

When the lectionary gives you Matthew

Matthew is not my favorite Gospel. But where would we be without it?

By [Diane Roth](#)

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For those who follow the Revised Common Lectionary, this is the year of Matthew's Gospel. It was the first Gospel I studied as a student preacher, when I was on pastoral internship. For the first time I paid attention all year, every single week. I noticed the words and the themes and the images that recurred in Matthew's Gospel: how often there were mountains, how much time Jesus spent teaching, what caused friction with the religious leaders.

Even so, I have to admit, Matthew is not my favorite Gospel. Is it even right to say we have favorites? Mark is the short and breathless gospel. Jesus is a man of action. He is always going somewhere, doing something, healing people, casting our demons. When I think of Mark, I think of the word "immediately." I also think of the words "Son of Man" and "Son of God." I think of Mark's abrupt beginning, without a story of Jesus' birth, and his abrupt ending, with a resurrection announcement but no appearance. Sometimes I think that Mark is my favorite Gospel.

Luke is the gospel of the poor, and women, and children. Luke includes people that other Gospel writers leave out. Luke remembers the prodigal son, the lost sheep, the poor man Lazarus, the widow of Nain. Instead of a sermon on the mount, Jesus preaches on the plain. Luke tells us of Mary and Elizabeth, and Mary sings about a God who lifts up the poor and brings down the mighty. Sometimes I think that Luke is my favorite Gospel.

John is the philosophical Gospel. Jesus speaks in metaphors and performs signs. There is a depth that we cannot get to the bottom of, a mystery that cannot be solved: the incarnate Word. Jesus is the resurrection and the life, the light of the world, the Lamb of God, the bread of life. Sometimes I think that John is my favorite

gospel.

But Matthew? Matthew makes me think that God is strict. Jesus is a teacher concerned with righteousness. "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribe and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven", he says. "You have heard it said," Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. "But I say to you..." he continues. And every single time what Jesus says is even harder to do. Matthew wants me to know that being a disciple is hard. It is not all sweetness and light. There is a cost to discipleship.

When Jesus teaches a parable about forgiveness in Matthew 18, he begins with a story about a king who forgives a servant an enormous debt. It is a story of amazing, unbelievable grace. But then the servant shakes down a fellow servant for a few bucks, and at the end of the story that forgiven servant is not only thrown in jail, but tortured as well—until he pay the full amount. O Matthew, do you really have to include the bit about torture?

I have mixed feelings about Matthew, sometimes.

But if it weren't for Matthew, there would be no wise men from the East, bearing exotic gifts. Joseph would not have dreamed, and we would not know the promise of Emmanuel, that God is with us. If it weren't for Matthew, we would never know the promise that he would be with us always, "to the end of the age." If it weren't for Matthew, we would never know that Peter tried to walk on water, once.

If it weren't for Matthew, we would not have these words, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be there."

If it weren't for Matthew, we would not know that most difficult of math problems, that we are required to forgive our brother, not just seven times, but seventy times seven. If it weren't for Matthew, we would not know that the higher righteousness, the impossible righteousness to which we have been called is forgiveness. We are called to mercy.

At the beginning and in the middle and at the end of Matthew, Jesus promises that he will be with us always. Emmanuel. Where two or three are gathered. To the end of the age. When we try to walk on water, and fail miserably. When we can't count to seven and struggle to forgive.

I have mixed feelings about Matthew, sometimes. He tells hard truths. But he also tells me God is with us. In the beginning and in the middle and in the end.

And it is enough.

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