
Introduction to This Issue

The Law of Love in Matthew's Gospel: God's Unrelenting Passion for Justice

When I was serving in the parish, I always found the Year A Lectionary texts the most difficult to preach. The arc of Matthew's story of Jesus is filled with grace, from beginning—with the inclusion of the five storied women in the initial genealogy—to end—the faithful liberating death of Jesus on the cross. But it seems like nearly every teaching of Jesus in between—from the reshaping of the Mosaic Law in the Sermon on the Mount to the parables of the kingdom told as Jesus nears Jerusalem—have a relentless emphasis on the consequences of behaviors not congruent with God's standards. Justice and judgment are tightly woven throughout Matthew's Gospel and authentic preaching needs to wrestle with this tension. One's place in the eternal society of God comes through the saving death of Christ Jesus, but we cannot simply bask in this knowledge and ignore the fact that every teaching of Jesus in this Gospel points to the fact that God cares passionately about what God's citizens do in the here and now.

This issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* brings together a range of voices that speak to the justice of God as illustrated in Matthew's portrait of Jesus and how judgment is often a facet of that justice. Though the God of all creation is unreservedly for all that God has created, Jesus tells us that there are dire consequences for living in ways that are not in harmony with God's care for the most vulnerable, both among humanity and in the creation itself.

Amy Lindeman Allen sets up the dialogue by discussing in some detail the idea of justice in our context and within Matthew's Gospel. She points out that this Gospel, particularly the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25 is one of the foundational texts for how justice is understood by many Christians. She adjures us to consider, in our current divisive political context, that the call to care for one another, particularly those who are disadvantaged and/or different from us, is not contingent on our political party or convictions. "Social justice," she says, is "biblical justice." There may be different ideas regarding the means to achieve God's ends, but the call of God itself, as taught and lived by Jesus, is clear and compelling.

Gilson Waldkoenig reminds us that the earth is the Lord's and is intended for the meek. He explores the scriptural roots of the Sermon on the Mount and demonstrates that the Parable of the Wicked Tenants recapitulates this teaching, illustrating God's response when people seize control over the land in opposition to God's ownership, trampling on the meek and denying their inheritance. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, recapitulated for us and in us through the means of grace allows people to live in

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hope in the promise that their inheritance and the earth itself will not always be harmed, but will be healed. Even in such difficult contexts as that of the taking and misuse of the earth through fracking in Northern Appalachia, God's people, strengthened by God's grace, can witness to the unshakable nature of God's promised future in the resurrected Christ.

Man Hei Yip reads the Olivet discourse from a post-colonial perspective. Scripture is misused when read from the perspective of "epistemological triumphalism." Such a reading, however well-intentioned, becomes exclusive and demotivating. People sit comfortably in their self-created "sacred space" while others—and God—suffer outside. She describes the practice of reading contra-puntally and demonstrates the difficult blessing of hybridity—that viewpoints from other cultures and identities can create an in-between space that allows the invaluable voice of the invisible to be heard. When we hear and see those whom Jesus never abandons, we are freed to respond to God's call in an authentic way.

Chanta' Barret writes a very personal and powerful reflection on her struggles under the harmful messages that she internalized growing up as an African American in an un-gentrified urban American context, a place, she says, like Nazareth. The liberation and empowerment that came to her through the good news of the incarnate God choosing a life like hers, of one on the margins, in order to save "those discarded and constrained to such circumstances" has transformed her life into one of witness and service.

Beau deForest explores the ways our human fears lead us to mask our own struggles and self-awareness, just as they did in Jesus' day. He interprets the Sermon on the Mount and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats from the perspective of a member of the

LGBTQIA+ community, reminding us that, hard as we might try, we do not get to be the ones to declare the goodness of the fruits that are our actions.

Mark Rigg invites us to dwell richly in Matthew's story of Jesus, particularly during Holy Week. He lifts up five emphases found in the Passion account in Matthew that can enrich the Year A journey through Lent and allow congregations to encounter God's justice in Jesus' non-violent resistance to the powers of this world; find something life-giving and life-sustaining in the proclamation of the good news proclaimed in Matthew's Gospel.

In the *Listening to Immigrant Voices* feature **Jennifer Owens-Jofre** (copy yet to come)

In the *Currents Focus* feature **Mark W. Bartusch** questions the argument for a polyphonic reading as the best answer for interpreting the "dynamic structure" of the Book of Job. Rather than being merely part of the book, finally there is the privileged voice of the prose prologue and epilogue that is among the latest additions to the text. This voice holds a place of honor and intends to create a sense of closure by tying up loose ends and disparaging (while not eliminating) other views from the poetic dialogue. This voice promotes a worldview that privileges the final redactor and his own community, framing the book to establish the status of elites in the restoration community of Yehud.

The issue concludes with another fine selection of *Preaching Helps*, edited by **Barbara Lundblad**.

The hope for this volume is that all these perspectives will give us some hybridity, opening a space that allows us to consider other perspectives, coming to a new awareness of what the grace of God means in our lives. Does grace guarantee us quiet and comfort, or does grace empower us to be active members of the community of God, witnesses to God's action in the world, participants in God's justice and advocates for those who are invisible and unheard and therefore closest to the Creator's heart?

Allison deForest, United Lutheran Seminary, Guest Editor

Craig L. Nesson, Issue Co-Editor

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