

“JESUS AMONG THE PEOPLE”

Matthew 4:23-5:3; Matthew 19:1-5, 13-26

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A note about the Matthew 19 reading: Jesus’ words about divorce in the first part of this chapter should probably be understood as critical of a practice that was inequitable and harmful to women.

I imagine it hanging in the room where a family gathers to eat their meals, talk over the latest neighborhood news, maybe do some mending of clothes or tools; where siblings squabble a bit and parents try to teach them manners. I imagine it in a pastor’s study, where sermons are prepared and troubled souls seek counsel, or in a place of business where it might counter the occasional temptation to put profits before ethics. I picture this picture beside the chair of a lonely widow or above the bed of a sick child, a visual promise of Jesus’ presence and compassion.



Those kinds of settings seem like perfect places for this picture that shows Jesus surrounded by a bunch of mostly pretty ordinary-looking people who look like they’ve come right from the activities of their daily lives. Or perhaps Jesus has come into their neighborhood. There’s nothing grand about what we see in this picture, and it just feels like it belongs in – like it was made for – not a cathedral or museum, but the places where people live their lives.

I can image this picture in those places because (although it might look like a drawing) this is a print – always intended to produce multiple copies. It’s by the great Rembrandt van Rijn who is better known for portraits and other oil paintings. It was created about 1648, and an unknown number of prints were made, including some after his death in 1669. It didn’t originally have a title (it was only later that artist’s routinely gave titles to their works) later) but became known

as the “Hundred Guilder Print” - a guilder being the monetary unit of the Netherlands. Now, it’s not clear whether 100 guilders was the original asking price, only that at least one copy of this piece did sell for that amount (which the letter writer who recorded this fact thought was an outrageous price). In Rembrandt’s time, 100 guilders was about five months wages for a laborer, or three months wages for a pastor ... so my imaginings about where these prints might have hung are probably fantasy. Though it wasn’t a price only the extremely wealthy could pay, and though art historians think that most of the early prints probably *didn’t* fetch 100 guilders... still, this wasn’t exactly cheap, mass-produced art accessible to anyone.

I think it might be hard for us, living as we do in an age where images of all kinds are so readily accessible, to appreciate how remarkable a piece of art this is. It might help to know something about how it was made. It’s a drypoint etching, which means that the design is carved or scratched into a metal plate – usually copper - with a sharp tool like a needle (rather than using acid as with regular etching), pushing some of the metal into ridges or indentations to create the picture. When it was done, ink was applied and the image was pressed onto paper to make a print. Try to imagine how challenging that would be to do, especially to create all the realistic details we see here – the areas of light and shadow, the people’s faces and clothing. I think there are 37 or 38 portraits of people in this picture, and they aren’t “generic” people, but individuals with distinct features, gestures, and expressions. There are some animals in here as well – a dog in the front and in the shadows at the right a donkey and a camel. Now think about this: the actual picture, the whole thing, is only about 11 inches by 15 inches. It’s a more amazing work than I knew before I started reading up. Rembrandt was experimenting with some different techniques here to get the results he wanted, pushing into some new artistic territory. Interestingly, he didn’t sign this piece with his name, which was unusual for him; he was generally a pretty avid promoter of his own work and artistic reputation. In fact, one story about the “Hundred Guilder Print” name is that the artist bought back one of the copies for that high price, as a strategy for increasing the value (something he was known to do on occasion, possibly because for various reasons he often found himself in financial and legal difficulties). However one art historian wrote that there was no need for him to sign it, because it could only have been a Rembrandt; no other artist was doing work like this.

I wonder though. Rembrandt was a complicated person: He was a brilliant and hardworking artist. He was also someone whose reputation suffered in his community because of relationships he had with a couple of women after the death of his wife and because living beyond his means led him into debt and lawsuits. But Rembrandt’s work also reveals a deep and sensitive religious side; about a third of his work is of Biblical subjects, and though it’s not sentimental, much of it has a devotional quality. He sometimes painted himself into a Biblical scene; most notably, he’s at the foot of Jesus’ cross in a couple of crucifixion paintings. So I wonder this work might have been a kind of exercise in faith; maybe he chose not to emphasize his own name but rather Jesus at the center of the picture. I don’t know; but there’s no doubt that Jesus *is* the focal point – our eyes are drawn to him.

He’s surrounded by a gentle light, which seems to somehow emanate from his person. We look and we know that the artist is showing us divine presence and holiness. Nevertheless, this is not

Jesus as judge or king or death-conquering hero. Rembrandt shows us a very earthly, human, even humble Jesus. There's an openness and compassion about him; it's his *humanity* that shines.

And around him are people who are drawn to him. They are men, women, children. Some are well-dressed and others are poor. Many look like folks who work with their hands. Some are healthy and well, and there are some obviously ill or infirm. There is one person of color, evidence that the Netherlands of Rembrandt's day was a place of some diversity and a center of global trade... and perhaps also the artist's way of saying that the compassion of Jesus reaches out to welcome all.

You can look at this picture as I did and see a visual meditation on the nature Jesus' ministry. I think that is in fact at least part of what the artist intended. Others must have thought so, because the work has been referred to as "Christ Healing the Sick," or "Christ Preaching." But it is actually more specifically a meditation on Matthew 19.



In back, at the left, we see the Pharisees who came to argue with Jesus.

They're talking among themselves, perhaps expressing their outrage at what they think are his radical teachings or planning their next confrontation. I suppose some could even be wondering if there might be some truth in what Jesus has to say.

Over to the right are the sick and injured people referred to in the beginning of the chapter, being brought to Jesus by friends or loved ones.



We see a little child who looks like he has a lot of trouble sitting still,

And, right in front of Jesus, a woman looking very determined to get Jesus to bless the baby she holds.

At Jesus right, one of his disciples puts out a hand as if to push her away, but you can tell she isn't going to move. And Jesus' hand reaches out toward her and her child.



On her left you can see the rich young man, his hand over his face, evidently dismayed at what Jesus has said to him about eternal life and what he ought to do with his riches. And across from him, in the shadow but perhaps in his line of sight,

we can just see a camel

... a reference to Jesus' words: "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."



I like this combining of several stories because it's different from the way we usually approach the gospels – one story at time, often disconnected from its context.

That works for preaching but can cause us to forget that each story is part of a larger whole. Rembrandt connects those stories into a larger picture of Jesus' ministry.



I also like the way this picture is both earthy and realistic but also a little bit mystical, as if it's all happening at the same time, as if Jesus is simultaneously there for all these different people. It suggests that every encounter with Jesus – the Pharisees', the children's, the disciples, the sick, the rich man's, ... ours – takes place in what someone has called the "eternal now." Rembrandt is not *illustrating* the gospel of Matthew; he's not depicting Jesus' ministry as a historical event – he's envisioning the encounter with Jesus that's also possible for him and for anybody who contemplates his picture.

We come like those people in the picture - "all sorts and conditions of people," to paraphrase a traditional intercessory prayer. They're a diverse crowd, as we've already noted. But their external differences are just part of it: they come with challenge and confrontation, skepticism, curiosity, brokenness and disappointment, hope, desperation, eagerness, faith. They come seeking healing, blessings, answers... perhaps community, perhaps even the presence of God.

Rembrandt's neighbors would have recognized them – literally, because he used people he knew as models. But we recognize them too, and identify with them: A mother come to insist on a blessing for her child – maybe because she is worried about her future. The family member desperately hoping that Jesus can help a loved one to heal. Folks for whom pain is a constant reality. People who are tired from hard and not-always-rewarding work. Somebody far from home who might feel alienated, lonely, excluded. Someone struggling to find meaning in life. Disciples who really want to follow Jesus and be helpful in his ministry... but often don't know the right thing to do. Children who just want to be part of whatever is happening. People who are drawn to Jesus, for reasons they can't even articulate.

We see them here all gathered in the presence of Jesus. Does this picture suggest that the light, grace, compassion of Christ somehow embraces all – even the antagonists, even the conflicted, even those just focused on getting what they need, even all whose lives are as messy and imperfect as the artist's? Or as our own? It seems impossible. As impossible as a camel going through a needle's eye. But as Jesus said to Peter, "with God, all things are possible." Thanks be to God. Amen.