

The Gospel of Matthew in the Work of Liberation: *Strategies of Resistance and Models of Care*



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Introduction to This Issue

This past Spring, the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago hosted its second annual Queer Intersectionality and the Public Church Symposium. The theme of the event was “Queer Joy as Resistance.” This theme arose from my students’ desire to explore queer joy as a means of countering death-dealing legislation and oppressive social and ecclesiastical actions against queer communities, especially trans and non-binary kin. The symposium sought to provide space to explore unique ways that people of faith could support, create, and celebrate queer joy within their communities. Celebrating queer joy, in its many forms—from crafting queer liturgies to honoring queer ancestors—became an act of resistance and liberation.

Similarly, this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* explores strategies of resistance as well as models of care found in the Gospel of Matthew. These strategies arise in response to the seemingly ever-increasing turmoil and trauma we witness individually and collectively. In the United States, ICE raids intensify, wildfires burn, trans kin are denied access to care and bathrooms, reproductive rights are under attack, books are banned, vaccines are questioned, the histories of people of color and queer folk are erased, and the list goes on. Globally, genocide, famine, and ongoing wars fill our newsfeeds. Considering these realities, the authors of this issue examine themes, emotions, and practices that individuals and communities can explore to support one another as we work toward our collective liberation. They reflect

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on these topics placing the first century CE experiences of Roman occupation and systemic oppressions in conversation with present realities. These conversations open up space to challenge the ways in which the gospel is currently used in the public sphere to support oppressive ideologies and death-dealing practices. In doing so, new embodiments of justice work emerge rooted in God’s love and compassion.

In the first article, **Jennifer Kaalund** explores the Canaanite woman’s actions in Matthew 15:21–28. Kaalund explores how the woman’s bold efforts to save her daughter, including challenging Jesus, highlight forms of resistance to imperial oppression, cultural boundaries, and dehumanizing practices present in the first century CE. The Canaanite woman calls contemporary readers to

analyze power systems and consider ways that even those working for justice can dehumanize others. Kaalund invites readers to explore how boldness in demanding justice, coupled with compassion and self-reflection, offer spaces for liberation.

In the next article, **Angela Parker** provides a womanist interpretation of Matthew 9:36 and invites us to consider the use of empathy in justice work. She contrasts contemporary forms of toxic empathy found in white Christian nationalism with the concept of *splanchna*. In the Gospel, Jesus experiences *splanchna*—a highly emotive, visceral feeling of compassion and empathy—toward the crowds present who are experiencing imperial harassment. Jesus’ embodiment of *splanchna* coupled with his acts of care serve as a model for countering hate and sharing God’s love to all.

The next two articles explore strategies of solidarity with those who are systemically marginalized. **Eric Thomas** uses a queer of color lens to provide an intersectional reading of the “least of these” in Matthew 25:31-46. Thomas demonstrates that embracing Jesus’ ministry and message to care for the “least of these” is a call to radical solidarity rather than charity. It calls followers of Jesus to work collectively to dismantle systems of oppression and consider new models of mutual aid and care. Through these actions we glimpse a queer futurity where all have the ability to thrive.

My own article focuses on Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 18:1-6 that to enter the kin-dom of God, disciples must become like children. Using childist and queer lenses, I read the text alongside the realities of trans and non-binary youth and young adults in the United States. As they face increasing stigmatization, violence and lack of access to care, Jesus’ teaching to become like children calls us to embody humility and more closely listen to and learn from these youth. It is also a call to radical welcome and solidarity with those who are most vulnerable in society, empowering them to guide our work of collective liberation.

This issue’s exploration of strategies for resistance and models of care culminates in the exploration of true rest by **Yung Suk Kim**. Building on Jesus’ call to take on his yoke in Matthew 11:28-30, Kim surveys the ways in which this is a call to enact the work of God and bring forth God’s justice in the world. This work is rooted in gentleness and humility toward oneself and others. Going beyond traditional understandings of self-care, Jesus’ light yoke invites those who carry it into a space of true rest coupled with action. Only with space for meditation, self-reflection, and God’s grace are we renewed, finding mental wellbeing and peace that allows us to live out our call to bring about God’s justice in our world.

Karri L. Alldredge
Guest Editor, *Currents in Theology and Mission*

We are grateful for Dr. Alldredge’s work as Guest Editor for the October issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission*. This issue also has two challenging **Currents Focus** articles. **Yung Suk Kim** contends that biblical texts do not mean of themselves, but we mean with them. Given the nature of contextual interpretation, we need to know who we are as readers, what we read in the text, and how we read it. How do we understand God in the Bible? Whose God do we read? The reader must decide. As readers, we must engage with texts responsibly and take a stand. Liberation movements and social transformation must address all kinds of marginalization—locally and globally, economically and socially, religiously and politically, personally and communally, psychologically and spiritually. Readers need to recognize how multilayered intersectionality, interwoven with marginality, stands in front of the text, and witness the power of the gospel for all people.

Jack Brownfield examines a common allegorical interpretation of the magi’s gifts with a focus on myrrh as the reading’s weak link. Evidence from the New Testament, Matthew’s historical context, and the Hebrew Bible does not link myrrh with death. Instead, textual evidence, especially based on the Song of Songs, indicates that the magi’s gifts would have suggested romance or eroticism to Matthew’s earliest readers. This article offers an alternative interpretation of the gifts in conjunction with Matthew’s use of marital imagery for Christ elsewhere in his Gospel. The gifts of the magi foreshadow the relationship of love between believers and Christ akin to marriage or sexual union.

Hopefully every preacher (and others as well) will flag this issue of *Currents* because the Year of Matthew begins on the First Sunday of Advent and will be the Gospel focus for the rest of the Church Year. You’ll want to come back to this issue again and again as we move from Advent to the Sundays of Ordinary Time. The **Preaching Helps** introduction draws attention to the first seventeen verses of Matthew, verses that are seldom read in public. What are those strange women doing in Matthew’s genealogy? Why does Matthew dare to name ancestors others have neglected? Why is our government trying to erase people and events they don’t want us to remember?

Kathleen D. (Kadi) Billman and Craig L. Nesson
Co-editors, *Currents in Theology and Mission*

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