

Chapter 3

Part One: Matthew as one of three and as unique

The Pericope

Pericope [Latin L. (Jerome) section of a book,

- a. Gr. a section, f. peri= around + kope = cutting, to cut around.]
A short passage, section, or paragraph in a writing.
- b. Eccl.
A portion of Scripture appointed for reading in public worship.
Oxford English Dictionary (Unabridged)

Pericope is a Greek word meaning “to cut around”. In practice, pericope means a section of scripture that stands alone; a pericope is a reading. An example of a pericope is Mark 11.27-32.

Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?” Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.” They argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But shall we say, ‘Of human origin?’” —they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

We read this pericope once every three years in churches that follow the Revised Common Lectionary. In a church bulletin this pericope would be listed, most likely, as “the second lesson” or “the Gospel Lesson” or “The New Testament Lesson.”

We read it alone. In a sense we cut it out of the Gospel of Mark. We hear it as something in and of itself. It is “appointed for reading in public worship.”

This pericope can be seen as a story. There is a beginning, a middle, and an end. But not all pericopes are stories. This can be seen as a teaching of Jesus. But not all pericopes contain the words of Jesus or even his actions. It could be seen as part of a larger narrative, or development of a plot like a scene in a play. Yet, such is not necessarily the case of a pericope.

What makes this a pericope is the tradition of being read alone in worship. We hear it in worship. From this reading which is cut out and stands alone you can and should build a sermon.

There are 91 pericopes, or readings, in Mark. The one offered above is the sixtieth.

In order to hear the gospel and find the power to live what is offered, I believe it is tantamount to understand the pericopes. We must see the gospel as built on pericopes and then understand how and why the pericopes were put together the way they were.

For instance, before we consider what makes Matthew unique, we must consider what makes him a synoptic gospel. Of the 91 pericopes in Mark, Matthew will use 88 of them in his gospel. In all there are 151 pericopes or readings in Matthew. To understand and hear what is in the Gospel of Matthew we need to see the pieces he used to compose his gospel. What did he bring from Mark; what parts were shared with Luke; and what parts are unique to his work?

A Few Steps Back

A pericope is an independent piece or building block from which the evangelists built their gospels. Early on we discussed the way the gospel was composed. Our working theory is that the gospels were an intentional description of the life and teachings of Jesus. Each of the synoptic gospels is a shared and a unique attempt. Each of the three synoptic gospels has a number of pieces, or pericopes, but where and how did they get these pieces?

With Matthew we can say he got more than half of his gospel from Mark. 88 of the 91 pieces of Mark are in Matthew. Mark is, in essence, within Matthew. But what about the other 63?

Before we proceed it would be right to state our working theory once again.

After Jesus died his disciples became apostles. A church was born from his death. The apostles preached, taught, planted churches, traveled, and were martyred until the year 65 C.E. This is the first generation of the church.

The greatest insights we have of this first generation are found in the letters of Paul. In his letters we find a couple of very consistent themes: the life of Jesus was being put aside for the death and resurrection of Jesus; the church was divided into very hostile camps; and, the teachings about Jesus were becoming very cosmic.

Into this resurrected, divided and cosmic environment, three gospels were written that were about the life of Jesus and his very earthly ministry. Moreover, the gospels promote a consistent message of humility, failure, and brokenness in the disciples who would become apostles.

Borrowing from the legend recorded by Eusebius we conjecture that the first gospel was composed by Mark, who was a protégé of Peter. Mark ordered the preaching of Peter that was offered in Rome.

From this theory we can begin to draw a few preliminary conclusions. First, the gospel that Mark recorded was not a series of sermons; the pericopes he used to order his gospel were the place of sermons. The gospel was born of preaching, but the pieces of Mark were not sermons per se. The 91 pericopes of Mark can be considered 91 places to preach.

Second, the 91 places of preaching of Mark grew to over 150 in Matthew and roughly the same amount in Luke. This growth, though, kept to same story, the same account of Jesus' ministry and suffering. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record Jesus teaching and preaching and performing miracles in Galilee and then walking to Judea where he suffered and died.

Thirdly, and this is what we will explore shortly, the pericopes of each gospel are connected to each other. They stand alone. They are cut out. But one flows into the next. Moreover there is a sequence and a sense of narrative. One rung on a ladder can lead you to another, but the rung is the rung.

In order to see and understand Matthew we need to understand what he did with the order of Mark, what he added, and, only then can we truly appreciate what makes Matthew a place to find Jesus.

Reading the Bible is Frustrating

In 25 years of ministry in Presbyterian churches I can tell you that the average parishioner feels guilty about how little he or she reads the bible. We are "people of the book" yet we do not read the book. It would be as if we were known as a family of fishermen, but we never went fishing.

Presbyterians are bright people. Many of them hold advanced degrees. They are people who tend to read a great deal. Yet, so often, I find these very bright people who read a great deal baffled by the experience of trying to read the Bible. Why is it so frustrating? This is what I read in their eyes.

What if I were to tell you that the Bible is not for reading? It is a book, yes; so it is to be read. True. But the Bible, especially the gospels, is not for reading as a novel is for reading. The gospels are to be read and preached, not just read.

What if I were to tell you that each pericope in the gospel of Matthew was a moment to stop for a week? That would be a terrible way to read the gospel.

Here are three pericopes of Matthew:

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Each pericope above stands alone. Each is a teaching of Jesus. Matthew places them one after the other in his gospel. (Luke will include these three, but neither together or in this order.)

In the second part of this chapter we will explore each of these and their place in the Sermon on the Mount. Here though just consider that each one should be read alone; each one should be heard in essence a week apart.

If we were to read the Gospel of Matthew as it was ordered for preaching it would take us more than three years to read it. If we were to sit down and read Matthew it shouldn't take more than three hours. Yet, to “read” it as pericopes that stand alone it should take more than three years. That is if we stop reading for a week after each pericope.

Reading the gospel of Mark has value. I am not suggesting you not read it. The gospel of Matthew has great value; read it by all means. But don't blame yourself if after reading you think, well, that is odd. The gospels were simply neither composed nor conceived as a book you find in a bedside night table in a hotel. Nothing against the Gideons, but this was not Luke's intent when he told Theophilus, I want “to write you an orderly account.” Indeed, his gospel, more than any, is only perceived by its pericopes read in order week after week.

The Revised Common Lectionary is Little Help

On any given Sunday morning in a Presbyterian church you will hear three, maybe four pericopes. You will hear a portion of a psalm in the call to worship; an Old Testament lesson and a New Testament lesson. There can be more than this, but usually you will hear three.

Most people don't ask why we do this or why these passages were selected. In order to have ears to hear the gospels we need to understand how and why we are reading Matthew, Mark and Luke. We need to understand their order, what they borrowed, what they brought, what

they shared. Moreover, I contend we need to remove the order of Revised Common Lectionary. To make this point I need to make a foray into the Roman Catholic Church.

I have attended mass in Roman Catholic Churches since I was three-years-old. Not every week mind you, but enough to get the gist. My first religious vision came to me as a boy of four in St. Rose of Lima Church in Chula Vista, California. I distinctly remember my grandmother knelling; I can still see the quality of light in the late afternoon on the Saturday; and, I remember being told to wait in my seat as she and my grandfather walked to the front of the church leaving me alone in the blonde wooden pew.

From this first vision until today I hold one thing to be true of the mass: it is about the eucharist. There are prayers; there are hymns poorly sung; there is an offering or two. Much to my surprise when I came of age: there also is a sermon that is judged purely by its brevity. This is to say there are other things than the eucharist in the mass, but only the eucharist really matters. Or to put it in Roman Catholic terms: it is the eucharist alone that counts.

In the 1960s as part of Vatican II, there was a call to revise the readings that were offered in the mass, the lectionary of the church. Understanding the focus of the mass, the new lectionary was devised with one, sole purpose: to prepare the congregant to receive the host in the eucharist. Let me unpack that.

A group of scholars sat down with the Bible and chose pericopes, the pieces of the Bible to be read each week. These choices were not encyclopedic (the chosen reading were not meant to represent the Bible as a whole). The choices were not meant to embody the particular theme of each gospel or section of prophets per se. The readings were chosen with one purpose: to prepare the congregant to receive the host in the mass.

With this goal, four readings were chosen for each week and Holy Day. These choices are read for three years and then repeated. Again and again for the last 50 years the readings of the "Revised Lectionary" has been read in the Mass of the Roman Catholic Church.

Each week the homily of the priest is to reflect these pericopes. The intent of the order (this pericope from Matthew 5 this week, this pericope from Luke 8 this week) is not meant to tell a story or build an awareness of the gospel writer's intended order. The intent of the order of the revised lectionary of the Roman Catholic church was to prepare the heart of the parishioner so to receive the host. The lectionary was a communion aid.

Back to the Presbyterian Church

In the late 1960s the mainline churches in America sought to build a greater sense of collegiality; they wanted to be ecumenical. At this time there were dreams of "one world church." With the hope of hastening this dream the revised lectionary of the Roman Catholic Church was adopted by Protestants. The idea was simple, we cannot yet gather to the table, but we can gather to the book. So for the last 50 years Protestants and Roman Catholics have been reading the same pericopes each Sunday.

I cannot with any degree of certainty tell you what impact the revised lectionary had on the Roman Catholic Church. But I can tell you it has neither fostered ecumenical relationships nor been an aid to our Protestant tradition of worship. The intent of reading scripture in a Presbyterian worship service is not to prepare the heart for the host. **The intent is to gain clarity and power so to live the truth of the gospel.**

Why is this important and what does it have to do with reading the Gospel of Matthew?

The importance is this: the order is all wrong. The order in which we are reading the gospels for preaching has nothing to do with the intent of the gospel writer. This is not to say the gospel is not preached. Each pericope in the gospel of Matthew has the power and opportunity for us to hear the gospel. Each piece is to read alone. Yet, each piece is also to be read, heard, and understood in order. There is power in the order.

For us to hear Matthew as the same and then also as unique from Mark and Luke we need to see the pieces he chose, the pericopes he ordered. Only then can we appreciate the way Matthew includes Mark, but then changes his themes. Only then can we encounter the depth of the gospels.

The Shape of Matthew: the Rabbi and the Proof

There are two parts to the gospel of Matthew. There is the sermon and there are the examples. Scholars have tried to describe this as a hub and spokes to a wheel. The hub is the sermon (chapters 5-7) and the spokes are chapters 3-4 and 8-28.

This metaphor and theory is based upon the tradition that a rabbi's teachings were only valuable if he could live them. In other words, talk is cheap. If what you say is true, show us by your example. Matthew, then, is long collection of teachings (the sermon) and long description of how and where Jesus lived these teachings (ministry in Galilee and suffering in Judea).

There are two significant outliers to the metaphor of the hub and the spokes: the infancy narrative and the parables. Each of these will be considered in separate chapters, but for now suffice it to say that while they are important parts of the gospels of Matthew and Luke, they are best seen in their own right. The stories of Joseph (Matthew) and the stories of Mary (Luke) have a deep connection to themes we will explore below, but they should be seen as additions to the order of Galilee and Judea which bind the synoptics together. Additionally, the parables are consistent with the sayings of Jesus as well as the answers he offered in controversies, but parables have a unique literary structure that is other than the "proof of the rabbi" (Matthew) or the one who walks with the Samaritan (Luke).

The Rabbi Invites You to Sit Down

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak and taught them.

Matthew 5.1

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Luke 6.17-19

Although, the difference seems subtle, this is the key to understanding the difference of Matthew and Luke. In Matthew Jesus climbs a mountain, sits down, and then bids his disciples to sit down. In Luke, “he came down to them and stood on a level place.”

In the next chapter we will explore what this “standing” and “level place” mean for Luke. For now consider the ancient tradition of the Greek sage is one who walks and talks with his pupils as contrasted with the ancient image of the rabbi whose students sit at his feet. One is not better than the other. Moreover they are both modes of teaching. Yet, their difference speaks volumes.

Matthew’s Jesus is a Jewish teacher offering midrash and koan; he is a teacher of the Jewish tradition. Perhaps the best way to embody this truth is to consider this unique teaching Matthew placed in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

From this teaching we can gain two key insights into Matthew and what makes him unique. The first is that Jesus is teaching “the law”. His teaching is not a verdict against Judaism or a rejection of the Hebrew Scriptures: his teachings are a fulfilling of them. This will prove key in the pericopes that follow the one above. In the next six teachings Jesus will begin by saying, “you have heard . . . but I say to you.” His teachings then complete what was offered without rejecting what came before.

Next, if Jesus is a rabbi, then this teaching must be lived out in his life. To take his words as true there must be proof. The gospel of Matthew offers this proof in a unique way. While other gospels speak of Jesus fulfilling scripture, only Matthew offers this in specific and

numerous ways. Below you will find the twelve “proofs” of Matthew. Here Jesus is either claiming his deeds fulfill “what was said” or the evangelist is making the claim.

Matthew 1.22-24

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

Matthew 2.14-18

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. **This was to fulfill** what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. **Then was fulfilled** what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

Matthew 3.13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “**Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.**” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Matthew 4.12-16

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, **so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:** “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles — the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

Matthew 8.14-17

When Jesus entered Peter’s house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; he touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him. That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick. **This was to fulfill** what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.”

Matthew 12.14-20

But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him. When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them, and he ordered them not to make him known. **This was to fulfill** what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,

my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory.

Matthew 13.13-16

The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' **With them indeed is fulfilled** the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn — and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.

Matthew 13.34-35

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. **This was to fulfill** what had been spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."

Matthew 21.1-5

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." **This took place to fulfill** what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Matthew 26

Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?" At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of **the prophets may be fulfilled.**" Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Matthew 27.3-10

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money." After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. **Then was fulfilled** what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the

people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."

Mark will speak of fullness as will Luke. Yet, when they do, they speak of the fulness of time or the fulfillment of the kingdom. They will say "scriptures" are fulfilled. Yet, only the instance where Mark has a specific fulfillment is in the Palm Sunday pericope. This becomes significant when compared to the dozen in Matthew. At the very end of his gospel, Luke will describe the resurrected Jesus speaking to two disciples and he says this, "then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in the scriptures" (Luke 24.27). It is almost a nod to Matthew's theme.

Why would Matthew offer such a theme?

If we go back to our working theory about the composition of the gospels (they were written by the second generation of the church in light of the cosmic Jesus and bitter divisions), then the theme of fulfillment can suggest a motive. If Jesus is from the beginning, then he should be in the prophecies all along. If Jesus is Lord of all, born of the messianic promise, then his Lordship begins with Abraham (Matthew 1.1). If the church is both Jewish and Gentile, then the Hebrew Scriptures need to be considered.

Matthew's use of the word "fulfillment" conveys his response to the needs just offered. Jesus is in the beginning and is a fulfillment of an eternal promise. Jesus is born of Abraham, but he is also the fulfillment of the genealogy. The Jews and Gentiles are together in the church, and the Hebrew Scripture is included as a source of fulfillment not dead weight to be discarded.

The idea of being the fullness of something already, the culmination of something long awaited, is a key component to Matthew. Think of this in contrast to Mark and his immediacy. Everything was happening right now. Things were changing at once. Matthew would omit nearly two-thirds of Mark's "immediate" descriptions while keeping the story Mark told. This is important because Matthew kept the story but changed the theme. For Matthew, the gospel was happening, not so much as a lion attacking, but as a human being living for generations.

The Theme of Patience

The concept of fulfillment and continuity would also be developed in another key theme of Matthew: Patience. Three pericopes capture this more than the rest: the parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat, the Reproving of the One who Sinned, and the Number of Forgiveness. Read each below and look for the theme of patience.

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the

householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

All three of these are unique to Matthew. The sensibility of each is found throughout all the gospels. Forgiveness is the power of life lived following Jesus. There is a complexity to life that demands humbleness. Yet, in these three unique Matthean pericopes we have more than a sensibility. There are very concrete directions.

Leave the weeds.

Go and talk; go and talk some more; go and talk again. Only then, consider exclusion.

And the most extreme: forgive seventy-seven times.

The gospel of Matthew is a second generational response to the cosmic Jesus and the divisions of the church. His gospel depicts Jesus as a teacher who is fulling a very earthly design and lived experience; his gospel begs the reader to resist the temptation to cast people aside. These are the themes that distinguish Matthew from Mark and Luke. Yet, the greatest distinction is what we will now consider: The Sermon on the Mount.