

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 8:18-27 **“Outside The Comfort Zone”**

July 12, 2015
(5th Sunday After Pentecost)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

IVB: MATTHEW 8:18-27 "OUTSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE"

EIGHT MARKS OF DISCIPLES

3 Miracles (8:1-17) // 3 Disciple Stories (8:18-21, 22-23; 24-27)

1) vv.18-23 THE HIGH COST OF COMMITMENT (Lk.9:57-62 [Q], Mk.4:35 [v.18]).

4:2, Mt. Inserts Disciple Material, Follows 8:1-17, A *Rescue* Miracle

a) v.18 Jesus Takes The Initiative: Gentile Territory.

1. DISCIPLES LEAVE PREJUDICE

18 Now when Jesus saw **great crowds around him**, //8:1, 16, Crowds Challenged, Forces The Unclean Issue
he gave orders to go over to "the other side." Mk. 4:35b, 28:16-20, Kingdom Invasion Of Decapolis: 10 Pagan Cities
Anonymous, Strategic Move Beyond Israel, Never Been There!!

b) vv.19-20 Challenge To Would-Be Disciple: Glorious Uncertainty (Over-eager).

19 And a scribe came up and said to him, //Lk. 9:57-58, Status, Scripture/Torah Scholar: Life Of Study
D.A. "Teacher, D.A. (M), Outsiders Use Teacher In Mt., Positive Portrayal: 13:52, 23:34
I will **follow** you wherever you go." Eager! "I wish to become your disciple" Leads To Golgotha!
Assumes He Can Apply, But Jesus Calls, 4:18-22, 9:9

World's Priorities (Security) Are Reversed, 3-Beat Rhythm (v.20)

20 And Jesus said to him, 2. DISCIPLES ABANDON SECURITY
+ "Foxes (jackals) have holes, 3 Beats, Wandering Charismatic Teacher/Healer
+ and birds of the air have nests; 10:5-14, 1 Enoch 42:1ff., Security
- but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head." //2 Sam. 5:19-20, Thomas 86, Did He Respond?

b') vv.21-22 Challenge To Disciple: Jesus Over All (Under-eager).

21 Another of the disciples said to him, Luke (Call Story), Already A Follower: Issue = Will He Continue
D.A. "LORD, D.A. (2x, v.25)// Lk. 9:61b, 1 Kgs. 19:19-21, Same Day Burial + Ossuary
let me first go and bury my father." 6:33, Tobit 4:3-4. Permission Requested: Delayed Obedience
15:4-6, 26:10, Tobit 1:16-20, 4:3, 6:15; m. Ber 3:1; Jewish War 5.545

But Jesus said to him, Intro //Lk. 9:61a, First Supreme Loyalty, 3. DISCIPLES PUT JESUS FIRST

22 "Follow me, 2 Parts, New Level : No Excused Absences From Following
and leave the dead to bury their own dead." 10:37, 19:29, Offensive: Others Already Dead!
Did He Follow? Prophets Refused: Ezek. 24:15-24, Jer. 16:5-7

a') v.23 Jesus' Takes The Initiative: Departs (//Mk. 4:36).

4. DISCIPLES ARE A MINORITY

23 And when he (Jesus) got into the boat, Ends Unit, Jesus Takes The Lead, Following Story Is About *Discipleship*
his disciples **followed** him. a/a' From Mark, Sail To Gentile Territory, Others (Crowds) Did Not Follow Him

vv.18-23 = Authority Over People; vv.23-27 = Authority Over Nature/Evil

One They Follow Has Authority, New Horizons, Real Storms, *Navis Ecclesiae*

2) vv.24-27 SAILING INTO THE DANGER OF CHAOS (//Mk. 4:35-41, Lk. 8:22-25).

4:2 Concentric, *And behold* Signals New Paragraph

a) v.24 Introduction: Great Storm, Who Is This Jesus Who Sleeps In A Storm?

Lake

24 1 And *behold*, there arose a **great storm** on the **sea** seismos = "earth-shaking" (24:7, 27:51-54, 28:2), Ezek. 38:19
so that the boat was being swamped (lit. "hidden") by the waves; 5. DISCIPLES ARE IN WARFARE

Contrast, Details Trimmed, Mk's *pillow* Is Omitted, v.20b Above

2 but he was asleep. // Illustrates 8:20, Ps. 3:5, 4:8, Peace/ Fear, How Is This? *With Them* (1:23, 28:20)
Is. 51:9-10, Rest As A Divine Prerogative, Symbol Of Divine Rule, 11:28

b) v.25 Disciples' Desperate Appeal To Jesus.

6. DISCIPLES LEARN TO PRAY

25 And they went and woke him, saying, In Mk. It Is A Question
D.A. "Save, LORD; we are perishing." (M), 1:21, 8:21, 14:30, Ps. 44:23, 107:25-30, Call Jesus To Do God's Work!
6:30, 4:31, 16:8, 17:20, Dialog Created By Mt.

b') v.26 Jesus' Critique Of Small Faith.

Jesus Speaks While Laying Down!

26 And he said to them, 2Q (Mk.) → 1Q, Rebuke Precedes Calming In Matthew, Not Mark
D.A. "Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?" 14:31, Diagnostic! 7. DISCIPLES ARE HUMBLER
In Mt. He Corrects Them *Before* He Fixes The Problem

a') v.27-28 Conclusion: Storm Calmed, Who Is This Jesus?

8:26, The Mission Will Not Be Stopped!

27 1 Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the **sea**; Ps. 89:8-10, 107:23-29, Job. 26:11-12, Is. 51:9-10; God Over Chaos
and there was a **great calm**. rebuke = 17:18, Acts As LORD, Power Over Demonic (Mk. 1:25, 9:25, Lk. 4:41)

Nature Miracle, Trust For Safety! 8. DISCIPLES LIVE IN AWE WITH QUESTIONS

28 2 And the men marveled, saying, Exceeds Expectations, 7:28, 9:9, 12:23, 22:33; Who Is This? God With Us!
"What sort of man (how great a man) is this, (M) 1) Christ's Power, 2) Necessity Of Faith, 3) Destiny Of Church
that even winds and sea obey him?" Ex. 14:31, Christology, How Do We Answer? Power Of Nature, Hostile Powers

A Brief Treatment Of Matthew IVB. 8:18-23, 24-27

These two paragraphs (1. 8:18-23, 2. 8:24-27) are the next section in Matthew’s essay on miracles and discipleship (IV. 8:1-9:35) and stand parallel to IVB’ (9:9-17) with common terms: *follow* (8:19, 22, 23 // 9:9a,b), *disciples* (8:21, 23 // 9:10, 11, 14a, b), *teacher* (8:19, 9:11). Matthew edited together three healings from Mk. & Q in 8:1-17; in 8:18-27 he edits material from Mk & Q to offer three instructions on discipleship, two in dialogs (vv.19-20, 21-23), the third in the calming of the storm (vv.24-27). His sources are Mk. 4:35-41 (storm on the sea) and Lk. 9:57-62 (Q) on the demands of discipleship. The direct address *LORD* (vv.21, 25) ties the two paragraphs together, as do the 4:2 chiasms (a-b//b’-a’) with clear inclusions: Jesus’ command (v.19)//Jesus’ action (v.23); *great storm, sea* (v.24)// *sea, great calm* (v.28)

Matthew makes an interesting initial move. He takes Mark’s report of Jesus’ invitation, “Let us go across to the other side” (v.35) and splits it from the report of immediate obedience, “And leaving the crowd, they took him as he was...” (v.36) in order to insert two dialogs concerning the meaning of discipleship in crossing cultural barriers. Jesus has just cured the slave of a Gentile centurion (vv.5-13); here he decides to cross the lake on a mission to the Decapolis. There may have been some who did not mind reaching Gentiles on home turf but did not want to to *go to all the nations* (Mt. 28:16-20), instead, “Let them come to us.” In Mark the disciples follow Jesus without objection, but not here. The first dialog with Jesus (//Lk. 9:57-58) addresses a scholar’s naive enthusiasm, “Teacher, I will follow you *wherever you go*.” He does not know following leads to Golgotha, and Jesus warns there are no guarantees on the way, “Foxes have dens, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has no place to lay his head.” Jesus is a vagabond, as are his followers; all depends on village hospitality, so you may want to dampen the enthusiasm a bit. Whether the man followed through is left open for our response. The second dialog (// Luke 9:59-60) is a classic call story where Jesus initiates, “To another he said, ‘Follow me.’” But in Matthew the man is already a disciple, “And *another of the disciples* said to him” (v.21a). Matthew widens the call beyond initial summons to each new challenge; you must say *Yes* to Jesus over and over. The man’s excuse he must first complete the duties of a son meets a blunt response. “Follow me, and let the dead bury the dead,” which may mean *Let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead*. To use family duties to avoid going to Gentile territory– and risk ritual impurity– is not to follow. How this man responded is also open-ended. Note how *follow* is used three times (vv.19b, 22b, 23b) to tie the unit together; also how the two dialogs at the center (b//b’) are framed by narratives of command (a) and obedience (a’). After the address *Teacher* (v.19b) Jesus teaches about the cost; after the address *LORD* (v.21b) he calls for obedience, so be careful of your address. What you call him he will require of you!

The second thought unit (2. 8:24-27) is introduced by Matthew’s common *And behold*, signaling a new paragraph. A comparison with Mk. 4:35-41 indicates how Matthew abbreviates his source and reorders the narrative flow. The order in Mark is great storm/Jesus sleeps/disciples cry *as a question*, “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?"/rebuke of wind and waves/immediate calm/correction of their fear and absence of faith/concluding Christological question. Matthew has changed the order to great storm/Jesus sleeps/cry of disciples *as a plea*, “Save, LORD, we are perishing!"/rebuke of their fear and little faith/Jesus rebukes wind and waves to bring calm/concluding Christological question. In Matthew Jesus mocks their fear and lack of faith *before* he addresses the storm! Apparently, it is more an issue. The rescue is not so quick as in Mark. He corrects them *during the storm*, not afterwards. He has the right to put us at risk and expose our thin spots! Satan did not want him to cross the lake! Expect resistance.

OUTSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE

“Why are you afraid, O men of little faith.”

What Jesus says to his most courageous followers!

M A T T H E W 8 : 2 6

A single train track runs through Cheraw, South Carolina. Used to be two, the Seaboard and the Coastline, but they were long ago absorbed into conglomerates so one of tracks how now been removed. The blood flow of rail commerce from Cheraw to Florence survives; Cheraw to Camden is gone, a redundant artery surgically removed, just as through the heart of Greenwood.

The line south to Miami and north to New York was more than a freight route and passenger line, it was also a dividing line. It was the boundary between *our kind of people*, meaning white and generally middle class or above, and *other kinds of people*, mainly poor whites and African Americans, or *negroes* as polite, respectable folk said in those days. *Black* was not yet a term of pride and self-definition.

I don't remember the first time I heard the phrase *the other side of the tracks*, but it's part of the geography of my childhood mind. It was one of the ways our world was segmented, and with the rattle of the car over the rising and falling hump of the rail bed you crossed from one world to another on missions to have dresses altered and pants hemmed, or else to pick up or drop off the cook or the yard help. That I don't remember some of their names indicates I was early on absorbing one of the deadly sins of privilege which is to reduce people to functions: the cook, the help, the yard man. That's how it was then— as the older of you remember— and even to say now how it was then is embarrassing, but real social change is agonizingly slow. It takes more than the movement of a committed minority and some adjustments in the law— even big ones. In 2011 when I saw the movie *The Help*, I walked out thinking, “That could have been shot in my home town. It was my childhood world.”

The maps that matter are not drawn on drafting tables by cartographers tracking mountains and rivers, highways and rail lines; the maps that matter are drawn in our

Matthew 8:18-23, 24-27 5

minds with dotted lines between *us* and *them*, *our side* and *the other side of the tracks*. The maps that shape the social landscape are not geographic; they are economic and racial and religious and cultural, and if we do not cross them in faith we cannot follow Jesus Christ far at all, only circle around inside our little worlds. Jesus is God’s big bang leading to an expanding universe of concern. A comfort zone may be a cozy place to furnish, but it is a spiritually deadly place to live. It constricts compassion with its small circle of acquaintances; it suffocates curiosity with its low ceiling of vision, it shrinks this expanding gospel down to my personal needs and inherited prejudices and unexamined assumptions. J.I. Packer was blunt when he wrote, "It needs to be said loud and clear; in the kingdom of God there ain't no comfort zone and never will be."¹ There is— despite what you may have heard— no sweet Jesus, no comfortable Savior, no easy, wide path from here to the kingdom.

A sweet Jesus would never say something so rude as “ leave the dead to bury the dead.” A sweet Jesus would never have publicly mocked twelve terrified followers over howling winds and crashing waves, “Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?” Beware of a Jesus who keeps you in the safety of your comfort zone. As a rule of thumb, the people and places you avoid are a reliable inner map of your comfort zone. Some of us don’t need any more Bible studies; it’s easy to be full of Bible knowledge and nearly empty of Bible living. If Jesus is not rockin’ your world, dismantling comfort zones and creating social anxiety, I ask, Which Jesus are you following? The one we find in four gospels, or one of your own making?

I remember the time I had to go— after my conversion forty three years ago last Sunday- to a gangly poor girl we always mocked at school and ask her forgiveness. It was a crossing over from pride to humility. I wept, and she— with a generous spirit— forgave me. I remember the first time I entered the tunnel of the Fulton Country Jail and heard the door clang shut behind me. It was a crossing over from ministry in the safety zone to service in the danger zone. I remember the first time I held someone’s hand as they died. It was a crossing over from studying theology to being a pastor. I remember the first time I preached in a black church. It was a crossing over to an inclusive gospel of ebony and ivory. I remember going out to start a new church from scratch; it was a crossing over from maintenance to mission. I remember the first time I served communion to an AIDs patient, the first time I baptized a stillborn baby at a hospital bedside, the first time I smuggled money into Kazakhstan for missions and the first time a Russian soldier moved me along with a

¹ "We Can Overcome," *Christianity Today* (10-02-00).

Matthew 8:18-23, 24-27 6

machine gun. I remember the first time I commanded a spirit to leave in the name of Jesus and the first time I talked a suicidal man off the big bridge in Charleston. I remember the first time I did a death notification to a ghetto mom whose son was killed in a North Charleston drug deal. I remember the first hooker whose story I listened to and the time I turned in a church member for murder. Every one was hard and full of fears. But if Jesus was going into those places ahead of me, I wanted to follow. If I have a fear, it's that in my mature years I have become more an observer and commentator rather than a risk taking follower of the living Jesus. I'm glad I Yes when he called me on July 5, 1972; what I did not know then is that the initial Yes must be reaffirmed each time he calls me beyond my current comfort zone. It is not one Yes but many; not just one conversion, but a lifetime of turning. And when I start offering reasons why I should not go with him again, there I am frozen.

I haven't told you of the failures, only successes, and the flops have been many: times I was silent when witness was called for, times I shrunk back, times I was in fear of the price to be paid, times I was nothing but lazy. Down one wall of the gallery of my mind is a wall of fame, and on the opposing side a wall of shame. I've got some really good stories to tell around the Christian camp fire. The danger is in not adding any new ones, of going stale and cautious. I see it happen to pastors all the time. But above the storms of my concerns I see his piercing eyes and hear his penetrating voice, "Pastor Phil, Why are you afraid, O man of little faith?" It is love that mocks and calls us forward. "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." There are barriers this church needs to cross, comfort zones that need to be stretched.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

1) vv.18-23 The Cost Of Discipleship.

The advantage of close study is to notice details, and in verse 18 I see something.² It's more than a bridge from one story to the next. So pay attention to *who* Jesus speaks to and *what* he asks, "Now when Jesus saw *great crowds* around him, he gave orders to go over to *the other side*," and here some spiritual geography is in order.

The Jordan River begins in southern Lebanon on the slopes of Mount Hermon

² On this reading of Matthew's intent, see David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 98ff. On insights from Synoptic comparisons, see Herman Hendrickx, *The Miracle Stories* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1987), 193-199.

and flows north to south. Just inside the north of Israel it forms the Sea of Galilee, the west coast of which is dotted with fishing villages whose names we meet in the gospels: Bethsaida, Capernaum, Magdala. It then flows south again and ends in the Dead Sea for which there is no outlet. To the west the strip of land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean is Jewish territory. Across the river to the east is the Decapolis, a string of ten Gentile cities.³ So when Jesus calls the disciples— and even the crowds— to go over with him to *the other side*, he’s asking them to violate some of their deepest religious convictions. Imagine asking a member of Hezbollah to attend a Jewish synagogue service for worship with no bomb strapped on. Imagine forty years ago asking a Klan member to attend a NAACP luncheon. Imagine asking a Jew to attend a lecture on the practical benefits of fascism. Jesus called them out of their comfort zone for the sake of new reality he represents, even though it’s only across the lake, or as we say, *across the tracks*. Some of the most difficult journeys have nothing to do with distance. While the kingdom of God is first for Jews, it does not stop there. As we saw with the centurion and his servant, it’s for Gentiles as well, those who worship many gods or not god at all. In fact, if you think about the historical purposes of God, all us non-Jews— all us Gentiles— live on the other side of the tracks. For us to get in, someone first had to cross over the tracks to us.

“Yes,” someone may have thought, “Jesus has just healed a Gentile outcast *on our side* of the river Jordan, on sacred turf; now he wants us to go with him over to *the other side*. Let them come over to our side first. Why do we have to go over there? Maybe later. Did not Rabbi Hillel say, ‘He that separates himself from the uncircumcision (i.e. the Gentiles) is as one who separates himself from the grave.’”⁴

Think about the privilege of the crowds. They’ve heard Jesus’ teach, seen kingdom power displayed. The crowds are *around him*, but will they follow him against their prejudices? Will they attend his classes and demonstrations only, or will they be his students, which is what the word *disciple* means, not just a hearer but a doer. Jesus forces the issue. His language is military in tone, “... he *gave orders* to go over to the other side.” Verse 18 is more than a transition; it is a fork in the road. “I have decided to follow Jesus... no turning back, no turning back.” You’ve sung it. Will you do it? Mark No. 1: Disciples follow Jesus beyond present prejudices.

³ Charles R. Page, *Jesus & the Land* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1995), 87-91.

⁴ Mishnah Perharim 8:8. I am aware of the anachronism of this quote but use it to make a point about competing authorities and the repentance Jesus was calling for.

Matthew 8:18-23, 24-27 8

To his credit, the Jewish scholar who approached Jesus in verse 19 offered himself publicly, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” The Holy Spirit illumined his life, but he was what we call an *over-eager convert*, one easily swept up in the emotion of the moment to make promises that are later abandoned. Nothing wrong with emotion, with high moments of vision and commitment, so long as they are accompanied by a reality check, which is what Jesus gave him.

Scribes like this man and Pastor Phil are mainly *inside people*, living with candles burning at night as they sit among scrolls and books. It’s no accident Jesus used imagery of wildlife and the wilderness to challenge a man of learning and letters, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has no place to lay his head. Don’t know where I’ll sleep tonight. Can you handle that? Are you willing for me to become your curriculum and discomfort your companion?” There are physical and emotional demands to discipleship. Over-eager souls who do not examine the costs and are looking for a spiritual ride to Disney World will soon be discouraged. Jesus does not reject the scribe’s offer, just bumps him back with a warning. We don’t know whether the man kept his promise or not. Matthew leaves it open-ended. Mark No. 2: Disciples abandon old ideas of security and success.

Mark No. 3 is that disciples are radically obedient; they do not procrastinate or request release time. No duty was more sacred to a Jewish male than the burial of parents. It was an undisputed way to honor father and mother and among the best of good works.⁵ To shirk this duty made it hard to enter one’s village again, “There’s a man who did not bury his own father; he was off on some silly religious business.”

The nature of the second man’s request— and we note in verse 21 that he was already a *disciple*— is not as clear as first appears. The present challenge is to cross over *to the other side*, to Gentile turf, but for how long? Our friend says he’s willing to go, but only after sacred duties are taken care of. How does a first son explain to a kosher father he’s followed an upstart prophet to serve Gentiles? It is hardly possible the father died that day, since burial was completed by sunset and we find the man with Jesus at the time. More likely is the option he be allowed to remain at home till his father dies, or else- since it was the duty of a first son to gather up the bones at the end of a year and place them in an ossuary box— that the man’s request for a leave of absence is short term, at most a few months. The only duty left is to place the bones in a stone box on the tomb shelf; then he can follow. What could be

⁵ On the background, see Garland, *Matthew*, 99-100.

more reasonable? “Let me please my conscience, my village, my family, then you. It is the most sacred of duties. Let’s find a way to keep everyone happy.”⁶

It is ironic that this hesitating disciple addresses Jesus as *Lord*, then contradicts the meaning of the word with his request, “let me *first* go and bury my father.” You are *Lord*, but you are my *second* priority. See the contradiction? Loyalty to Jesus Christ is not one among others. It is the center around which lesser loyalties must be organized. Family can never be first, neither can country or business or social obligations or anything else. Jesus had *ordered* him as a disciple to cross over to *the other side*; he hesitates. It was time for a kingdom invasion of Gentile territory. Time to learn that the positive holiness of Jesus and his power to heal and cleanse is more powerful than the taboos with which they all lived, and the only way to learn it is to *do it outside their comfort zone*. The noblest excuse is still avoidance.

Jesus was blunt in the extreme, so much so that commentators have worked to find ways to make his words less brutal, but it will not work. In a word from the Spirit, Jesus reissued the call, “Follow me,” and then spoke words that sucked the breath out of all who were listening, “...and leave the dead to bury their own dead.” What an incredible sense of authority, to announce anyone not following him was spiritually dead and that the task of burying the physically dead should be left to them since both are in the same state. If parents or family or social commitments are standing in the way of your following Jesus in some specific way, you have a problem, and to you he says, “Why do you call me *Lord, Lord*, and do not do what I tell you?”⁷ “I can’t come to church on Sundays, Pastor Phil; it’s the only day I have with my family.” Dare I be as blunt as Jesus?

After the illuminating interruptions of the over-eager scribe and the hesitant son, Jesus’ command is carried out in verse 23, “And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him.” You could tell who was a disciple; they were in the boat. The crowd and excuse-makers stood waving on the shore as they pushed off and lifted the sails, then scattered till the gospel show returned to their side of the lake.

John Wesley knew what we have forgotten. The formation of disciples

⁶ On the options, see the discussion of Craig Keener, *A Commentary On The Gospel Of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 275-277.

⁷ Luke 6:46.

happens best in small face-to-face groups where there are tough questions and real accountability.⁸ But we have substituted low expectation church membership for high-demand discipleship.⁹ The church I love and serve, The United Methodist Church, is weakening for two primary reasons, both of which are linked to our name. First we are not *United* but greatly stressed internally because of disagreements over issues that are biblically settled, such as sexual morality and the Great Commission. We have downgraded doctrine and all but forfeited discipline, except perhaps for pastors who misbehave. Ignorance of Jesus and neglect of Scripture are twins. And secondly, because we are no longer all that *Methodist*, if by that we mean that we have a clear understanding of the way of salvation and the *methods* that help people move into a living faith and toward full the sanctification and being filled with love in love in this life. Running people in and out of a worship services is not enough to do the trick, nor is an hour of Sunday School. The crowds heard Jesus teach; only the disciples lived in close enough community to learn obedience. Jesus challenged the crowds, but he worked with disciples up close. It was his method. Mark No. 4: Disciples are a minority because they live in fellowship and accountable community.

2) vv.24-27 Sailing Into Danger.

And behold is the marker Matthew uses to open the next scene, one beloved of artists like Rembrandt who paints himself in the boat as the thirteenth disciple.¹⁰ So violent is the storm Matthew uses the Greek word for *earthquake* (*seismos*) to describe the shaking, “And behold, there arose a great storm, *an earthquake* on the sea so that the boat was being hidden by the waves.” It came out of nowhere. Well, not quite.

⁸ On the recovery of this classic Methodist practice, see Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting* (Wilmore, KY: Seed Bed Publishing, 2014); also Michael Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley’s Class Meeting* (Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 1997).

⁹ On making disciples, see Steve & Lois Rabney, *Side by Side: Disciple-Making For A New Century* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook/ Nav Press, 2000); Greg Ogden, *Transform-ing Discipleship* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2003); Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings On Discipleship* (San Francisco, CA: Harper SanFrancisco, 2006); David Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006).

¹⁰ *Christ in the Storm on the Lake of Galilee*. 1633. Oil on canvas. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA, www.abcgallery.com/R/rembrandt/rembrandt99.

Matthew 8:18-23, 24-27 11

There is a pattern in Scripture, illustrated in both Gospels and Acts, that whenever a new missions frontier is about to be crossed, there is stiff spiritual resistance to be overcome.¹¹ Reaching an unchurched neighbor, starting a new ministry to single mothers, taking the message of Jesus to an unreached people group at home or away, planting a new church, taking a stand against some entrenched social evil— as was earlier done with slavery and child labor, and in our day must be done with convenience abortion and the residues of racism. The kingdom does not advance without resistance and often not without casualties. It's naive to imagine you can do good and not call up resistance from the one who is opposed to the good. At the meeting of a warm and cold front there is a clashing of energies; behind appearances a spiritual battle is being waged. Missions scholars call this a *power encounter*, and it is defined as “a visible, practical demonstration that Jesus Christ is more powerful than the false gods or spirits worshiped or feared by a people group.”¹²

The resistance may at first appear coincidental and natural, but the discerning eye sees beneath the surface. Have you noticed— as I have— that when you seek to do good at the Lord's leading, evil is at hand resisting your resolve and making things more difficult than you imagined? Skies are clear when you strike out, then a fog of confusion descends. To follow Jesus- as these intrepid disciples have- is only to enter the battle. They do not know what's ahead; they enter the ring with an adversary who wishes their death and does not like his treasuries plundered by invaders.

Think of this crossing of the Sea of Galilee as you would the crossing of the English Channel by Allied forces on the dawn of June 6, 1944. This is the invasion of the armies of the kingdom of God led by King Jesus onto pagan territory and the first installment of the Great Commission which continues to this day. They meet spiritual resistance disguised as a storm. Matthew calls it *earth-shaking*, as with his report of earthquakes that accompanied the death and resurrection of Jesus and will return at the end of the age when the very structures of creation are rearranged.¹³ They are in the midst of a cosmic conflict the size and scope of which they do not yet understand; but King Jesus does, and he has orders from above.

¹¹ The exorcisms in Acts are at the beginning of new missionary ventures.

¹² See John Wimber, *Power Evangelism* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1986), Chapter 2, “The Power Encounter,” 15-31.

¹³ 27:54, 28:2, 24:7.

Before the House of Commons that fateful morning, Prime Minister Winston Churchill spoke these words near the end of his address. Picture yourself in an English sitting room listening to the crackle of the wireless. All knew the voice:

“I have also to announce to the House that during the night and the early hours of this morning the first of the series of landings in force upon the European Continent has taken place. In this case the liberating assault fell upon the coast of France. An immense armada of upwards of 4,000 ships, together with several thousand smaller craft, crossed the Channel. Massed airborne landings have been successfully effected behind the enemy lines, and landings on the beaches are proceeding at various points at the present time.... This vast operation is undoubtedly the most complicated and difficult that has ever taken place.... The battle that has now begun will grow constantly in scale and in intensity for many weeks to come, and I shall not attempt to speculate upon its course....”¹⁴

Ten years later, Edward R. Murrow spoke of Churchill’s rhetoric: “He mobilized the English language and sent it into battle to steady his fellow countrymen and hearten those Europeans upon whom the long dark night of tyranny had descended.”¹⁵

As critical as was D-Day in facing down Nazi evil, the forces that crossed to France over the English Channel were not so momentous as an unnoticed fishing boat that left Jewish shores for *the other side* and soon ran into enemy fire. Behind whatever natural phenomena could be measured by seismograph or wind gage, behind this sudden shaking was one Jesus met in his 40-day wilderness test and in the tormented eyes of men and women. We know this because he uses the same word to address the wind and waves as he did the demons, and to the same effect, verse 27: “Then he rose and *rebuked* the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm.” It is offensive to our sense of natural order, but this is how the writers tell the story.¹⁶ This

¹⁴ “D-DAY, 6 June 1944, House of Commons,” in Winston Churchill, *Never Give In! The Best of Winston Churchill’s Speeches* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 362-363.

¹⁵ www.wordspy.com/waw/20000814061405.asp

¹⁶ For a review of the miracle tradition and interpretive options, see M. Eugene Boring, “Excursus: Interpreting The Miracle Stories In Matthew,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VIII* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1995), 241-251.

Matthew 8:18-23, 24-27 13

was more than a freak storm; it was a counter-attack to resist an amphibious landing of kingdom forces on axis territory. Mark No. 5: Disciples are involved in spiritual warfare, most of which is invisible, but at times it becomes visible, even in nature.¹⁷

At the center of the stilling of the storm in verses 25 and 26 is a brief dialog. Jesus sleeps, a sign of God’s peace in which he lives. He said they were going to *the other side*, and go they will, whether on top of the water or under it! They have seen his power on land and are about to find it extends to the waves and wind as well. Their prayer is honest and urgent, “Save, Lord; we are perishing!” and remember that at least four were professional fishermen. This was their back yard, and they call on Jesus to do what only God can do, which is bring order to chaos.

Posture is important. No one stands in a boat heaving up one swell and being washed over by another. The question of Jesus is— oddly enough— spoken lying down, or at most sitting. Only later are we informed *he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea*. This is one cool and collected Savior who speaks to the opposition behind the chaos. According to Matthew, before Jesus deals with the storm with a word of command he makes fun of his friends, “Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?” Why? Because they are about to die. The one they follow has put them on a battlefield with no weapons but him, and here he asks an embarrassing question about his command that they are going over *to the other side*. His best troops, the ones in the boat with him, will always and ever remain *men and women of little faith*. Yes, but even that little faith is deposited in the right place. They knew who to call on! It is precisely in the crises brought on by obedience that disciples learn to pray and remain humble and live in awe, which are marks six, seven, and eight.

Need I tell you that we who intend to remain merely Christian are soon to sail into storms which will threaten to swamp us, drag us to court, and bully our institutions with what was political— and is now— legal correctness, and marginalize us as hate-speakers. There are already passages of the Bible some are scared to read in church. Are you ready for this kind of self-censoring and intimidation? As it becomes less and less acceptable to be Christians who follow Jesus and honor the-teachings-of-Scripture-not-challenged-till recently, we will find many seek a smoother path, a go-with-the-flow Jesus, a customized Savior who only blesses and never judges. The mainline church I have known and loved is on life support and is

¹⁷ For a mature treatment by a noted missions anthropologist, see Charles H. Kraft, *The Evangelical’s Guide To Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015).

waning, and I am both grieved and frightened. The obituary is yet to be written, and the corporation can coast for a while on inherited strength, but its days as a thoughtful, reasoned— an even prophetic— form of Christian faithfulness are fading, and if renewal and revival come, it would be a raising from the dead— of which God is capable, but in history is rare. The normal pattern is for new movements to be raised up, of which Methodism was one nearly three hundred years ago. There are lines, when crossed, that change identity, and some which— if pursued— move you outside the faith by any definition. We recognize this with Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, but we never thought it might be us! Thank God for the Baptists and Catholics who still have spine and whose steeples bear crosses, not weather vanes. They are our teachers in the forgotten discipline of being *in but not of* the world.

We have always seen ourselves as the center of the country, as good American citizens, but no longer. A new circle has been drawn by one man, and we now live much nearer the margins. Welcome to post-Christian America where the pressures will only increase. We must relearn the obedience of standing over against the world as a faithful, courageous, loving and honest minority, willing to take our stand in the courts of the church and in the courts of public opinion.¹⁸ God is going to teach us— after a long, comfortable American respite— how to suffer again. We are to be tested, and like the disciples in the midst of the storm, it will feel as if we are dying.

When you re-define marriage, the most basic and humane building block of a society, and when you make gender irrelevant in one area of public life, it will soon be impossible to keep it in others because of the internal logic of the law to test the next case on the basis of precedent. The most basic categories of human life given in creation— male and female from the hand of God and for each other— as witnessed consistently throughout Scripture— are now legally disregarded because of a single, jurist philosopher. And while Justice Kennedy was the tipping point, I don’t particularly blame him. Supremes are not elected but appointed and confirmed according to the Constitution, supposedly to guard them from politics as an independent judiciary, and that is good, but there is no way to insulate them from the cultural pressures with which we all live. Kennedy read the signs of the times, felt the surge of a coming wave, saw an opportunity for a legacy of progressive judicial courage, and crafted the logic to make it legally plausible despite substantive dissents

¹⁸ For a promising strategy, see Glenn Stanton, *Loving My (LGBT) Neighbors: Being Friends In Grace & Truth* (Chicago, ILL: Moody, 2014).

for which he will long be critiqued. But for one moment he was king, and with his signature changed the course of the nation. What does God do with a nation like ours? What's he's always done. Hang a plumb line in the midst, see who notices, and then visits our moral foolishness back upon our heads, including his church!

In the long view of divine providence I believe we are getting what we asked for and deserve. The freedom of the sexual revolution that led to the freedom of the abortion holocaust is now bearing mature fruit in the cultural and philosophical deconstruction of gender through the courts as instruments of national coercion. Sex as recreation only, with the human results as legally and medically disposable has now led to this: the patent lie— now widely embraced— that gender is fluid and— in fact— no longer matters. We have flipped-off the Creator, shot God the bird, and now made it national policy as a footnote to the Constitution. I tremble; I want to run and hide, but there is nowhere to go, so I will stand and teach and reason and listen as best I can and see who notices, that there may be a remnant amidst the ruins. That the mainline churches, including ours, have gone along for the fifty-year ride with little protest as smiling chaplains, means we are implicated and culpable because we should have known better; that we did not is our sin as a church and an indictment of our clergy and their teachers, including me for the sin of faint protest. The wrath of God is often quiet and unnoticed; it's simply God withdrawing restraints and letting us have our way and experiencing the consequences of our folly. It is a pitiful thing to see once-faithful colleagues sticking a wet finger into the air to see which way the wind is blowing so they can align themselves with emerging trends and the hopes of staying relevant in a career. We should beware of watering down the faith, because if you do it long enough— as we have— there is no wine left, only water.

I hate no one, and I will not be accused of what I am not. I will minister with mercy and truth in equal measure to all sexually broken people— straight and gay, as I do now— and call them to follow Jesus to a new way of life, which is chastity in singleness and fidelity in heterosexual marriage as the only two faithful options for Christ's followers. Let the world go its own crazy, destructive way, but a church that follows it is giving away its identity for the sake of temporary applause. And if complementarity is not definitive— if gender is now out as a criterion— then why a committed pair? Why just two? Why not follow the logic through to three or more of whatever blend— including family members, and you can be sure the Mormons are watching carefully for their moment to overturn a hundred and fifty years of legal discrimination. Watch for ever-more-bizarre variations in family law. If it's all about how I feel instead of God's creation order written in Scripture, validated in human

reproductive biology and witnessed to in natural law and long held tradition, why stop here? If he is a Christian— and that’s not for me to decide— when it comes time for the resurrection of the dead and the assignment of a new bodies for a new world, Bruce Jenner’s will be male, and God will have the last vote on gender confusion and publicity seeking Kardashian style! Some call it a brave new world of freedom and choice; it is not; it’s just the next chapter in an old, old story of human rebellion against the Creator and God’s good designs for us, as our doctrine clearly teaches, “whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually.”¹⁹ We are sailing into a long, ugly storm.

CONCLUSION

Jesus’ final words are that he would be with us always in the process of making disciples, not members of a religious club but risk-taking, accountable followers.²⁰ The official mission statement of the United Methodist Church reads, “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”²¹ Here are eight marks from today’s text:

1. Disciples leave prejudice behind for the sake of mission to new people.
2. Disciples abandon the world’s definitions of security and success.
3. Disciples are obedient, even if it means they can’t go home again.
4. Disciples are always in a minority and not impressed by crowds.
5. Disciples are drawn into spiritual warfare and learn discernment.
6. Disciples learn through crises and desperate prayer that Jesus is faithful.
7. Disciples always feel like men and women of little faith. But even a little trust— when rightly placed in Jesus— is sufficient.
8. Disciples are never done with awe and learning. Disciples follow Jesus, and they do it together.

Are you ready to say Yes to Jesus’ call, or do you need more time to formulate excuses as to why your plans for your future are better than his?

¹⁹ The U.M. Articles of Religion, Article VII, “Of Original Sin,” *BOD 2012*: 65.

²⁰ Matthew 28:16-20.

²¹ *The Book of Discipline*, 2012, 91..
