

Matthew 17:14-27:

Introduction:

Some sections of Matthew are easier to talk about than others. Today's isn't one of those.

Matthew, we might remember, has five long discourses, long speeches or sermons, in which Jesus teaches his disciples--and us--about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, what it means to live for God, just basic instruction, you know, by way of lesson, rule, parable, example and commentary.

Next week we'll enter into Jesus' fourth time of teaching; today we're rounding out the first part of his trip to Jerusalem. In terms of, you know, narrative progression, we're on our way toward the end of Matthew. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, now, and he's started to reveal to his disciples just what awaits him there, and it's not all stickers and kittens; it's suffering.

In today's passage, for example, as they enter into Galilee, the region Jesus spends most of his time working, he says, for a second time "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life."

We read, "And the disciples were filled with grief" at what Jesus says.

We're supposed to see that they are beginning to get it, they are beginning to realize that Jesus isn't going to Jerusalem as, you know, "a boss," but, for a reason they can't understand, he's going even though it will cost him his life. What is clear is that they don't yet have any idea what he means when he talks about "being raised to life." At best, they're thinking this is a future thing, when everyone will be resurrected. At worst, they're ignoring him. As Jesus is on this Journey to Jerusalem, they're on a journey of discovering what that means.

Chunks:

There's three chunks, three parts to today's passage, really. The scene in which Jesus heals a boy suffering from demon-caused seizures. Let's call it Scene One. There's a transition moment, in which Jesus talks about the suffering that he'll face in Jerusalem. I just mentioned this. And there's another scene--we'll creatively call it Scene Two, in which Jesus and his disciples arrive in Capernaum, Jesus sort of base-of-operations, and we become obsessed with a coin-carrying fish.

There are so many questions that come up in today's passage! We'll see what answers we can find. Let's pray for a lot of them.

Prayer:

So. Scene One:

Scene One:

14 When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. 15 “Lord, have mercy on my son,” he said. “He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. 16 I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.”

17 “You unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.” 18 Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment.

19 Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

20 He replied, “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

Scene One: People.

There’s all sorts of people in today’s scene. A crowd, who’s at the backdrop of things. Two figures that come out of them

into the forefront: A father, and a son. The son has seizures, but not just any kind of seizures: ones that often toss him into water or fire. His seizures are an attack on his life. The father has already struck out in his attempt to get help for his boy; clerks couldn't get it done, so he goes to the store manager. There are the disciples, who engaged publicly and failed, and then engage privately with Jesus, and fall short, too. There's Jesus, who is the star of the show, but comes off as kind of a grump, almost frustrated with being bothered.

And the way these people interact give rise to all sorts of theological questions.

Scene One: Theology: Ailments

There's glimpse into a theological view of the world that we, by and large, don't live by. It's one in which some--not all, by the way--of the physical ailments people deal with are simply accepted as being caused by devilish spirits. Agents of the enemy. To be healed, in these cases, is to be freed from the antagonism, harassment, or possessive takeover by these unseen spiritual enemies. The demon is driven out, and out with it goes all the problems.

One way of understanding Jesus' work, just broadly, is that he freed all creation, is freeing all creation, from its takeover by our common enemy, and we ourselves who trust him, we're free even now, and can bring that same freedom to others. On some level the disciples got this, but they didn't get it

enough. Jesus gives voice to this here, right now. He's not frustrated, in today's scene with the Father; he's not frustrated, in today's scene, with the Son, he's frustrated in today's scene with the disciples.

Scene One: Theology: Jesus

He says, in response to their inability to heal the boy, "You unbelieving and perverse generation...how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" Another translation puts it "You faithless and crooked generation."

Let's be honest, this isn't, you know, arms outstretched, "let the little children come to me," Jesus, right? This is Jesus appalled at the disciples' inability to do something that he, apparently, believes they ought to be able to do by now. It's Jesus giving voice to his weariness at having to deal with the faithlessness and the "crookedness"--that is, the dis-alignment between Jesus' Godly way of living and their selfish way of living--that his disciples are exhibiting. In this moment Jesus, in his exhaustion, lets them know that they are failing. And Matthew knows, even as he writes this for his first congregation and for us, that Jesus is talking about him, too; his first church would have read this, and thought, "Oof. Our pastor got called out."

But Jesus, in his weariness and frustration, doesn't withhold anything from the father, the son, or the Disciples. We think of Paul, saying, "In your anger, do not sin." He gives voice to

his weariness, he speaks truth, but he doesn't withhold anything from the father, the son, or the disciples. I wonder if we, in our weariness and frustration, withhold things from others?

Scene One: Theology: Faith

Jesus doesn't withhold from the Father, the Son, or the Disciples. He heals the boy, and answers the disciples when they wonder why they couldn't do anything?

He says, ***“Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”***
[21] [a]

Let's deal with this.

If Jesus is promising that if you have faith--faithfulness, belief, it's all the same word in greek--if you trust him enough, then you basically get super powers, a blank-check to do as you will with all God's power behind you, then what he says here stands against almost every other promise of what it means to live for Jesus, right? So, you know, just basically, if you have one witness to one thing, and dozens and dozens of witnesses that stand against it, bear witness to its opposite, then we'd rationally say, “Let's trust the dozens.”

The problem is that, for all sorts of reasons--maybe crooked faithless ones--we give enormous weight to outliers. We'll trust one crackpot over a hundred sane people. There's something about an outlier that gets our attention, and gets our over-emphasis, and gets our affection, too.

In no way do I believe that Jesus is giving us blank-check super-powers here. If he is, then I've never known a faithful Christian, because you all are pretty normal. I mean, he's lumped the disciples in with a "faithless and crooked generation," and there's nothing more faithless, nothing less trusting, than doing what you want without respect to what God wants.

Is Jesus implying if we have enough faith we can be healed of any ailment? And that, by extension, all physical problems we have are basically demonic in nature? Because that's what people will suggest: well-meaning, faithful, kind people...and wrong people. We all know people of enormous, enormous faith, faithfulness, belief...and yet, their lives are ones with physical pain in them. Paul himself prayed that his physical trouble might go away, and he was told by Jesus "My strength is perfect in weakness." Beyond this, of course, even if in this case this boy was demon-possessed, an evil spirit, an agent of the enemy was in play against him, it's not the case that every single sickness is, therefore, caused by evil spirits or something. That's just bad extrapolation.

Scene One: Practically:

And yet, practically, we're left with one thing in this first scene: An urge to increase our faith, our faithfulness. That's the exhortation, the push given to we who read this.

When Jesus says "nothing will be impossible for you," he's not telling us we'll have superpowers. He's telling us nothing related to our faith will be impossible for us. That may mean, now and then in the world, freeing people literally from demons; it may mean, figuratively freeing people from the things that metaphorically demonize them; it may mean all sorts of things. And we have to come to terms with the truth that most of us, most of the time, would rather have super powers than the ability to be really faithful and obedient to God, live out our citizenship responsibilities in this Kingdom we're privileged citizens of.

It's probably okay to wish we could fly more than we wish we could be faithful, I guess? I don't know. Reality has a way of intruding on our daydreams, and what reality needs of us, what our real lives need of us, is that we're really faithful and really live up to the Kingdom life we've been given.

Scene Two: People

Jesus keeps moving through Galilee, though. They end up in Capernaum, where most of the Twelve were from, where their families still lived and worked.

Here's what happens after they arrive:

...The collectors of the two-drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?"

25 "Yes, he does," he replied.

When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. "What do you think, Simon?" he asked. "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own children or from others?"

(A lot of parents of newborns collecting duty from their children right now! Amirite?! Hey-o!)

26 "From others," Peter answered.

"Then the children are exempt," Jesus said to him.

Scene Two: People

The scene reads as if Peter and Jesus (at least) are walking along, likely making their way to Peter's own home where Jesus had earlier healed his mother-in-law. Maybe most of the other Disciples have gone to check in with their families. And the tax-collectors--not the ones who collect taxes for Rome, but the ones who collect taxes for the Temple, two-drachmas a head--they sidle up to Peter and ask if his teacher pays the

tax.

This is a test and request at the same time: “Is your teacher faithful...by our standards!? Are you, you follow him? And, by the way, has he paid it? Have you?”

Peter says “Yes.” But you get the sense that he has no idea, that he’s just reacting. I could be reading his response incorrectly: I admit that, but what we know about Peter is that he is reactive, the first to speak, the first to act, whether or not he has all the facts in front of him, or thought about them much at all. We haven’t seen Jesus pay this tax before.

When they enter the house, Jesus speaks first; it’s weird that Matthew puts this note here, as if Matthew knows we’d expect Peter to be the first to speak. And we would if in fact they’ve entered Peter’s home. And Jesus makes a compelling argument.

Scene Two: Argument

It’s a straightforward one. Jesus says, basically, “Hey, kings don’t tax their kids, right?” Peter agrees with him. The assumption is that Jesus and Peter fall into the “non-taxable children” category, or at least Jesus does, and so they don’t need to pay this tax.

But more is in play here. Because this is a religious tax, right? It goes to the Temple, not to Caesar. By claiming he has the

rights of a royal child, what Jesus is really doing is suggesting that he and Peter too, have a special relationship to the Temple, or rather, to the God who stands behind it. God is King, and Jesus puts himself in the place of God the King's Son.

There's no surprise in this, right? In fact, this is sort of more of the same. I mean, Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, the miracles before it, Jesus' mountaintop moment with Peter, James, and John...we get that the Son of Man is also the "Beloved Son of God in whom God takes pleasure."

And yet Jesus doesn't, in his position of privilege as God's Son, want to cause an offense. So, he arranges a miracle.

Scene Two: The Miracle

"But so that we may not cause offense, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours."

Maybe Jesus doesn't arrange this miracle. Maybe he just happened to know that the fish would be there, would bite Peter's line, would have just the right amount of cash in its mouth. But whether arranged or just aware, this is a miracle, right? And man is it compelling. It's crazy! It's so fantastical that it feels out of bounds, best for Sunday School and VBS

lessons, for kids who'll take it as it is, instead of wondering what is going on here.

And it communicates, this miracle.

In this miracle God provides for Jesus, so that Jesus doesn't have to abuse his position of privilege as God's Son. He provides for Jesus--and Peter--so that they don't cause an offense in the eyes of the establishment.

Subversive Stuff:

But there's subversive stuff here that doesn't make the Sunday School lesson, you know? Jesus is able to both keep from causing an offense to the temple-tax-collectors, to the established way of things, and at the same time, he's not paying this out of his own pocket. He is, after all, God's Son, a royal child. One who will ultimately have his life taken, not simply his taxes, by the religious elite who run the Temple. He is under no compulsion to pay this tax.

Because of God's miraculous provision, Jesus is able to do two things at once. On the one hand, he pays the tax, and keeps from using his privilege as an excuse for doing something offensive. Is this clear? He pays the tax, and doesn't use his privilege as an excuse for doing something offensive.

And yet, he doesn't pay the tax out of the money Judas is

carrying around for the Twelve. He doesn't go to the women who, as Luke tells us, were his patrons--Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna--and have them pay it. He uses the money that God provides for him to pay the Tax that he, by all rights as the Son of God, doesn't even have to pay.

Why go to all this effort? The miracle was unnecessary. The fact is that Jesus had an entourage paying his bills and Judas had a checkbook. And they were in Peter's house, you know? There was cash around. The miracle was unnecessary, except that it allows Jesus to keep his integrity as God's son, a royal child, and avoid offending people at the same time.

Causing Offense & Keeping Integrity:

Two unexpected things happen in today's scenes: In one of them, Jesus calls out his disciples for their basic lack of faithfulness in a way that doesn't sound very nice to us, even though it's just true. In fact, it sounds pretty offensive. In the second, a miracle helps Jesus keep from offending the sensibilities of those who are simply doing their jobs collecting taxes. And yet, in both cases, Jesus' personal integrity doesn't change.

In the first, acting with faithfulness, he points out the faithlessness of his Disciples, urges them to bigger trust, and resists withholding from them and others blessing and insight.

In the second, he doesn't betray his identity as the Son of God, the Royal Child in whom God is well pleased, who doesn't owe the Temple any tax, even though its leaders will seek his death.

He just healed a Son whose rights over his own body had been taken over, and now he himself, God's Son, won't let the accusing questions of the tax collectors steal away his right to reject the tax. God provides a way for him to keep his integrity, even as he keeps from offending people.

What do we do with these scenes?

What to do?

Here's what we don't do. We don't say that the point of today is to keep us from offending people. Or that God wants to make sure we don't "show offense" to others.

That's just not what Jesus models here; In fact, in the first scene, Jesus models the opposite, even as he tells the truth and doesn't withhold from those who need him. And in the second, his lack of showing offense likely has more to do with his purposes to wisely keep himself out of the limelight as long as he can than anything else.

What Jesus models today is a wise understanding of other people's sensibilities--what they find offensive--and how to keep his integrity while navigating them. Even in his speech

to his disciples, which we can find so offensive, what he's really doing is protecting their integrity, calling them to deeper faithfulness and greater belief, even as he protects his own.

What Jesus models here is an amazing ability to insightfully navigate the sensibilities of other people, while protecting his integrity.

Truth can be offensive. Jesus has been walking with the disciples for months, and they are still acting without faithfulness, faith, belief, even after just seeing what they've seen of who he really is. And yet, there's no reason to be offensive with the truth for, you know, offensiveness's sake. He has no demands on him to pay the Temple Tax, he realizes this; the tax collectors don't. Years later, when Paul is talking to the Church about whether they should eat this or that, worship on this or that day, he'll tell the congregation in Rome, "Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters...make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." All he's doing is living out Jesus' example in these two passages.

And God provides a way for Jesus to keep his integrity and keep from offending people. That may not be true for us, I think. There may be things that we do, as we stand for the truth, that others find offensive. We may be more Scene One people than Scene Two people sometimes. And yet, not all

the time, right? That's what it means to live with integrity in various different situations.

This passage gives rise to questions that we could ask ourselves today, and their answers will be different today than they will in a month or a year. This is simply because we find ourselves in different situations that call us to navigate what other people find offensive, and figure out how to protect our integrity as we go.

Here are the questions:

How is your integrity?

How is your integrity lately? We get what I mean by integrity, don't we? The practice of consistency in our moral self, being true to ourselves no matter if we're in public or private, no matter what situation we're facing. Jesus acted with integrity in both scenes today. He was selfless, even in his exhaustion, giving what people needed--hearing the father, healing the son, calling his disciples to greater faithfulness and belief. He welcomed the providential miracle of God that enabled him to avoid offending people, but not deny his true rights as God's Son. How is our integrity? If the opposite of integrity is hypocrisy, we can get there willfully, you know: fake it, pretend to have a consistent moral character when people are around, and bail on it when we're by ourselves. Or we can get there by simply forgetting to attend to our integrity. We forget who we are--Children of God in whom God takes great

pleasures; we forget what we stand for--all that Jesus stood for, and stood alongside. We trade one set of principles, attitudes, and beliefs that are fundamentally Christ-like for another set, that only seems it is. Life is busy; too much is asked of all of us too often, and yet: Today, are we people--each of us, persons--of integrity or not?

Frankly, we want to be like Jesus in these scenes, not like Peter; a disciple who declared Jesus the Messiah, saw him transfigured, and still has too little faith, a disciple who spoke before he thought about what he was saying, and basically seems to lie.

When it comes to pursuing integrity, until Jesus returns everyone fails at some point, but not everyone struggles--not everyone embraces the struggle. Let's at least struggle for integrity, and so: In what places are you acting without integrity? Under what circumstances do you open the door to hypocrisy, give a little bit, just because?

The Sensibilities of Others:

And that just because is so often, of course, just because we don't want to cause offense.

And look, there is no perfect rule that applies here. Sometimes we simply must risk offending people, because what they find offensive is, honestly, the truth. Sometimes to act with integrity means speaking the truth--and as

Christians, speaking the truth in love--and if that offends, well, then it offends. Even then, though, if we withhold--hearing a person, healing a person, blessing and teaching and giving to the other what they need, then we are the ones sinning, the ones being unlike the Messiah we follow.

How's being offensive (or avoiding it) going?

Who have we offended lately? Who have we avoided offending? Who have we offended lately and who have we avoided offending? And have we protected our integrity in this? On the one hand, it's easy to cave, and placate someone simply because it's easier than protecting our integrity, our boundaries, our moral self. On the other hand, it's easy to be a jerk, and offend for offending's sake, just because we can, because we feel empowered to. Both of these are failures.

Some tips here; Don't stand on your own opinions, do all you can to stand on Scripture. Find an authority that really is an authority. This is a difficult thing in a world where there is no assumed authoritative voice at all anymore. But at least among Christians, Christ has to be the place we retreat to. Too, take time to know what you believe about this or that thing, this is or that position, this or that situation. Pray through these things, lean into God who wants us to know what we believe about this world we're in. Jesus knew exactly who he was, and what his rights were, and he still didn't want to offend the tax collectors in today's scene. He counted the

cost of what an offense would mean, and turned to a miracle instead. We all know jerks, you know, trolls who take a perverse joy in offensiveness and pleasure in our responsiveness; let's at least avoid them. It's a miracle if we're able to these days. But let's both protect our integrity and wisely navigate other people's sensibilities--sometimes risking offense for the sake of the truth, sometimes looking past our rights, ignoring self-defense, and making peace.

God Will Help Us:

If this is what we want, I think God will help us. He may even provide miracles so that we can do both at the same time. But today we have today: We have the people we've recently offended. We have the people we've avoided offending. We have our integrity, and its neglect or its nurture. When we leave, shortly, and go here and there in the world, back to those relationships where our sensibilities about what's right and good and their's are constantly interacting, I hope that we can be people who protect our integrity, ones who know who we are in Christ, and who wisely discern when to speak and when to be silent, when to bend and when to resist, when to act and when to refrain from acting, so that God's purposes for us, his children, can be realized.

Look, today's scenes aren't just, you know, "Grumpy Jesus and the Miracle Fish." There are significant themes of integrity and the sensibilities of others in play here; those themes come up in every interaction we have with people,

maybe more at this moment in our history than they have for awhile. We have to be like Christ, protecting our integrity, knowing when to speak the truth in love, and risk offending others, and when to avoid causing offense. God will give us what we need to do this, if it's what we want to do.