July 12, 2015

“Greater Than We Think”

Matthew 4:23-25

**FCF**: The danger of a lifeless Christianity

**PROPOSITION**: (magnet) Jesus’ ministry is greater than we are accustomed to thinking.

(anchor) We need to see this and let it stretch us.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Some of you know I’m a Civil War buff – meaning I grew up walking VA battlefields and have read a few books. So I’ve been asked of late, “*What do you think of the debate over the Confederate flag?*” My answer is somewhat nuanced. I don’t really see it as addressing the real issues underlying the Charleston massacre. And the fact is that, for many in the 19th c. South, if you go back and read the sources, the war really was more about states’ rights than slavery.

That said, in the years since, the way that flag has been used has been abusive. And, for many, it is offensive, a barrier to racial reconciliation. And, that being the case, it may be time to take it down. It may be, for the sake of love, some things should only be displayed in a museum.

But not everything. Not everything should only be displayed in a museum. And I say that because there are some who say that is the place for Christianity, that it a relic from the past and has no place in the public square. What do we say to that? How should we respond?

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 4:23-25

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

I hate to burst the bubble of my fellow science fiction fans but I have some news. If the *Enterprise* really was to boldly go seeking new life and new civilizations, it would be a boring mission. Because there’s no one out there. The fine tuning required for life is too great to expect it. Years ago, Carl Sagan said there were but two things needed for life and so we should find it on roughly one of every 10,000 planets. That doesn’t sound like much but, given the number of planets, there was hope. But in recent years, scientists have raised that number to 150 things. Things to do with the sun, the moon, the other bodies in our solar system, and the earth itself. Which, after you do the math, means that the odds of there being any planet able to support life are at one in ten to the 50th power. That’s a one followed by 50 zeroes. It’s just not likely. Put another way, this is a privileged planet. We are living on and surrounded by testimony to design. And, hence, evidence of a designer. It’s right around us all the time. And we take it for granted.

I bring this up because of how we often read these accounts of Jesus’ earthly ministry. I don’t know that it stuns us as it should. Perhaps we’ve been over-exposed. Perhaps we struggle to put ourselves there. Let me try and help. Galilee is a mountainous area in northern Palestine. In the 1st century, its population was about 300,000, spread out in around 200 villages and towns. Keep in mind Jesus was not staying in one place but going to those places. Imagine the physical drain. Imagine repeating that message and seeing the same struggles and needs day after day.

It might have felt mundane. Except for this (READ Matthew 4:23). Can you imagine? Jesus’ ministry is greater than we are used to thinking. We need to see this and let it stretch us. How is it greater? Two things. The breadth of His concern. And the extent of His power.

1. **THE BREADTH OF JESUS’ CONCERN**

So, first, the breadth of Jesus’ concern. How far does that reach? How far does it go? And how does that stretch the boundaries of our expectations of what it means to follow Christ?

1. *Embracing All Peoples*

Our text is clear that His concern embraces all peoples.

1. Throughout all Galilee

(READ Matthew 4:23) Note what Matthew is saying. No matter the size, no matter the status, whether it was wealthy and cultured or isolated and remote, Jesus went there. He cared for them.

1. And beyond

He went through all Galilee. The result? (READ Matthew 4:24-25) Galilee was mostly Jewish with trade routes that brought Gentiles through certain areas. So the word spread. His reputation grew. So then came people from Syria, a Gentile region north of Galilee. And came people from the Decapolis, ten Roman Gentile cities to the south and east. And Jesus cared for them.

Do you see? The kingdom, the reign of God, was coming to all peoples.

1. *Including All Needs*

Such is the breadth of Jesus’ concern, embracing all peoples. And including all needs.

1. The ministry of word

There are two phases of ministry here. First, the ministry of the word. He was teaching in the synagogues, expounding and explaining. And proclaiming, preaching the gospel of the kingdom. Heralding, “*Here ye, Here ye! The King has come! Death to the tyrant! Long live the king!*”

1. The ministry of deeds

But with the ministry of the word was the ministry of works, of deeds. Every kind of disease, every kind of affliction was healed. There was no concern for pre-existing conditions, meeting your deductible, whether the doctor was in the network. Jesus is Lord over all – the physical, the emotional, the spiritual. Nothing can have such a grip upon you that Christ cannot set you free.

Such is the breadth of Jesus’ concern – embracing all peoples, including all needs.

*Application:*

Such is the breadth of Jesus’ concern. And it should stretch the breadth of our own. Think with me. To all peoples – no one excluded, passed over, or ignored. Gender, age, race, culture, background, baggage, how much you know, or how much you make – none of that matters. This is the lens through which we must see others and ourselves. Jesus saves sinners.

To all peoples. And to all needs. The Fall brought alienation, separation, from God, from self, from one another, and from nature. It was like a rock being dropped in a pond, the ripples moving out in concentric circles. The coming of the kingdom means all that is to be healed. The ministry of the kingdom has to then reach into every place the Fall has touched. Jesus is a holistic savior with a holistic church, engaging as far as the curse is found.

Jesus’ ministry is greater than we are used to thinking. We need to let this stretch us.

1. **THE EXTENT OF JESUS’ POWER**

Which takes us to the second point – the extent of His power. How does that stretch the boundaries of our assumptions about life in this world? Here we need to talk about miracles.

1. *The Definition of a Miracle*

What is a miracle? How can we define it? Let me give you three options.

1. Common

First, there are common everyday but impressive events. Titans fans might think of “The Music City Miracle.” The rest of us might think of the birth of a baby. Such fills you with wonder.

1. Uncommon

The second option would be uncommon events. The timing of things here, the way needs are met, can be startling and impressive. The laws of nature are not broken but we still can’t explain it. Prayers seem to have been answered and God’s hand seems to have been at work.

*Illustration:*

Here’s an example. In the fall of 1992, I was a student at Covenant Seminary. We had just gotten word we’d lost our free housing and had to find an apartment immediately. The best option for us needed a deposit with a month’s rent. We didn’t have it. But in the mail, the day before the money was due, came a check for the exact amount needed from friends back in VA. We hadn’t told anyone about the situation. And, even if we had, they would have had to have sent the check days before we even knew of the need we were going to have. Just coincidence?

1. Supernatural

That’s the second option – uncommon and startling but without the breaking of any laws of nature. Then there’s the third option, the kind we read of here. These are supernatural events where God is intervening and intruding into the normal workings of His creation. For example, in the Old Testament, we have the exodus. In the New Testament, we have the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus. And then then things we see here and in the rest of the Gospels and Acts. These are “signs and wonders” for which there is really no reasonable natural explanation.

1. *The Purpose of Miracles*

So what is the purpose of such miracles? What does God have in mind? Three things.

1. To accredit His messenger

First, to accredit His messenger. Through the miracle, God is showing this person is from Him.

1. A demonstration of God’s nature

Second, to demonstrate His nature. Through it, we see God’s compassion, justice, and power.

1. The kingdom breaking in

And, third, miracles are times when the kingdom breaks in. That is, not so much a violation of nature but a restoration of it. Not just proof of Jesus’ divinity but a foretaste of what’s to come.

1. *The Possibility of Miracles*

But all that begs a question. Can we believe this? Are such things even possible?

1. The claim

Here’s the claim that’s made. “*The Bible can’t be trusted because it records miracles. And we know miracles aren’t real because science has disproved them*.” But has it? Has it really?

1. The response

What’s the role of science? It’s an important one. To test for natural causes and to explain them. But that’s it. Science isn’t equipped to speak to other causes. That’s beyond its pay grade. It’s not in the job description. Science can’t prove that another cause does or doesn’t exist.

1. The problem

Too often such scientists are letting their assumptions drive their conclusions. They assume we live in a closed system – like a great big room – that consists of merely natural cause and effect. And that’s it. Nothing else is allowed from outside the room. Well, what if there was someone outside the room? Someone who built the room and decided to intervene? Science can’t prove that one way or another. And so to say it can’t happen is actually a statement of faith.

*Illustration:*

Here’s an analogy from Alvin Plantinga. Imagine a drunk looking for his car keys at night under a street light. It’s the only place on the street he can see so it’s the only place he’s looking. Which is fine. But he can’t then say that’s the only place the keys can be. It’s just the only place he can see. Here’s the thing. When scientists make these sweeping claims about what science has proven, they are like the drunk, insisting if it’s not there, it’s not anywhere.

The point being we need to let the extent of Jesus’ power stretch our assumptions.

*Application:*

Meaning that we need to be aware of our assumptions. Maybe you’re here this morning and you’re wrestling with whether all this is even true. Be aware of the assumptions you bring to the table. And then weigh the evidence. Think of it this way. Good science is pointing more and more to the concept of intelligent design. And, hence, a designer, one who made all things of nothing. Is it really so hard to then believe such a being could heal? Or even raise the dead?

But perhaps you’re here this morning and you have no problems with the idea of miracles. Then live out of that. God is the same today as then. Live out of that. May that make you willing to hope. May it give you courage to act. And may it fill you with boldness to pray.

Jesus’ ministry is greater than we are used to thinking. We need to let this stretch us.

**CONCLUSION:**

To the extent we are willing to reckon and wrestle with the breadth of Jesus’ concern and the extent of His power, it will have an effect on us. Much as it did on the early church. Think with me here. Historical facts can be stubborn things. What was it that compelled them to plant churches, and to send missionaries to places where they didn’t know how they’d be received and also to the places they did? What enabled them to withstand the pressures – Roman persecution for sedition and Jewish accusations of blasphemy? What drove them to engage the culture of the day – going to the marketplaces, the centers of power and influence, the halls of academia and the arts – and to identify, expose, and challenge the idols? What was the fuel that caused them to set the world on fire? What was the force that caused them to turn the world on its head?

Again, historical facts can be stubborn things. What was behind all this? What’s the explanation? Those men and women – ordinary people just like us – were emboldened by this message. Emboldened by this message and empowered by God’s Spirit. They knew the kingdom of heaven had come. And they were sure of the presence of the King. That’s what they had grasped. And had gripped them. May it be so with us in our day. May the reality of Jesus and the abiding greatness of His ministry shape and stretch our expectations and assumptions.

**PROPOSITION**: (magnet) Jesus’ ministry is greater than we are accustomed to thinking.

(anchor) We need to see this and let it stretch us.