in turn, challenges each of us. Are we the wedding guests in the story? Do we take worship, and the life of love and service to which we are called, seriously? *That* is the question put to us by the parable last week.

—
This morning, I’d like to talk about our Gospel reading for today by asking a different question, or set of questions. Here we go:

First, what would you say is the most common emotional response people have to the major events and moments in Jesus’s ministry? I’m going to repeat that: What would you say is the most common emotional response people have to the major events and moments of Jesus’s ministry? At the first service, I heard “confusion.” I think I heard “joy.”

In the New Testament, however, the most common response was neither of these. It was *amazement*. People were amazed. This word appears in the New Testament some 44 times. The Greek word is *ethaumasian* from *thauma*, which means “to wonder” and by implication “to admire.” So marveling, wonder, and amazement: *this*, in fact, is the most common response to the major events and moments in Jesus’s life and ministry.

That’s the first answer. Now, the second question: What, typically, causes people to be amazed by Jesus, according to the Gospels? What do you think?

(response) “He doesn’t follow the party line.”

What else causes people to be amazed by Jesus?

(response) “He heals people,”

Yes, which is a subcategory of the larger, “miracles...”

The *miracles* seem to cause people to be amazed and to marvel at what Jesus is doing. The word in Greek is *dynamai*, which is where we get the word *dynamite*. It’s better translated “deeds of power,” the fireworks of the New Testament. So, it’s these deeds of power, these fireworks, that inspire people in the New Testament to respond to Jesus with amazement, and with wonder.

Let me give you a few examples. You know all of these. Jesus calms a storm as his disciples huddle in a boat out of fear. (Only one of them had tried to walk to Jesus across the water. We heard about him a couple of months ago, that is the disciple

Peter; his faith was greater than theirs, but he too failed.) In response, Jesus comes the storm, causing all of them Peter included, to *marvel*, or be amazed at what he had done. Now I don't know about you, but if I saw somebody do that, I would probably be amazed, too. Yesterday I was invited to join a couple on their sailboat, and I think to myself, wouldn't they be impressed, if I could calm the storms of Seattle? They would indeed be *amazed*.

Here's another one: Jesus causes a fig tree to wither. His disciples respond by way of being "amazed." (Now I think this is the most unfair story in the New Testament, right? What on earth did the fig tree do to Jesus, to merit being withered?) That aside, the disciples, again, are amazed.

We also hear of how Jesus heals a man who cannot speak, because this man was possessed. In this instance, it's not the disciples who were amazed; it's the crowds. The crowds were amazed at this incredible act of healing Jesus performed.

Now what's fascinating about our Gospel reading for today, the audience of which are Pharisees, is that *they too* were amazed not by what Jesus *does*, but by what he teaches: by what he *teaches*!

Take a look at the Gospel reading for today on the back of your worship bulletin.

We learn right at the outset that the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So, they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians; they butter him up. This is what they do: they flatter him. They tell him that he "is teaching the Way of God in accordance with truth." They do this to entrap Jesus; they're setting him up. The question is how, how are they setting Jesus up? Well, it's evident in their question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

Now here's the predicament: If Jesus says it is *not* lawful according to Jewish law to pay the Emperor, then he is a threat to the Roman Empire. A potential revolutionary, admitting here the beginning of sedition. If, on the other hand, Jesus says you *should* pay the Emperor – you should pay *Caesar*, rather – then the followers of Jesus will be upset. So what does Jesus say? Famously, "Render to the Emperor what is the Emperor's (or render to Caesar what is Caesar's), and render to God what is God's."

What is their response? We see it at the very end there: They were *amazed*, not by a miracle, but by his teaching.

The focus of this teaching seems to be this. If you look at verse 20, the text says, "Then he said to them, 'whose head is this, and whose title?'" The meaning of that verse is lost in translation. The Greek word here for head is *icon*, which means image, the image of the Emperor on coins.

Now, image is a really important word to us as Christians, isn't it? We are made in the image of God. Caesar, as well, is made in the image of God: all belongs to God. So, in Jesus's responding to their questions, he's actually not just evading them by way of an ambiguous answer, he's giving the glory to God, and saying, "Don't get sucked in to

the money matters of the world." Don't place your faith in wealth. Out of that, devotion to God should come.

So there you have a summary briefly of the story for today. And I want to repeat again their response: they were amazed, they marveled, not at a miracle but at his teaching.

So what about each of us? Are we amazed by Jesus's teachings, or would it take a miracle for any of them to capture our attention?

Now, Martin Luther had very little use for Jesus's miracles. He said, "If I had to do without one or the other, either the miracles or the preaching about Christ, I would rather do without the miracles than without the preaching." (He uses the term here "works.") "For the miracles do not help me, but his words give me life, as he himself says."

Now the Gospel of John writes very little about the works of Christ. Luther is right, of course, John only has Jesus perform seven signs and seven is a symbolic number. It's the number of completion or perfection.

(The number 666 incidentally, combines perfect number three with six, which is "imperfection; incompleteness." So, when we're talking about the Beast of Revelation, we're talking about the very antithesis of God: 666 versus, you might say, 777.)

Now, John writes very little about the miracles of Christ, Luther says, but very *much* about his preaching, while the other evangelists write more about his works, and *little* about his preaching. "Therefore, John's Gospel," Luther says, "is the one fine, true and chief Gospel, and thus is far, far to be preferred over the other three and placed high above them. So, too, the letters of St. Paul and St. Peter far surpass the other three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke."

Martin Luther was no fundamentalist Christian. He clearly prioritized, as is evident here, the preaching about Christ, as evident in the Gospel of John, because *it led us to Christ* and Christ, of course, is the cornerstone, the locus of our salvation.

Luther's point, in other words: "Neither the miracles nor teachings of Jesus save me, *He* does." And so the words that point to Him, to His person, and His work, are what matter. That's why we should focus on Him, and His death and resurrection.

We see the same observation made by C.S. Lewis, centuries later.

But I think Luther and Lewis are missing something big here. For one thing, if the teachings were so unimportant, then why did Matthew, Mark, and Luke spend so much time on them? I mean, in the case of Matthew, if you took out the death and resurrection stories of Jesus, you'd have 26 chapters left over! That suggests to me that *something* in those pages is worth reading, worth knowing. Maybe sometimes we spend too *much* time on who Jesus was, and what he accomplished, when we say things like "He died for my sins," instead of truly considering his *teachings*, and more specifically, their miraculous nature.

So, this is the point I want to make today: the Miraculous Teachings of Jesus. And I want to get there by asking you, again, some questions.

Which of Jesus's teaching speak to you, and why? Or, which of his teachings shock you, and why? Or which of his teachings has changed your perspective, or the way you live your life? I know that is impossible, or at least very difficult, to answer. So let me start by offering three of my own: Ready?

Number one: Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

That is such a hard teaching to follow! Have you ever tried to pray for someone you dislike? "Love your enemies." When Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said..." he's of course talking about the Old Testament, or more specifically, Torah. "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemies," then he *corrects* it. "You shall love your *enemies*, and pray for those who persecute you." And we see evidence for this in the Gospel of Luke when, while on the cross, Jesus asks God to forgive those who are crucifying Him.

Lloyd Geering, the author of *Reimagining God*, puts it this way. He writes, "It can be said that in fastening on the commandment, not only to love God, but to love one another, including one's enemies, Jesus was unknowingly laying the foundations of a whole new religion. For Jesus went much further in his interpretation of these words than his fellow Jews had been in the habit of doing. As the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan demonstrates, Jesus taught that not only should one treat one's *enemy* as one's neighbor, but one's *enemy* might be the very one who shows *you* how to do it.

Ah! I don't like that! That's a teaching that confounds me. "Love your enemies." Can you imagine if *a drop* of this teaching was released into the cauldron of conflict in the Middle East? Just a drop of that teaching! "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Second teaching: Jesus says, again in the Gospel of Matthew, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."

That teaching confounds me. It stands out to me. Jesus is challenging, again, the Old Testament dictum, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," saying "No! No to that." No to the cycle of violence and revenge. Now some of you may recall, "an eye for an eye" is our former President Donald Trump's favorite verse in the Bible. Jesus says "no" to that here. It's a teaching that should shock and confound us.

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," makes the world go blind.

Number three, ready for one more? (You have to be; you're sitting here.)

"One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another. And seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

Now talk about trying to confound Jesus, right? We saw that in our Gospel reading for today. Do you know how many laws there are in the Hebrew Bible? 613! So, this guy comes along and says, "Well, Jesus, which commandment is the first of all?" Now Jesus is forced to choose, or condense, all 613 laws into one answer?!? And he says, "The first is 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

You see what he just did right there? In just a couple verses, he summarized the entire Jewish law! "Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Now if that's not a miracle, I don't know what is!

What I love about these three teachings is that they all concern the common good. They all concern problems like revenge, or vengeance. They want the common good for people, elements of which we practice together and worship every Sunday. For example, when we share the peace, that's a way of rehearsing for life in the world, to be reconciled to others.

Jesus didn't just come to die for our sins. He came to teach and declare that the Kingdom of God had come, a teaching which, according to Mark 1, *astounded* those who heard it. He came to transform society, to turn our social and political world upside down. He came to challenge us, as well as the way things are, the status quo; and for that, because of that, he paid with his life.

Now of course, there's more to the story. The person he was, his death, and resurrection, obviously matter, too, infinitely so; it's a "both/and."

Yet, how often do we hear about his teachings; their novelty, their revolutionary nature, their capacity to transform self and society? Certainly we hear a lot about his miracles, the fireworks of the New Testament. It's quite easy to be amazed by them. But what about his teachings?

This week, I challenge you, or for my Seattle Pacific University students here, I give you homework (sorry). I want you to *identify one teaching of Jesus* that transforms the way you see yourself and/or the world around you. One teaching of Jesus that stands out, a teaching that transforms, potentially, the way you see yourself, and the world around you. Got it? Great!

My next assignment is this: Once you've chosen the teaching, let yourself be *amazed*, as were the crowds, as were his disciples, and even, as were the Pharisees.

Amen.