

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 12, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year A, Proper 10: Romans 8:9–17; Psalm 65:9–14; Matthew 13:1–23**

Beginning today, and continuing for two more Sundays, our gospel lessons are from the third of five sermons given in Matthew by Jesus. The first was the Sermon on the Mount, the second the Mission Sermon. It happens because there is so much to be done. So, he commissions the twelve and gives them the authority to preach, to teach and to heal as he preached, taught and healed.¹ This third sermon is generally called the Sermon in Parables² or the Parables Discourse.³ What is a parable is a question that has engaged Christian writers since the earliest days of the Church. Another issue of great importance is how to understand today's lesson in its own time. It's hard for me, and most people, not to hear anti-Judaism in Matthew, especially in light of the history through the millennia, including the anti-Judaism in our own time.

¹ Matthew 10:1–42.

² Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 185–87.

³ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 228–32.

There's nothing easy about these words, "Then the disciples came and said to [Jesus], 'Why do you speak to them in parables?' And he answered them, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.'" ⁴

In the introduction to his commentary on Matthew, Daniel Harrington suggested that we see Matthew as the spokesman for a community of Christian Jews, one of many Jewish communities in the late first century, trying to emerge from the chaos of the First Jewish Revolt against Rome.⁵ That revolt started in the year 66. Jerusalem would be besieged and fall in the year 70. The Second Temple and the rest of the city, save for three towers, were burned, leveled to the ground. Its starving survivors were killed or sold into slavery. The fortress at Masada would be last to fall to the Romans in the year 73.⁶ Raymond Brown summarized scholarly thinking about Matthew's date of writing as "80–90, give or take a decade."⁷

Is this story about the sower and the seed? Or is it about the soil? Matthew quotes from Isaiah, but in the

⁴ Matthew 13:10–11.

⁵ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 20–22.

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Masada>, (accessed 12 July 2020).

⁷ Brown, 216–17.

background, there's also the story of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that tempted the first humans. The story of their sons, one of whom murdered the other. The wickedness of humankind that leads to the great flood. The unfaithfulness of Israel after their deliverance at the Red Sea. The repeated failures through the centuries of God's chosen people to follow God's commandments and to listen to God's prophets.

Into this history, Jesus is born, for Matthew, Emmanuel, "God with us."⁸ Matthew's community identifies itself with the mission and ministries of Jesus. Their words and deeds show others that Jesus' Spirit with them and that in their lives the sovereign power of God is at work. Matthew concludes his gospel by telling the eleven, "I am with you always."⁹

I'm not especially fond of the story in Mark and Matthew of Jesus killing a fig tree with his words because it bore no fruit. Luke has a different tree story; Luke's community was a gentile community. Among them were Jewish Christians, starting with the apostles. Luke's Jesus handles what a farmer has planted in a more hopeful way: "Someone had a fig

⁸ Matthew 1:23.

⁹ Matthew 28:20.

tree planted in his vineyard; he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down’ . . . And he answered him, ‘Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it . . . if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’ ”¹⁰

Since March, I suspect most of us have had real fears of becoming sick and dying—and dying alone. I don’t even want to think about not being able to be with a person I love when he or she is gravely ill and dying.

Back in the day, when I became one of the assistant priests at the Church of the Incarnation, Dallas, it was a Morning Prayer & Sermon parish—much like Grace Church here in the city. If memory serves, after the final hymn, and before the postlude, the rector would quote words from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, “Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹¹

I think it’s okay for us humans to have ups and downs in our relationship with our Lord, our Savior, to realize that, for whatever reason, speaking to God in our

¹⁰ Luke 13:6–9.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 15:57.

hearts doesn't always come to mind. In Galatians, Paul writes, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."¹² Now is a time for each of us to think about how we may do that with hope and trust in Jesus Christ.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹² Galatians 6:2.