

You'll remember me saying that the gospel readings we've had for the last few weeks are pretty tough. It's not so much because they're about judgment and punishment as it is that they leave no room for faith, justification or grace. The Parable of the Bridesmaids that we had two weeks ago was all about being saved by works. The Parable of the Talents that we had last week was about being accepted for great accomplishments. Today in this judgment scene we get the idea that the thing which saves us is only acts of mercy and kindness. It appears as if things like belief and faith and spirituality have absolutely no place.

Last week I said that I believe the gospel writer Matthew is deliberately upending everything we think we know about Jesus in order to teach us something greater. And today as we conclude our time with these challenging teachings I want to show you more of what Matthew appears to be up to.

First a little background about Matthew. Church tradition suggests that it was written by the disciple Matthew from his

first-hand experience with Jesus. Tradition goes on to suggest that the gospel of Mark is a condensed, Reader's Digest version of Matthew.

Critical literary study suggests something very different. Most Biblical scholars believe the work we've given the name Matthew was not written by one of the disciples at all. Indeed nowhere in the text itself does it say who wrote it. That's all just an invented legend. The text itself suggests that Matthew was written to Jewish Christians in about the year 80. And it appears as if Matthew's primary source of information is the Gospel of Mark. Matthew appears to have taken Mark's gospel and added additional material to it and reshaped it into something that could speak to his original audience.

Matthew's gospel has a complex literary structure. (Refer to handout in bulletin and explain: first the overall chiastic structure, then the sub chiasm in 1-12 then the figure on the reverse.)

There's enough structural complexity in Matthew to make your head spin! The author of Matthew was a literary genius.

Any time an author has gone to the bother of creating a structure this complex to tell a story you'd better assume that the structure itself will help convey the meaning of the story.

We're always taught that we can get the wrong idea about something if we take it out of context. One of the biggest problems to preaching on Matthew's gospel is that we usually just look at it piece by piece. We then expect to learn something unique from each segment. The results can be a disaster.

So, let's look at our gospel reading for today in light of Matthew's structure and in light of what we know about what the world was like for Matthew's original readers.

For the last three weeks we've been reading from Matthew 25 which is part of the Judgment Discourse. If you look at the handout in the bulletin you discover that Matthew has shaped the Judgment Discourse so that it is a parallel to the Sermon on the Mount. I think we are meant to interpret each in light of the other.

You'll remember that the Sermon on the Mount starts with the Beatitudes - you know, blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek, and so on - and it goes on to be a teaching about how authentic faith comes to life in a person. That was very important to Matthew's original readers. You'll remember, it's probably written in about the year 80. And it's probably written to Jews who have decided to follow Jesus. Two things are happening to that group at that time. One, Jewish Christians are getting thrown out of the synagogues. Up until this point both groups appear to have gotten along and even worshipped together. But now a separation is happening. Families are getting torn apart. Parents are turning against children and children against parents. There are persecutions, and probably even killings. Being a Christian is starting to cost, and cost a lot. These people needed to know what being a Christian is really all about and how it looked. Matthew is trying to provide answers.

The second issue is a problem brought on by St. Paul's writings. The oldest writings in the New Testament are Paul's letters. It appears as if they were copied and distributed

widely very early on. Anything Paul wrote was considered authoritative.

What was the core of Paul's teachings? Salvation by grace alone. It's a great and a wonderful teaching. God loves you. You are saved by God's grace and not your works. You can't earn your way to heaven and your place as a child of God is secure.

People being what they are pretty quickly learned how to exploit that. If I'm saved by grace and not works or righteous living then why should I do anything? I'll be lazy. If I'm saved by grace and practicing my faith gets me into trouble then I'm not going to practice my faith. Ultimately it doesn't matter.

Leave it to human beings to ruin anything good. You then get a later round of writings trying to counteract these bad ideas. Perhaps that can be most clearly seen in James. There we find, "Faith without works is dead."

There's a head on collision going on within Christianity late in the first century and I think we see it reflected in Matthew's gospel. That conflict has gone on ever since. Is it faith or is it works?

I believe the way Matthew has put the Sermon on the Mount and the Judgment Discourse in parallel with each other we discover the truth. True faith leads to works of righteousness. True faith will cause a person to accept and handle persecution. True faith will lead to works of behalf of justice and compassion.

To Matthew's original readers and to us the message is the same: God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Ultimately grace does win. But don't exploit it.

God is still God. God is our ultimate judge. Don't mock God and don't exploit God's goodness.

I don't think God's ability to punish or annihilate us is to be a threat or to be mean. God has made us capable, powerful beings. If we weren't subject to God's judgment then we'd just be weak silly playthings to God, and that is not the case.

For there to be meaningful relationship with God there has to be meaningful consequences.

So, what of the judgment scene? The same message as always: live faith fully. Let it be alive as it was intended by God to be. Love and fear the Lord and let his grace carry you always. Amen