



# Matthew: The Teacher

*TEXT*  
*Matthew 5:1-12*

January 19, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

**T**omorrow the nation recognizes the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. It's been 90 years since he was born in Atlanta, and it's been just over 50 years since he was assassinated in Memphis. Enough time has passed for this country to have progressed more than we have in matters of treating all citizens of this nation as, well, as Americans. More often than not, we hear folks, even while claiming to love America, speaking hatefully about Americans. And tomorrow, on the recognition of his birth, in Richmond, Virginia, Second Amendment zealots and white supremacists, and more than a little anti-government sentiment will hold a rally. Some are even speaking of a new civil war in romantic terms.

This is all in the name of freedom. But it seems to be an understanding of freedom that celebrates not our being united, or our even being Americans together, but rather what David Brooks has called a "hyper-individualism"<sup>1</sup> — a sense that I can only be free if I have no obligation to another. It doesn't line up well with a Lord who says you are only alive if you love your neighbor.

It's a confusing time — confusing in part because it is not completely evident what to do to bring healing to a nation that celebrates division; but even more confusing as to why division is so attractive. Why is so much public time spent demeaning and belittling others? It makes us all look small.

What do they think will happen if we continue to attack not only each other, but also the institutions, the platforms, those places in our society that serve as the ligaments of the social structure? It's a confusing time. And in times like this, we need someone to show us the way. We all need a teacher.

We turn the page this week to Matthew's gospel. Matthew is quite similar to Mark, who we walked with last Sunday. As a matter of fact, when Matthew sits down to write this gospel, it is clear that Matthew has a copy of Mark on his desk. I say that because most of Mark is copied word for word into Matthew ... so much so that you wonder why Matthew felt he needed to rewrite Mark.

Well, Matthew has something to add. For example, last week Mark told us that Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Matthew tells us

their conversation: *Turn these stones into bread.*

Mark said nothing about Jesus' birth, but Matthew tells us his name is Immanuel; and Matthew alone knows of the visit of those mysterious Magi. Matthew knows some stories of Jesus that no one else knows, like the parable of the weeds in the wheat; and the story of the merchant who searches for the pearl of great price. One of Matthew's favorites is the parable of the sheep and goats and "whoever did it for the least of these."

And on Easter Sunday, Mark leaves us wondering if those women who journeyed to the tomb are ever going to say anything about what they saw and heard. But Matthew tells us that Jesus met his disciples on the mountain and gave them the Great Commission: *Go into all the world making disciples.* Matthew is the only one to tell us that.

Now you might think that Matthew does this just because he knows parts of the story of Jesus that Mark leaves out. In part, that's right. But there is a bigger issue for Matthew. Matthew understands Jesus a little differently than Mark. It's not that Mark is wrong; it's just that

there is something else to say. If Mark knows Jesus to be one who enters the wilderness of our lives and battles the forces of evil to grant us glimpses of God's promised day, Matthew knows that Jesus is a teacher. In Matthew, Jesus is teaching all the time.

One of my favorite novels is John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. In the first sentence, you learn that Owen has a weird voice. It's described as a "wrecked voice." At another time, it's described as a "cartoon voice." Most people hate his voice. I don't know what it sounds like, but I think his voice is weird not only because of the sound, but also because, as his friend Johnny said, he spoke with a frankness that you could trust.<sup>2</sup> Johnny said, over time he learned to apprentice himself to Owen's cartoon voice. It was more influential than the wisdom of other voices in his life.<sup>3</sup>

I wonder if some might have described Jesus' voice as a cartoon voice. I assume he spoke in normal tone, but he spoke with a frankness you could trust. He saw the world differently than even the wisest of his day, or of ours. Matthew believes we should apprentice ourselves to his voice.

I say his voice was trustworthy, but it was also at odds with human assumptions. He said, the really blessed ones in this world are the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, and even those who are persecuted. Really? What's blessed about being poor in spirit? He pokes a hole in the assumption that

the ones who are blessed are the ones who have it all together, for they fail to see their dependence on grace.

And the meek, they are the ones who do not treat the world as their oyster, but rather walk through life with a humble spirit and therefore have a peace that no one can steal.

And those whose hearts are broken open in grief? Well, they are the ones who give their hearts away; and if you never risk love, deep generous love, you never live.

And the persecuted know that there comes a day when there is a "good" so important you sacrifice anything rather than give up on it. That's what he taught.

Matthew knew that there would be days of confusion and struggle when we would need someone to show us the way. He says Jesus is that teacher.

In Matthew's day, there was a cultural assumption that is less valued in our own time. In Matthew's day, it was just assumed that becoming a grown-up — becoming a person who lives a good life, a meaningful life, a faithful life — was a hard thing. And if you were going to live such a life, you couldn't do it on your own. You would need a teacher. But here's the catch. The teacher's job was not just to give you information about what was good and faithful. No, the teacher would show you the good life ... inspire you ... live as an example. Matthew says Jesus is your teacher.

Tomorrow is recognized as Martin Luther King's birthday.

King was a teacher like that. He did not just talk about love, but tried to demonstrate for us what the nation might look like if we loved our neighbor, if we treated citizens as citizens. But King also said that the biggest threat to the beloved community was not those who were set on evil, but those who knew good and just failed to choose it. The failing of society is by those who know what is right and choose to set it aside. Or those who said, "It's not time yet, don't push so hard; let good be chosen tomorrow."

I look around, and I hear a lot of people in and out of churches talking about Jesus, but many of them don't live much like him. Matthew says, even in confusing times, do the good that is yours to do and let God make of it what God will make of it.

In May of 1862, as the smoke was clearing from the Battlefield of Williamsburg, Virginia, Rev. Joseph Twichell, an army chaplain, ventured out on the battlefield to see if there were wounded he could pray with. He came across an injured and frightened 19-year-old soldier who was bleeding to death in a ditch. His name was William Moffatt Grier. Rev. Twichell carried Grier to the tent of a surgeon, who cared for him and saved his life. When Grier was strong enough to travel, Rev. Twichell collected money to pay for his trip back home to his parents. Rev. Twichell was a graduate of Yale College and chaplain for the Union Army. Grier was from South Carolina

and a soldier in the Confederate forces.

Inspired by the compassion he witnessed in Twichell, Grier became a minister himself. He stayed in contact with Rev. Twichell as they, joined by an act of compassion in the midst of the horrors of the Civil War, maintained a friendship for the rest of their lives. It was a friendship that modeled the healing that was so desperately needed by the nation.<sup>4</sup>

I only know of this story because Rev. Grier was the great-grandfather of Rev. Thomas Grier Long, who in 1996 was named by Baylor University as one of the twelve most influential preachers in the English-speaking world, and who for a generation was one of the greatest teachers of preachers. While never formally his student, through his books, his friendship and his example, he has taught me more about what we are doing here than any other single teacher. So, I am so grateful for the choice of Rev. Joseph Twichell to trust his teacher who was crazy enough to say, “Love your enemies, even in battle.” Twichell trusted his teacher on a Williamsburg battlefield 158 years ago, and I think in a real way, my life is different because he did. He did the good that was his to do.

We live in confusing times, when even smart people engage in celebrations of dehumanization and participate in the world of make-believe rather than surrender to truth; when even the smartest of people worship the

power to control rather than the power of love.

We live in confusing times, as tomorrow, to mark Dr. King’s birthday, white supremacists and neo-Nazi’s will march. I don’t know what to do about that. But ours is to do the good that is ours to do, and let God make of it what God will. Trust your teacher and choose the good that you know, and let God take care of the rest.

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<sup>1</sup>David Brooks, *The Second Mountain* (2019), pp. 17, 19, 31

<sup>2</sup>John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989), p. 32

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 20

<sup>4</sup>Tom Long’s *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (2009), pp. 9–10

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.