

“YES TO LEAN, NO TO MEAN”

Page | 1 Unless it's in Bible study, through a devotional practice, or on a rare Church holiday, we won't be hearing much from Matthew after today. Next weekend Mark will become the featured gospel for a year, with plenty of John mixed in for good measure. The following year Luke will take center stage. But even as we prepare to move away from Matthew for a good while, his unique representation of our faith will likely go with us. Matthew is an insistent writer.

As he does again today, one of themes to which Matthew turns again and again is The Final Judgement. Today we get talk of eternal punishment for some. More often it's that some will spend eternity looking outside in; getting no break from darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth. Perhaps like you this repeatedly grim and gruesome portrait of what is to come for some bothers me. I love people. I believe deeply in the value and sanctity of every last member of God's creation. I don't want anyone, no matter how different they may be from me, to end up in an outer darkness where teeth shall be gnashed down to nothing and where cries of sorrow and suffering shall be unending. When Matthew goes there as often as he does it gives me the willies. To be sure, nowhere to be found in Matthew is the sweet nothing that everyone goes to heaven no matter who they've been in life. Matthew is coarse and combative. He pulls no punches and registers his points as colorfully and often savagely as he can. But Matthew loves people as much as any of us; maybe even more.

Like so many New Testament writers, Matthew is convinced the broken and sinful world we've all come to know isn't built to last. In his view and the view of Scripture in general and the New Testament in particular, the broken and sinful world we've all come to know is going to collapse and fall to pieces and not everyone is going to be welcomed into God's eternal alternative; the one we call the Kingdom of God. As Matthew says so often, some are going to end up outside looking in; weeping and gnashing their teeth; experiencing eternal punishment. But like me, and I hope you, I'm inclined to believe Matthew doesn't want this to happen to anyone. I think it's why he keeps ringing his alarm bell about the Final Judgment. I think it's why, as he does again today, Matthew keeps telling us what shall be required to inherit the Kingdom of God so our teeth might remain intact. Like a good parent filled with overwhelming, almost unspeakable love for their child, Matthew in the plainest language possible keeps crying out, "Keep your hands off the stove and where they can be safe for all eternity." And for this we should say thank you to Matthew and the Holy Spirit who inspired him. Thanks to Matthew and the Spirit, we do know the Kingdom of God shall prevail and what citizenship in it will require.

What it's going to take is a lived faith; a faith that lives out Jesus' priorities and principles. Thankfully, the scriptures tell us this lived faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit; a gift the Spirit most often imparts when we gather as we are now—together and around God's word and sacraments. But here's the thing. As much as the Holy Spirit is in our corner, as much as the Spirit can be counted upon to supply every last thing we need to live out the Christian faith, we can rebel and resist. When it comes to the Holy Spirit's gift of a living faith, we can't say yes, but oh my can we say no. It's why in a couple of weeks we'll hear Scripture plead that we not quench the Holy Spirit. As the scriptures know so well, quenching the fire of the Holy Spirit shall spell death for the lived faith the Kingdom of God shall require. We don't want this to happen to us. We don't want it to happen to anyone. But there are other faiths, other lifestyles, other philosophies that lead us away from what the Holy Spirit would have us believe and do.

By way of example, towards the end of my basic training at Fort McClellan, Alabama, one of our drill sergeants had this to say. You can rest assured our female drill sergeant was not

around when he said it. He said, “Soldiers, as you prepare to leave, many of you now beginning your first, full-time job, remember that real men are not built for monogamy, but they do always take care of their wife and kids.” As a Christian and the son of a father who counted his greatest accomplishment in life as being faithful to my mother, I was shocked that such a thing would even be said. But there was another philosophy that gathered a little more currency with me during my time at Fort McClellan. From the moment I started basic training, I was told that my aim in life was to become and remain a lean, mean, fighting machine. If you’re going to be a soldier who survives the rigors of military service, it’s a philosophy, a lifestyle, a lived faith that makes some sense; even if the mean part of it can and has been overdone in more than one theater of war. Having long ago exited military service, it’s no longer a philosophy to which I adhere, but perhaps it can be used to illustrate when we are in fact living the faith the Holy Spirit gives rather than one of the many other faiths the world would have us live.

Start with the mean part. As I’ve already suggested, even within the realm of military service, being mean can be quite problematic. But if it can be problematic for the soldier, it is entirely so for the Christian. It’s kindness, not meanness, which the scriptures list as a consequence of Christian faith. And the people Jesus lauds today, those who care for the hungry and the hurting, certainly are kind.

As for the idea that we might be some kind of fighting machine, this too is out of bounds for the Christian. “Do everything without grumbling or arguing” says the letter to the Philippians, as the 2nd letter to Timothy also enjoins us to steer clear of that which produces quarrel. But even as I reject the idea that we’re in anyway called to be mean fighting machines, I will say this. There’s a lot of room for being lean in the faith the Holy Spirits calls and empowers us to live. In fact, it might even be said that becoming and remaining lean is a primary aim of the faith the Holy Spirit gives us for here and now use.

Now as I’m thinking of it, to be lean isn’t to be starved, malnourished, or emaciated. To be lean is to have and use what you need to be healthy and to give that which personal health doesn’t require to those who need it to become healthy themselves, be it physically, emotionally, or spiritually. To be lean in this way is to recognize that my neighbor will benefit when I’m healthy enough to help them and that I shall benefit when my neighbors are healthy enough to help me. In ways various and numerous this is what Jesus is always telling us, including today. When communities are strong and healthy, everyone wins. It’s not that Jesus calls us to be starved, malnourished, or emaciated. This will only serve to hurt us and thereby hurt the various communities to which we belong. What’s in view is that Jesus is calling us to be lean so that overconsumption on our part doesn’t weaken the strong and healthy communities we all need to win to the greatest extent possible. It’s why Jesus today praises those who empty themselves of the time, talent, and treasure that would make them more than lean and leave others less than lean. And so, let me call all of us today not just to be done with being mean and quarrelsome, but also to direct considerable energy to becoming and remaining lean; in the sense that we keep and use what we need to be healthy and give away what others need to be healthy themselves.

Will this be easy? Anyone who’s ever tried to become and remain physically lean, myself included, knows that it will not be. But it can be done to a greater and greater extent. Again, the Good News is that the Holy Spirit gifts us with all we need to live out the faith the Kingdom of God shall require. Will it still be a climb? Yes, it will be. Will we have to learn more and more to drown out the world that calls us to come down from the mountain so that we might remain tuned in to the Holy Spirit who calls us up the mountain? Again, yes it will. But as someone

who's always thought parables like the one we've heard today seek effort rather than perfection or completion, maybe it is the climb, not scaling the mountain, that ultimately matters. Amen!