

Sermons at St Paul's

The 12th Sunday after Pentecost
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

In 1833, Charles Dickens began publishing a series of stories in newspapers that readers loved. The stories were collected later in a book called Sketches by Boz. Then Dickens expanded his repertoire with a deliberately serialized story – The Pickwick Papers – and made literary history. Subsequently, each episode was collected and published, and re-published, and re-published for decades. Dickens was clearly on to something big. People could not wait for the next weekly installment. They were hooked.

It turns out that people love a story told over multiple weeks in a series of segments. Makers of movies and TV rediscovered this in short order in the 20th century. Now thanks to the Internet, we are discovering the fun of watching the whole story unfold at once – it's called binge watching. In print it is still called a book.

Now here's the problem with our gospel readings. They were not written by Dickens or Made-for-TV scriptwriters. They were written decades after Jesus lived, and there were no serial publications, no Hulu, no Netflix, or Amazon. So today we get these four different versions, of a story that should keep us on the edges of our seats, in little snippets each Sunday, which has effectively serialized the Gospel for us. And for a variety of reasons, the people who put our three-year lectionary cycle together generally do not give us sequential readings, but excerpts from each chapter.

This morning in Matthew's gospel, we hear a section from Chapter 16 about how Jesus named the disciple Peter as the Rock of the Church. Which is fine – but, we forget or don't realize that Jesus has been talking all through Matthew's gospel about what the many translators have called the Kingdom of God. And when we hear the word Church this morning, our minds move about 2,000 years forward, so we think we know what Jesus is talking about. My bet is, that we don't.

He's been talking about the Kingdom of God, not about this building or about the Episcopal Church, or even the universal Church of all Christians. He says something very important about Peter and his relationship to the assembly of people who have come to know the Kingdom of God through Jesus' teaching.

The root Greek word used by the writer of Matthew's Gospel is *ekklesia*, which can mean an assembly of people or a congregation of people. It has come, over the centuries, to be the basis for words like *ecclesiastical*, meaning in modern English, "of, or relating to the church." So you see, we have a rather neat and misleading conclusion we can jump to: "ecclesiastical" means "of the church" in modern English, so Jesus meant "the Church" when he used an Aramaic word that the writer of Matthew's gospel translated as "ekklesia."

What if we were back in about the year 60 or 70, and the writer of Matthew was the Dickens of his day? What if we gathered every week to hear what he had written (or dictated) about the amazing

life and sayings of Jesus? We would have heard about the Kingdom of God, and how precious it is. We would have heard about how difficult it is to earn it, and how freely it is given to those who have been baptized, decided to live a Kingdom-of-God life, and started feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned, clothing the naked, and sheltering the children and vulnerable.

We would have heard about how each and every person is invited into the Kingdom of God, here and now, by repenting and adopting a world-view of love. We would have heard the Kingdom of God and Messiah language move from the Old Testament's future prediction to the Gospels' confident present tense language. The whole gospel of Mark is written in the present tense: The Kingdom of God is here!

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus teaches about the Kingdom of God, and what it takes for people to enter it, in a series of stories and parables. In today's lesson, he may well be saying that the Kingdom of God is the assembly of people who live in it and believe in him. If you have seen me, he tells his disciples, you have seen the Kingdom of God. Then he turns to them and asks: *Who do you say that I am?*

Perhaps he poses this question to see whether any of them have figured this out yet. Perhaps this is a pop-up quiz to see how far along the road toward the Kingdom of God his followers have come. So he may indeed be stunned when Peter moves past the Kingdom of God concept, and names Jesus the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Peter – in that moment and in days to come – has entered the Kingdom of God by knowing Jesus as the source and fulfillment of it.

This is the moment when the dream of a Messiah who will someday come to be King and Savior of the faithful Jews, becomes the reality of Jesus, the Redeemer of all those invited into the Kingdom of God. This is where the verbs go from future to present tense.

Why does this matter to us? What if we miss the moment because we are so used to serializing the Gospel, that we tend to accept each piece as a stand-alone story about a cast of characters we seem to know so well? The Gospels are too important to let ourselves trivialize them into the equivalents of TV drama! Let me urge you to sit down some afternoon soon, and read Matthew's Gospel as a connected narrative. If you really want to get the whole story, binge read it. Connect the segments and make it a story.

If we place this story in context, in the whole narrative arc of Matthew's Gospel, we can easily try a thought-experiment. What would happen if we substitute the phrase, "the people of the Kingdom of God" in place of the word "church?" Instead of saying "I'm going to church today" we might say: "I am going to be with the people of the Kingdom of God today." Instead of saying "I am a member of the Episcopal Church." We might say, "I am a member of the Episcopal branch of the people of the Kingdom of God."

What would happen if you stopped thinking of the church as this building, or this organization, and started thinking about the people to the left and right of you, ahead and behind you, as the people of the Kingdom of God at St. Paul's?

I have this funny feeling that Jesus might like that very much. Try it, and see!

Amen.