

Matthew 14-16: Feeding the Hungry, Building the Church

Chapter 14 inaugurates a new section of the Gospel. Prior to this, Jesus' activities have taken place mainly in and around Galilee. With chapter 14, Jesus begins the journey through neighboring regions and ultimately, to Jerusalem. The chapter begins with a brief flashback reporting the gruesome beheading of John the Baptist (14:1-12), and then moves into the well-known miracle stories of the feeding of the 5,000 (14:13-21) and Jesus walking on water (14:22-33). The chapter ends with a brief account of Jesus' healings in Gennesaret, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee (14:34-36).

Chapter 15 revives the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees over the Jewish law, particularly traditions about what defiles (15:1-20). After the dialogue, Matthew returns to recounting Jesus' miracles: first, of healings (the Canaanite Woman in 15:21-28, and "many others" in 15:29-31), and then, of another feeding (15:32-39). Matthew then shifts yet again to focus on the Jewish leaders' hostility toward Jesus. The Pharisees and Sadducees come "to test" Jesus by asking for a sign from heaven (16:1-4), and Jesus warns his disciples about the Pharisees' and Sadducees' dangerous teaching (16:5-12). Chapter 16 ends with a climactic exchange between Jesus and Peter, in which Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus declares that Peter is the "rock" upon which his church will be built (16:13-20), Jesus' first passion prediction (16:21-23), and a description of the suffering (cross-bearing) required for discipleship (16:24-28).

The Death of John the Baptist (14:1-12)

After a chapter devoted to parables, ch. 14 starts by recounting the death of John the

Baptist at the hands of Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee (Matt. 14:1). This Herod was son of Herod the Great, who reigned when Jesus was born. “Tetrarch” literally refers to one who governs ¼ of a kingdom, though it appears that when Herod the Great died (see Matt. 2:19-22), his kingdom was divided into sections and distributed amongst his three sons: Archelaus ruled Judea, Samaria, and Idumea (4 BCE-6 CE), Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea during the public ministry of Jesus (4 BCE-39 CE), and Philip ruled the area northeast of the Sea of Galilee (4 BCE-39 CE). Herod Antipas was famous for “urbanizing” Galilee, at cities such as Tiberias and Sepphoris, and, now, he is infamous for having beheaded John the Baptist.

The grotesque image of John’s head presented on a platter has been a popular subject for Christian artists through the centuries. The story turns on Herodias’ wish for retribution; John had been arrested and imprisoned (previously mentioned in Matt. 4:12 and 11:2) because he had denounced Herod’s liaison with Herodias as unlawful, since she had been married to her half-uncle (see Lev. 18:6-16; 20:21). Interestingly, though Matthew’s text says Herodias had been married to Herod’s brother Philip, she actually had been married to the other brother, Herod Antipas (some ancient manuscripts simply say she was “his brother’s wife” without naming him). What matters here is that John’s prophetic message angered Herod and Herodias by declaring their union unlawful. In Matthew, royal retribution initially is forestalled because of Herod’s fear of the crowds (14:5), though the ancient historian, Josephus, writes that Herod executed John because he feared John would lead a rebellion (*Antiquities* 18.118-19). Matthew targets Herodias – via her unnamed dancing daughter – as responsible for John’s death.

The ruling elites’ violent opposition to John in this scene embodies the negative

reactions to God that Jesus has just depicted in the parables of chapter 13. Their response also fits well within Matthew's broader depictions of this world's rulers as ungodly and violent (see 1:6-11; 2:7-12, 16-18, 22; 10:18; 27:11-26) and of prophets as rejected by the people of Israel (see 5:12; 13:57; 23:31, 37; for the latter, Matthew picks up an Old Testament motif: see, e.g., 2 Chron. 24:21; 36:16; Jer. 11:19-21; 37:15).

The Feeding of the 5,000 (14:13-21)

The contrasts between the Herod scene and the feeding miracle that follows it are striking: John's beheading, fueled by a desire for revenge, happens at a private, elite banquet that ends with death and tragedy. The feeding miracle, fueled by compassion, happens in public, with common people who do not have enough food, and ends with abundance. The miraculous feeding satisfies their literal hunger, which is itself a mark of the inauguration of the kingdom of heaven, a glimpse of the coming messianic banquet.

In the larger scope of Matthew's narrative, this scene foreshadows – provides a foretaste of – the Eucharistic meal at the end of the Gospel (26:26-29). In both scenes, Jesus breaks bread and gives thanks, and both scenes depict a taking and giving. In each case, the shared meal, and Jesus as host, is a communal act, a mark of their unity (in addition to Gospel parallels, other references to the early Christian sacred meal include Acts 2:42; 27:35 and 1 Cor. 11:17-26).

There is also a theological point to this story: the disciples assume that the desert is a wasteland, a place where one cannot find sustenance. Thus, they protest to Jesus' command to feed the people by saying, "This is a desolate place . . . send the crowds to the villages" (14:15). Jesus' response, however, challenges that assumption: "They need

not go away” (14:16). Just as God fed the Israelites in the desert with manna (Exod. 16, Num. 11), so does God provide what people need in other “deserted places” (Matt. 14:13).

Many Jews of Matthew’s day expected that the manna would return. Thus, although Matthew does not make the connection to Moses and manna explicit (cf. John 6:30-35), many would likely have made that association. Matthew’s Jesus is the new Moses, greater than any of the ancient prophets (see also the depiction of the prophet Elisha’s multiplication of loaves in 2 Kgs 4).

We might also detect here allusions to the Old Testament concept of ideal kingship. Ezek. 34 indicts the shepherds (leaders) of Israel for feeding themselves instead of their flock. In contrast, David is portrayed as the ideal shepherd/king, who will feed the flock and provide abundant food. Matthew’s Jesus is also a new David in this regard (also see Matt. 21:14-15, which appears only in Matthew).

In addition to allusions to the Old Testament, this scene resonates with themes that have preceded it in Matthew’s own narrative as well. For example, Jesus has been inviting his disciples into his ministry all along; the most obvious example is in chapter 10, when Jesus explicitly sends his disciples out to continue the work he has been doing. In the story of the feeding of the five thousand, Matthew stresses the inclusion of the disciples in Jesus’ provision of food for the people. Unlike John’s Gospel, where a young boy provides the loaves and fish (Jn. 6:9), in Matthew, Jesus performs a miracle out of the disciples’ resources. They provide the five loaves and two fish (14:17), and they gather the leftover baskets (14:20).

The detail that there are *twelve* baskets of food left over has been a matter of some

debate. Some say this simply indicates an historical fact: practically speaking, each disciple had one basket, and there were twelve disciples; hence, twelve baskets. Other readers have taken this as symbolic for the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The feeding in this case would be more broadly representative of Jesus' mission to go first to the "lost sheep of Israel."

Jesus Walks on Water (14:22-33)

After spending time alone in prayer (14:23), Jesus miraculously walks on the rough, stormy waters of the Sea of Galilee to meet his disciples in their boat. The note that he goes out during the "fourth watch" is simply a Roman way of referring to the time period between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m. This indicates two things: 1) Jesus has spent most of the night in prayer, and 2) it is most likely dark, which explains why the disciples do not recognize him at first and conclude instead that he is a ghost (14:26).

Jesus' response to his disciples' fear – "Take courage!" – is a frequent divine command in the Old Testament (Deut. 31:6; 1 Chron. 28:20; Isa. 41:10, 13; 54:4). Jesus then says "*Ego eimi*," which could be translated "it is I," or "I am." Some scholars see here an allusion to Exodus, where (in the Greek version, the Septuagint) *ego eimi* is the divine name God reveals to Moses at the burning bush. On the other hand, this is a common phrase used often throughout the New Testament. Jesus may simply be saying, "I'm not a ghost. It's just me, Jesus." John 8:58 makes a more explicit allusion to Exodus.

In the first of three Matthean passages focusing especially on Peter, Matthew adds to the plot of this story found in his source, Mark (Mk. 6:45-52). Jesus invites Peter to come out to him on the water. Initially, Peter is successful. Only when he takes his eyes

off of Jesus and looks at the frightening circumstances around him does Peter start to sink and Jesus saves him (14:30-31). Mark's version of the story also differs from Matthew in that Mark ends by drawing attention to the disciples' failure to understand (Mark 6:52), whereas in Matthew, they worship Jesus and call him the Son of God (14:33).

Jesus' Healings in Gennesaret (14:34-36)

The chapter ends with a brief summary of Jesus' and his disciples' arrival in Gennesaret, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, and the many healing miracles Jesus performs there.

On Tradition and What Defiles (15:1-20)

The Pharisees' traditions of interpretation of the Law circulated orally; they believed these traditions were given with the written law on Mt. Sinai and were therefore similarly binding. Thus, when Jesus' disciples fail to wash their hands before eating, they are breaking the Pharisaic oral tradition (Matthew calls this the "tradition of the elders"), not the written law. Jesus' response to the Pharisees' objections is to draw their attention to the written law (Exod. 20:12 and Deut. 5:16 in Matt. 15:4a, and Lev. 20:9 in Matt. 15:4b), and to declare that what actually defiles a person is what comes from the heart (15:18-20). Still, this is not a total disavowal of Jewish Law or cultic practices. Matthew omits the note that appears in Mark's version of this scene, namely that Jesus "made all things clean" (Mk. 7:19), perhaps reflecting Matthew's conviction that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill its true purpose (Matt. 5:17).

Jesus and the Canaanite Woman (15:21-28), More Healings (15:29-31), and the Feeding of the 4,000 (15:32-39)

The second half of chapter 15 recounts another series of miracles. As Jesus moves into the Gentile territory of Tyre and Sidon, a “Canaanite” woman asks Jesus to cure her demon-possessed daughter. The label “Canaanite,” drawn from Old Testament depictions of ancient Israel’s enemies (Deut. 7:1), indicates that she is a Gentile (cf. Mark, where she is described as “Syrophenician”). This story has troubled interpreters, since the response to the woman by Jesus and his disciples seems less than compassionate. When turning her away does not silence her (15:23), Jesus insists again that he has come “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24; cf. 9:36; 10:6), and calls the woman a dog (15:26). The woman, courageously refusing to be rebuffed, reinterprets Jesus’ demeaning metaphor and ultimately changes his mind (15:27-28).

A second miraculous multiplication of loaves (Matt. 15:32-39) represents another case of Matthean doubling. The repetition reinforces the themes established in the previous feeding episode: Jesus’ provision, the abundance of God’s kingdom, the promise that God satisfies the hungry, etc. However, the differences are also instructive. The major variation from the previous story is that the disciples pick up seven, rather than twelve, baskets of leftovers. Some interpreters argue that if twelve in the earlier version symbolizes the people of Israel, then seven here stands for Gentiles. Based on ancient associations of the number seven with wholeness and completion, such interpreters conclude that the seven baskets suggest that when Gentiles are included, the kingdom of God will be complete.

Seeking Signs (16:1-4) and the Yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:5-12)

Conflict continues as the Pharisees and Sadducees confront Jesus yet again. Matthew clearly indicates their hostility, using the same verb for their intention “to test” him (16:1) found in the devil’s “testing” of Jesus in 4:1, 3. They are acting as the devil does. This image is further reinforced by Jesus’ polemical rebuke, in which he calls them “evil” (16:4), the same term used to refer to the devil in 6:13. The juxtaposition of Jesus’ miracles in chapters 14-15 with the Jewish leaders’ request for a sign from heaven ironically underscores their hard-hearted inability to discern the signs that are right before their eyes. This negative portrayal makes it unsurprising that Jesus then launches into a strong warning against the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ teachings, which spread like yeast spreads through dough.

Peter’s Confession and Jesus’ Prediction About the Church (16:13-20)

Matthew has been dubbed the “Gospel of the Church,” partly because only here in the canonical Gospels do we find explicit reference to the “church.” The term that we translate “church” (*ekklēsia*) literally means “the called out ones,” from *ek* (out) + *klesis* (call). (Hence also “ecclesiastical.”) In the ancient Greek political arena, *ekklēsia* referred to a democratic assembly of citizens; in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament), the word *ekklēsia* is used to refer to the people of God (Deut. 31:20; Judg. 20:2; Ps. 22:22, etc.). Early Christians appear to have adopted this term to refer to the local and global “assembly” of the faithful.

In Matthew, the concept of this assembly of God’s people corresponds closely to the kingdom of heaven. The two times the term *ekklēsia* is used (16:18 and 18:17) both

concern the governance of God's people. In this instance, following Peter's climactic confession that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16), Jesus blesses him and declares, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (16:18).

There are several interpretive difficulties here. First, does "the rock" refer to Peter, or to Christ? On the one hand, some point out that Jesus' new name for Simon – Peter – means "rock" in Greek, creating a word play in 16:18, and indicating that Peter is that solid foundation. On the other hand, others (like Augustine in the 4th century) have argued that the rock is Christ (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 3:11; 10:4), and Peter simply represents all believers. Second, to what do the "keys" and the language of binding and loosing refer in 16:19? Is this the power to forgive sins (26:28; see also John 20:23)? The power to teach authoritatively (28:20)? The ability to control entry into heaven (see Isa. 22:22 and Rev. 3:7) and/or entry into the church on earth (18:17-18)?

Jesus' First Passion Prediction (16:21-23) and Taking Up Your Cross (16:24-28)

Jesus' prediction about his church is followed by the first prediction of his impending death and resurrection (16:21-23) and a sobering claim that discipleship entails similar self-sacrifice. In Matthew 16.24, the verbs Jesus uses for "take up" and "follow" can sound in English like a one-time experience, as though the decision to follow Jesus is made in a moment. In Greek, however, the verbs signify continuous, ongoing motion. Jesus is saying, "You must take up your cross and follow me continuously."

Questions for discussion:

1. Many people find Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman offensive. Do you find it disturbing? Why or why not?
2. Jesus changing his mind in 15:27-28 has been described as a "teachable moment," in which Jesus learned from the woman. Yet, for some, the idea that Jesus would have anything to learn is troublesome. What is your reaction to this depiction of Jesus?
3. Matthew 16:13-20 has led to centuries of debate over the organization of Christ's church, from the establishment of the Pope in Rome, through the Protestant Reformation, and into today. How is your church structured, and why?
4. What does it mean to you to "take up your cross and follow Jesus continuously"?
5. What does "bearing our cross" mean today? What is the role of suffering in discipleship?

Suggested Reading:

Jeannine K. Brown, "[The rhetoric of hearing: the use of the Isaianic hearing motif in Matthew 11:2-16:20](#)," *Built upon the rock: studies in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 248-269.

Tucker S. Ferda, "The Seventy Faces of Peter's Confession: Matt. 16:16-17 in the History of Interpretation," *Biblical Interpretation* 20 (2012): 421-457

Paul A. Tanner, "The Cost of Discipleship: Losing One's Life for Jesus' Sake," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56 (2013): 43-61.