

# The Meaning Behind the Miracles

Sunday Readings for Your Everyday Living





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## **Welcome to the Little Way**

### *An Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew*

**A** FEW YEARS AGO I had the chance to work at a group home for six developmentally disabled adults. I assumed my job would be fun and easy, hanging out with the residents, watching television, eating communal meals, and bringing them to concerts at the beach. I was wrong.

The job wasn't always easy or fun. I discovered that I could do things for them, but I found it difficult to be with them. They continually confounded my tidy expectations about people with developmental disabilities. "William" would tell clever lies in order to pit staff members against his vindictive, overprotective older sister. "Robert" dealt with his sadness by watching Johnny Depp movies for hours on end. Whenever the residents acted manipulatively, expressed rage, or withdrew into their sadness, I often felt anxious or inadequate. Facing my own powerlessness and incompetence terrified me: I either wanted to fix them, numb my feelings, or just quit.

Thankfully, I stayed long enough to learn a valuable lesson: authentic relationships require personal presence. In order to grow in love, the real me must show up and be present to the real you—not the "you" that I think you are or that I want you to be. Authentic love includes my willingness to be with you in

all your beauty and promise as well as all of your brokenness, sin, and anguish.

The Gospel of Matthew begins with a remarkable claim: Jesus is God with us (Mt 1:23). In and through Jesus God walks among us, offering his personal presence to us in all of our beauty and brokenness. This Gospel records many of Jesus' miracles, but perhaps these are the three greatest miracles: (1) in Jesus, God is with us and he wants to be with us; (2) through Jesus' death and resurrection, God is still with us; (3) through his Spirit, Jesus is with us as we go into the world sharing the gospel.

Surprisingly, although this Gospel contains a huge story of transformation (Jesus calls it "The renewal of all things" in Mt 19:28), and although Jesus asks for our wholehearted commitment, he also never asked us to follow him on a triumphant, overachieving, failure-free path to the spiritual life. This "Big Way" of discipleship eventually leads to spiritual burn-out, disillusionment, or self-righteous pride. Instead, Jesus constantly asks us to follow him along his "Little Way," allowing the Father to work through our poverty of spirit, our failures and suffering, our quiet obedience and trust, and our small acts of mercy for vulnerable people—sinners, outcasts, the poor, and the forgotten. This "Little Way" makes discipleship accessible to all of us, except the self-righteous and the alleged experts. Jesus himself provided the way to follow him: "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28-30).

So based on Jesus' open-hearted, merciful invitation, we come and we keep coming back to Jesus. We come not because we're worthy or qualified. We come not because we won't stumble or fail. We simply come because he told us to come, and that's always enough.



## **Food Matters**

*Matthew 14:13-21*

**I** USED TO LOVE HOT POCKETS. O, the tasty, juicy, greasy goodness stuffed into that magical baking sleeve! But ever since I read Michael Pollan's book *In Defense of Food* I haven't been able to wolf down a single Hot Pocket. According to Pollan, a Hot Pocket isn't "real food" (just grab your magnifying glass and chemistry textbook and read the ingredients).

Pollan is right (and biblical) on one major point: food matters. How we eat, what we eat, why we eat, how we get and prepare what we eat—it all matters. Gluttony matters. Malnourishment matters. According to the Bible, food matters because people matter. And people matter because God said so.

So it shouldn't surprise us that when Immanuel comes to the earth he treats food and people with utmost respect. In Matthew's Gospel, references to food (eating, bread, banquets) appear nearly fifty times. Satan tempts Jesus with food (Mt 4:4). Jesus tells us to trust our Father for daily bread (Mt 6:11). Jesus compares salvation to a beautiful banquet (Mt 8:11 and 22:1-11). And the beauty of God's presence is found in one simple act: Jesus takes bread, breaks it, and says, "This is my body given for you" (Mt 26:26).

So this story in Matthew 14 isn't a unique incident in Jesus'

ministry. It opens a window and displays a vital aspect of Jesus' mission. Desperate and weary people have been without food. They are hungry. They need help. The disciples offer their standard quick solution: They tell (notice they give Jesus a command), "Send them away." Jesus offers a better solution: "No, you offer them something to eat." Food and hungry people matter because they matter to Jesus, God with us. And we as disciples matter because we are the body of Christ on earth.

This is the only miracle that appears in all four Gospels. Pictures of loaves and fish appear often in early Christian art. Obviously, the early church thought this was a crucial story. On one level, Jesus' miraculous feeding offers personal comfort to Jesus' followers. Our Heavenly Father wants to provide for us. He doesn't want us to worry about our daily bread. It's also a challenging picture of our mission as a church. Faithful discipleship hinges, at least in part, on how we care for hungry people (Mt 24:38-45; 25:31-46). Once again, Jesus reminds us that we are "the Church for the world," not "the Church for the disciples' comfort."

But, finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, this story also shows us how we live in Christ. In many ways, this story serves as the first Eucharistic story. In his amazing love, Jesus takes bread, blesses it, and then feeds hungry people. That's why at Church of the Resurrection we don't just have weekly worship services; we have a holy meal. Jesus said, "Take and eat, this is my body." Every Sunday Jesus offers, not spiritual Hot Pockets, but "holy gifts for holy people."



## Beautiful Flops

*Matthew 14:22-33*

**R.O. BLECHMAN** IS OFTEN HAILED as the most famous illustrator in the world. But for every successful work, Blechman claims that most people would be shocked by his string of failures. In a series of letters to a young protégé, Blechman shares his ongoing struggle with artistic flops:

Preliminary drawings and sketches often are discouraging things, pale shadows of one's bold intentions.... "Is that what I did," the novice might ask, "and I consider myself an artist?!" .... My trash basket is full of false starts and failed drawings.... There should be a Museum of Failed Art.

Surprisingly, the Bible contains a "Museum of Failed Discipleship"—the spiritual failures of the disciples. We tend to cover up our heroes' faults; instead, the Gospels allow us to see the disciples' failures, and most of those stories came from the disciples themselves. This not only adds to the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts; it also encourages us in our faltering attempts to follow Jesus.

This story records yet another failure by Peter, the leader of Jesus' band of followers. It's so unimpressive; it's such a flop. In Blechman's words, this incident could serve as Exhibit A for the Museum of Failed Faith. It would forever remind Peter, "Is that

what I did, and I consider myself a disciple?!”

Of course we have to give some kudos to Peter: at least he got out of the boat, and then he even took a few steps toward Jesus. Apparently, Peter heard and believed Jesus’s words in the middle of this story: “Take courage. It is I. Don’t be afraid.” So Peter believed Jesus—well, sort of. As soon as started looking around and listening to the waves and wind, he crashed.

As our mentor and leader, Peter has a valuable lesson about discipleship: we will fail. We might do a belly-flop or a cannonball, or we might just quietly slip overboard, but we will sink. But Jesus’ response to Peter shows us another lesson about discipleship: our failures aren’t fatal. In the end, this story focuses on Jesus and his fabulous redemption, not Peter and his spectacular flop. Jesus is the Lord of our storms and the Master of our failures. In the midst of this colossal and humiliating failure, “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.”

Throughout this Gospel we’ll see Jesus’ readiness to stand in solidarity with sinners and flops like us. In Blechman’s words, there will be days when we’ll ask ourselves, “Is that what I did, and I consider myself a follower of Jesus!?” We will all create our own Museum of Failed Discipleship. But in the midst of our worst failures, our crushing defeats, and our most embarrassing sins, we’re also learning to hear and trust the words of Jesus: “Take courage. It is I. Don’t be afraid. Take my hand. I am with you.”



## Getting in the House

*Matthew 15:21-28*

**T**HROUGHOUT MATTHEW'S very Jewish Gospel we've seen hints (see Mt 1:2-17; 2:1-12; 8:5-13; 15:1-20) that Jesus' kingdom will reflect his multiethnic creation. But this story doesn't seem like a good place for Jesus to launch his multi-ethnic ministry. A woman with a need, raw and vulnerable, approaches Jesus and starts screaming for help, and Jesus seems to give her a cold shoulder. Why doesn't Jesus seem to act like the Jesus we know and love?

Matthew tells us that she's a Canaanite, a much-despised ethnic outsider. But notice that Jesus and his disciples have very different responses to her cry for help. The disciples have her judged, labeled, and dismissed. Once again, they tell (no, they command) Jesus, "Send her away." Personally, I'm not much better than the disciples. Recently, after spending a Saturday evening at the Kansas City Rescue Mission with 100 homeless men, it struck me that every man I spoke with had a different story. Sadly, I had derisively labeled and stuffed them into one category: homeless men. But after one evening talking and playing table games, I discovered that their stories of brokenness, failure, and redemption were unique. There isn't a "homeless men" category: there's only Akibo, Johnny, Seth, Jerome, and Patrick.

In contrast, Jesus displays compassion (he never wants to send her away), but he wrestles with the timing of the request. That's why Jesus responds to her by saying, "I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel." This wasn't just an uncaring, flippant reply; it cut to the heart of Jesus' understanding of his mission. The story of the Bible declares that God loves and desires to bless the whole world, but God also had a specific plan: by blessing one nation God would spread his love through them to the whole earth. Jesus believed in this plan (after all it was his plan too!). At this point in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has had forays into Gentile evangelism, but they've been small and isolated. Will Jesus use this encounter to invite the outsiders into the house?

There are hints that Jesus would indeed fling the doors open to every ethnic group. For instance, notice that in this story it's the labeled and dismissed outsider who displays real faith, not the disciples. She addresses Jesus as "Lord" and "Son of David" (Mt 15:22), two biblical Messianic titles. She cries for "mercy." This remarkable troubled foreign woman shows us how to get "in" with God's mercy: it's through faith in Jesus' mercy. And Jesus can't resist her cry for mercy, so he blesses the woman's faith and heals her daughter.

Without abandoning the original strategy to bless the world, Jesus quietly opens the door to the fulfillment of that plan: a new community in Jesus representing every ethnic group. The Jewish people of Jesus day said the Canaanites were like a pack of wild dogs roaming the streets, scrounging for food. Now in and through Jesus this Canaanite woman is in the house, under the table, getting scraps from the family's table. That was shocking enough! Before you know it, she and every outsider will be sitting at the family table, not like dogs but like daughters and sons, kings and queens, eating from the Father's lavish banquet table.

Indeed, that's exactly what happened. As soon as Jesus let her in

the door, his kingdom community started becoming a beautiful multiethnic mosaic. Shortly after Jesus' ascension, the Apostle Paul would declare, "There is no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free; but Christ is all and in all" (Colossians 3:11). "Look who's in the house now!" we exclaim. "For starters, I'm in the house! And you're in the house. And look at them—they're in the house too. Look at all these poor in spirit people who are now trusting Jesus. None of us deserved it, but here we are, feasting at the table of King Jesus. Ah, such sheer grace!"



## **“I’m ‘Spiritual’ but Not ‘Religious’” Part 1**

*Matthew 16:13-28*

**I** MEET MANY PEOPLE WHO SAY they like Jesus but then they’re quick to add, “I guess I’m spiritual but not religious.” Before the 20th century we used the words “spiritual” and “religious” almost interchangeably, but now many people prefer the “spiritual but not religious” (or SNR) label.

Unfortunately, this SNR trend often implies that the church is optional to one’s spiritual journey. But according to Jesus, this SNR penchant for “church-free” or “church-lite” discipleship isn’t just an innocent difference of opinion; it’s a colossal rejection of Jesus’ plan for the world. Jesus restores the world through a new community, a specific, concrete group of real human beings who live with him.

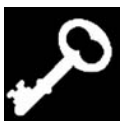
The story in this passage begins in the region of Caesarea Philippi, Israel’s northernmost and most pagan territory. It’s here that Peter makes an amazing declaration about Jesus’ true identity: “You are the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the Living God” (Mt 16:16). Messiah was everything for God’s people, the fulfillment of every promise and the satisfaction of every longing. According to the beautiful Hawaiian pidgin version of the Gospels, Peter

declared, “You da Christ Guy, da Spesho Guy God Wen Send. Da God who alive for real kine, you his Boy.”

After affirming and honoring Peter’s confession, Jesus gave his newfound community incredible worth and respect. Notice the promise from Jesus: “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Jesus’ followers will experience suffering and persecution, but nothing can destroy them—not even death itself. Then Jesus also gives them an amazing confidence-boosting (and terrifying) challenge: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom . . .” (Mt 16:19). Keys command respect and dignity and even power. The Pharisees used their keys to lock the front door and keep people out (Mt 23:13), but Jesus declares that the real keys belong to Peter and his fellow Christ-followers.

Apparently Jesus gave his disciples this promise and challenge without laughing, cringing or crying. We often fail to grasp how preposterous this must have seemed to everyone except Jesus. Here they are, a tiny band of ordinary people who constantly display “little-faith,” wandering far from the centers of religious power, blessed for admitting their spiritual poverty (Mt 5:3), promised persecution and hatred (Mt 5:10-12), gaining momentum by adding lepers and demoniacs and sinners to their ranks (Mt 8:1; 9:9-11), and yet the Messiah tells them, “No one will prevail against you . . . I will give you the keys of the kingdom.” It’s like handing a six year old the keys to the family’s new Mercedes and telling him, “Take it for a spin on the freeway, son; you’re in charge.”

And he offers the same preposterous-glorious promise and challenge to us today. I wonder sometimes: Do we have any idea who we are and whose we are? Do we have any idea how much dignity, glory, and authority our Lord has given to us? And it’s all found not just in our personal relationship with Jesus, but in and through his flawed and imperfect community called the church.



## **“I’m ‘Spiritual’ but Not ‘Religious’”**

### **PART 2**

*Matthew 16:13-28*

**R**IGHT ON THE HEELS of Peter’s amazing spiritual insight about Jesus (“You are the Christ”), Matthew shares another story about Peter’s botched attempt to follow Jesus. Apparently Peter got fed up with all this talk about a suffering Christ, so Peter performed an intervention on Jesus. He basically tells Jesus, “Get a grip and stop this incessant and negative self-talk. You’re the Messiah; now act like one!”

Jesus didn’t appreciate Peter’s “helpfulness” so he snapped, “Get behind me, Satan!” Within minutes Peter the hero, Peter the “rock,” had become Peter the Chump. After exuding the sweetness of spiritual insight, Peter reeks with the backed-up sewer of demonic self-interest.

It’s as if this story announces: “Welcome to the church, the most beautiful-hideous, holy-depraved, lovely-ragged group of people on the face of the earth. You’ll find saints and sinners here, but mostly you’ll just find saintly-sinners and sinning-saints. If you’re searching for a pain-free, totally consistent community living around Jesus, forget it. It doesn’t exist. It never did. Get over it.”

And yet, in the midst of this sinner-saint porridge Jesus emphatically declares, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” Jesus stands with his imperfect church and says, “Despite its flaws and assortment of slow-changing saints, it is MY church and I will build it up.” Jesus treats his church with so much mercy, walking beside us until we become healthy and obedient.

But living within his church isn't easy. I will discover things about you that shock me: you are selfish, petty, controlling and mean. You are opinionated, and you have poor taste in music and politics. These discoveries disappoint me and it's a cross to bear.

But worse, by living in the church I discover things about myself that are even more shocking: I am selfish, petty, controlling and mean. Out of my pain I can easily wound ten other people. I despise and judge all those judgmental people. Fantasies about my righteousness and my goodness get blown to bits. This is also a heavy cross to bear.

What should I do? I can throw my hands up in disgust and walk away; or I can stay put, commit to community, bear my cross, and lose my life for Jesus' sake. In other words, while being fully human like Jesus, expressing honestly my pain and disappointment, I can also decide to follow Jesus on his “Little Way” of discipleship.

Ronald Rolheiser offers the following analogy for the church's call to stay together around Jesus:

[Imagine that] the family is home for Christmas, but your spouse is in a sulk, you are fighting tiredness and anger, your seventeen year old son doesn't want to be there, your aging mother isn't well and you are anxious about her ... and everyone is too lazy or selfish to help you prepare the dinner. Your family is not the holy family, nor a Hallmark card for that matter.... but you are celebrating Christmas

and, underneath it all, there is joy present. A human version of the messianic banquet is taking place and a human family is meeting around [Jesus].

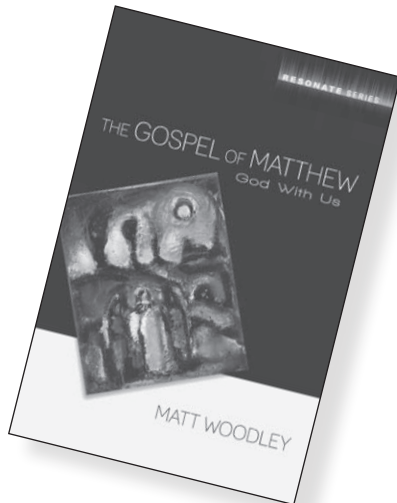
In the same way, the ever-flawed church gathers around and in and through and because of Jesus—and that makes all the difference. Jesus is building his church. So stay put, fellow saints and sinners; he isn't finished with you yet. He isn't finished with them yet. And he isn't finished with us yet either.

## *About the Author*



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He has also written a number of articles published in *Discipleship Journal* and *Leadership Journal* as well as *The Mars Hill Review*. *The Gospel of Matthew: God With Us*, will be available this fall. The selections in this booklet were adapted from Matt's book.







## *Sermon Series*



July 31

**Matthew 14:13-21**

*Feeding of the 5000*



August 7

**Matthew 14:22-33**

*Jesus walks on water*



August 14

**Matthew 15:21-28**

*Healing outsiders daughter*



August 21

**Matthew 16:13-20**

*Who do you say I am?*



August 28

**Matthew 16:21-27**

*Two rebukes, take up your cross*



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