



# Paying Attention to Jesus

AMY EKEH

## SEPTEMBER 3

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 16:21-27

**REFLECT:** As our academic year begins, it may be helpful to orient ourselves in the Sunday Gospels by recalling that we are currently in Liturgical Year A. This means that until Advent begins on Sunday, December 3, our Sunday Gospel readings will be from Matthew's Gospel. When Advent begins, the Church will enter into a new liturgical year, Year B, and we will read primarily from Mark's Gospel.

In this Sunday's Gospel we have a *passion prediction* followed by *instructions for disciples*. As we will see, the two subjects are intimately connected.

Matthew wrote that Jesus "began to show his disciples" that

he would soon go to Jerusalem, where he would suffer, be killed, and then be raised from the dead. Indeed, this type of prediction will be repeated by Jesus three more times in the Gospel (Matthew 17:22-23; 20:17-19; 26:1-2). It seems that the disciples should have been well-prepared for Jesus' death (and resurrection), but as we can see from Peter's immediate reaction, they clearly resisted this preparation!

How did Peter respond to Jesus' prediction that he would suffer and die? He *rebuked* Jesus! Although this rebuke certainly came from a place of love ("No such thing shall ever happen to you!"), it was certainly bold of Peter to disagree with Jesus — his teacher, his rabbi, his Master. Clearly the problem here was

not a lack of respect or a lack of love. Jesus identified the problem thus: "You are thinking not as God does, but as humans do." In fact, Peter was thinking in a way *so contrary* to the way God thinks that Jesus even called Peter "Satan" and "an obstacle."

Again, there was no lack of love between Jesus and Peter. The argument — and argument it

### MONTH SUMMARY

#### SEPTEMBER 3

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 16:21-27

Disciples of Jesus must be prepared to follow him closely, denying themselves and forfeiting their lives for his sake.

#### SEPTEMBER 10

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus teaches about a delicate topic: how to handle sin within the church community.

#### SEPTEMBER 17

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 18:21-35

In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus calls us to forgive others as generously as God forgives us.

#### SEPTEMBER 24

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 20:1-16a

In the Parable of the Vineyard Workers, Jesus teaches that we should not be resentful when God is extravagantly generous with others.



was — derived from the very different perspectives of these two men. Peter's perspective was natural, human, and limited. He did not wish harm to come to someone that he loved, and he could not see beyond this narrow truth. Jesus' perspective was greater, wider, and eternal. Jesus faced reality with a view to its cosmic scope. This is the way God thinks.

Jesus certainly did not wish harm upon himself. We will see this in the Garden of Gethsemane when he asked the Father to remove the cup of suffering if possible (26:39). But Jesus was willing to deny himself for the sake of others. He was willing to lose his life for the sake of others. He was willing to take up a cross for the sake of others. These are the things Jesus requires of his disciples, those who want to follow him.

This radical and sometimes painful way of life requires a re-orientation of our minds and hearts, an entirely new way of thinking. Human beings are finite, so it is only natural that we think with limited and limiting thoughts. But God has no limits, and there are no boundaries to what he can accomplish. Even the one who dies will be raised up. Just so, the one who follows and willingly forfeits his own life will gain all.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Am I a follower of Jesus or an obstacle to him? Do I stand in his way as he tries to act in me and through me because of my own preconceived ideas of what I should think, say, and do? How might he be prompting me to think as God thinks?

**ASK YOUR STUDENTS:** In response to Peter's rebuke, Jesus called him "Satan." Do you think



Jesus really thought Peter was Satan? Why might he have used this term when speaking to Peter? (There are numerous possible responses here, but you may want to discuss the use of *hyperbole* or *exaggeration* as a powerful way of making a point in preaching and teaching.)

*Jesus was willing to deny himself for the sake of others. He was willing to lose his life ...*

**PRAY:** Jesus, may I never be opposed to you! Give me the wisdom and strength I need to think as God thinks and to act as you acted.

**LIVE THE GOSPEL:** Jesus asked his followers to imitate him by denying themselves and laying down their lives for others. How can you do this in some small way this week? How can you deny yourself something and instead provide something material (a

ride, clothing, a meal) or immaterial (time, attention, love) to someone in your life? How does this sacrifice bring *you* life?

## SEPTEMBER 10

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 18:15-20

**REFLECT:** Matthew's Gospel collects many of Jesus' teachings into five major discourses. The best-known of these discourses is the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Today's Gospel reading comes from the Discourse on the Church, a collection of Jesus' teachings on the community of believers.

In this section of the discourse, Jesus gave instructions for how to deal with a sinner in the community. He told his disciples that first they should speak to the sinner in private, but if he did not listen, they must take one or two others to speak to him. If he still refused to listen, they should tell the whole church so the church could try to influence



him positively. But if the sinner stubbornly remained in his or her sin, the church should treat such a person as “a Gentile or a tax collector” — in other words, as an outsider.

Jesus’ words may seem harsh and exclusive to us. Is it not the mission of the Church to *welcome* the sinner? Of course, the answer to this question is yes. There are several things to consider here.

First, on a practical note, at this point in his preaching ministry, Jesus was nearing the end of his life. The ongoing predictions of his suffering and death reveal that Jesus had a sense of foreboding and an awareness that his death was fast approaching. Jesus wanted the community of his disciples to continue his mission. In order to do so effectively, the Church needed to stand strong with faith and conviction in the midst of a world that would often be hostile to its viewpoint and its good news. These instructions of Jesus speak to the importance of a cohesive community, unified in belief and fully aware of the slow-growing dangers of sin, pride, and an unwillingness to repent.

Second, it is clear from the stories of the Gospels that Jesus loved sinners. He was repeatedly accused of befriending “tax collectors and sinners” (Matthew 11:19), and he was clear that it was sinners he came to save (see Matthew 9:13). Far from excluding sinners (or Gentiles, for that matter) from his company, Jesus was known to serve them, dine with them, and preach to them tirelessly. In these stories, and in this active friendship, we find *ourselves* served by, dining with, and preached to by the loving Christ. Therefore we cannot conclude

that the hypothetical — or universal — sinner, of whom Jesus was speaking here, should be excluded from the community permanently. Just as Jesus was determined to win over the hearts of sinners, he is determined to win our hearts and the heart of every person. His Church is now



## Is it not the mission of the Church to welcome the sinner?

the community that has been commissioned to do this important work.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Have I excluded myself in any way from my community by being unrepentant or not listening to the true message of the Gospel? How important is the unity of my parish community to me?

**ASK YOUR STUDENTS:** In today’s Gospel, Jesus taught his disciples how to deal with sinful behavior in the church community. What are some loving ways we can communicate with and guide someone when we are concerned about their choices? What hurtful behaviors might Jesus be talking about? Has anyone ever helped you change your ways? Was this hard? Did it help you?

**PRAY:** Lord Jesus, be my guide. May I be a loving and welcoming member of my church community through my thoughts, words, and actions.

**LIVE THE GOSPEL:** This week, identify some ways you can be a positive influence in your community. Can you:

- *act* in a way that sets a good example?
- *speak* in a way that builds someone up instead of tearing them down?
- *think* in a loving and inclusive way about people that may seem to be on the fringes of your community?

## SEPTEMBER 17

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 18:21-35

**REFLECT:** In this Sunday’s Gospel, we encounter one of Jesus’ most eye-opening, soul-searching, life-changing parables. Of course, it will only open our eyes, probe our souls, and change our lives insofar as we allow it. This gets to the heart of a major reason that Jesus taught in parables. He wanted his listeners to really mull something over. He wanted a story to take hold of their imaginations and become a

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**AN IMAGE FROM** an illuminated Gospel Book, created in the approximate period 1030–1050, showing the men working in the vineyard

part of them. He hoped his message would survive long enough within his listeners to change their hearts.

Today's parable is about forgiveness, and it touches the very core of our human hypocrisy: We want others to be generous in treating us with mercy, but we tend to be quite stingy in doling out mercy to others. We want others to be lenient with *us*, but meanwhile we make harsh determinations about what we think *they* deserve. This is a painful truth laid bare by Jesus in a powerful story.

The impetus for the story was Peter's question: "How often must I forgive?" Jesus' well-known response was, "Seventy-seven times" (sometimes translated as "seventy times seven"). Of course we know Jesus did not mean this literally, as though we could stop forgiving on the seventy-eighth offense!

In Scripture the number seven symbolizes completeness or wholeness. The "wholeness"

of forgiveness reaches far and wide. It goes beyond what any human being may even feel capable of accomplishing. It is essentially limitless! Indeed, the

*This masterful parable is impeccable in its logic. It leaves the hearer with no possible conclusion except to say, "I must forgive my brother and sister from my heart."*

amount forgiven by the king, who represents God in the parable, is *more than a billion dollars* by modern equivalent! (Note that the NABRE translation read at Mass translates the Greek text broadly with "a huge amount," but the NRSV offers the more literal translation of "ten thousand talents," which is approximately the amount earned by a laborer in 150,000 years!) This "huge amount" of forgiveness offered

by God is compared to a much smaller debt that we are asked to forgive when a brother or sister offends us — the much more manageable sum of 100 denarii, or 100 days' labor (translated by the NABRE simply as "a much smaller amount").

This masterful parable is impeccable in its logic. It leaves the hearer with no possible conclusion except to say, "I must forgive my brother and sister from my heart." The alternative is a life without mercy, which is no life at all.

**ASK YOURSELF:** When and with whom have I been stingy with mercy, doling it out in small sums? When have I failed to recognize, accept, and appreciate the *limitless* mercy God has offered me?

**ASK YOUR STUDENTS:** Who represents God in the parable, and what does God want? Which

character in the story represents each of us, and what do we do wrong? What is the conclusion Jesus drew at the end of the parable? Share about a time you were able to forgive someone and what you experienced.

**PRAY:** Jesus, may this story be written on my heart as a reminder that you have forgiven me. Now you ask me to forgive others. Help me to forgive from my heart, generously and not begrudgingly.

**LIVE THE GOSPEL:** Search your soul. Who do you need to forgive? Forgiveness is a process. Begin that process this week, remembering how generous God is with you, and how he has *empowered you* and *called you* to be generous with others.

## SEPTEMBER 24

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 20:1-16A

**REFLECT:** Another parable from Jesus continues last week's theme of God's extreme generosity. In this story, Jesus touches on another unfortunate human behavior: We are often jealous when God is kind to people we think do not deserve it.

In the Parable of the Vineyard Workers, the landowner hired workers throughout the day — some at 9 a.m., some at noon, some at 3 p.m., and some as late as 5 p.m. When evening comes, he paid them all the *same* daily wage! What a strange thing to do! And how unfair!

As we might expect (and as we ourselves would likely do), the laborers who had worked since morning through the heat of the day “grumbled.” They said that the landowner had done the unthinkable — he had made the latecomers “equal to us.”

Of course the landowner offered a piercing rebuttal: “Am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” These words require little commentary. Like it or not, we know exactly what they mean. God can do as he pleases with his blessings, his mercy, and his graces. And the more we are like God, the less this will bother us.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Are there people — at work, in my family, in my community — who I secretly hope will not receive God's mercy because I believe they do not deserve it? How can I see them as God sees them, as flawed human beings deserving of, and in need of, God's mercy and blessings?

**ASK YOUR STUDENTS:** How would you explain this parable in your own words? Does it seem unfair? Why do you think God does not use “fairness” as a standard for how he treats human beings?

**PRAY:** Lord Jesus, your teaching cuts to my heart. Free me from the crippling limitations of my own judgment so I may live in the freedom of your generosity.

**LIVE THE GOSPEL:** Pray for someone you resent or dislike. Pray as honestly as you can, asking God to release you from your own narrow perspective and give you a heart to see this person in a new and generous light.



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