

The Kingdom of God

Psalm 105:3-4 *Seek the Lord and his strength;
seek God's presence continually.*

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 *Jesus' parables of the kingdom of heaven..*

The center of Jesus' life and teachings was the kingdom of God. As soon as he was baptized, he began a ministry of proclaiming the dawn of God's reign [Matt. 4:17; Mk. 1:14-15; in Lk. 4, Jesus announces God's reign in terms of Isaiah's prophecy]. Jesus did not point to himself but to God and God's kingdom. He saw God's kingdom everywhere. In the birds of the air and the flowers of the field which could teach us about God's kingdom if we looked closely and deeply. The kingdom of God could be found by knowing and honoring children. They are closer to the kingdom; they can be our teachers and lead us into the kingdom. Jesus even saw the kingdom within us. He did not want to start a religious movement, much less a new religion, with himself at the head of it. Instead he called people to the kind of repentance, the kind of change that enabled them to live in new ways. Jesus wanted people to encounter, to discover, and to enter this new way of life called the kingdom, or reign, of God.

What is the kingdom of God? It is never really defined in a way that we can grasp it or build it. Trying to build God's kingdom is dangerous business. It is too easy to end up building our own kingdom's, not God's. On the other hand, the kingdom of God has a definite shape. It is the way God made us to live. It is the deepest truth about life. It is how God made and means the world to work--in peace, justice, compassion, and relationships of love not violence. The kingdom of God is not idealism; it is the true nature of reality. And Jesus calls us to enter it now, to discover it in our own lives, and to live our lives according to its nature and shape.

Many of Jesus' parables are about the kingdom of God, or as Matthew calls it, the kingdom of heaven. The ones for this morning are very brief, and I want to group them for our reflection.

The Incredible Growing Kingdom

The first two parables describe how the kingdom or realm of God grows. It is like a tiny mustard seed sown in a field that grows big enough to provide shelter for the birds. The kingdom is about tiny beginnings and huge endings. That is how the realm of God is. That is how God's reign works in our lives and in the world. As "kingdom people," we must always value the small seeds that we plant or are planted in us. The ministries or missions we embark on must always be focused on the small, on the one need or the one person. It is our faithfulness to the small that makes it possible for God to work through us in larger ways.

Sandy Knodel, Gene Tweedy and I met the other day to work on a three-year budget and program for the Festival Center in preparation for a financial campaign in the months to come. We worked to put down figures and

estimate expenses and so forth. It was somewhat frustrating for us. We sensed that there was no way to put down on paper exactly what is going to happen at the Festival Center. It isn't something you can orchestrate or a plan you can put neatly in place and follow toward sure and predictable results. We know the things that we feel called to do, the small beginnings we want to make in this direction or that. But the vision of the Center has to do with relationships, with community, one relationship, one person, one program at a time. That's the way our children's program began. It is something that we have to allow to grow through us and as we take one step at a time, we never know quite where it is all going to lead. Who knew, for instance, a year ago, as we finally had some children from the neighborhood walk through the doors for the first time, that we would not have four children from Columbia coming to be part of our little community on Saturdays?

So, Gene, Sandy, and I put down the general directions we intend to move, some figures that will provide the funds to do it, and went back to sharing our visions and dreams, all the seeds we want to sow!

The kingdom of God, life as God made it to be, comes about in organic ways. It is something alive and growing. In this culture, we want to structure everything for success. But there is something about the true nature of life that despises our structures and frustrates them. There is a dynamic energy about the way the world truly is, the way God made it to be. We are to be the persons God made us to be, who can harmonize our lives with that deepest nature of things, the kingdom of God. We pay attention to the smallest of beginnings, are faithful to them, and we follow them wherever they lead, however they grow. And, according to these parables of the mustard seed and the yeast leavening the whole batch of flour, the growth is a sure thing! The realm of God, the way of life as God made it, will proceed and grow and come to fullness, in spite of everything that seems to thwart it.

Joy and Sacrifice

Jesus tells two parables about our response to the kingdom of God. The kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field. A person stumbles over it, covers it up, and goes and sells everything in order to buy the field. There is a hiddenness about the kingdom. Though it is everywhere, even within us, it is not evident to everyone. Jesus several times talked about this hiddenness of the kingdom. Not everyone sees it. Not everyone finds it. Not everyone understands it. You have to look below the surface. You have to WANT to find it. And if you just happen to stumble over it, then you give everything in order to make it the center of your life.

The parable of the merchant stimulates similar thoughts. Searching for fine pearls, the merchant comes upon one of surpassing value and sells his whole inventory to buy it. Here is an intentional search for what is most valuable. The intentional search, the selling of everything we have. I think this is a strong affirmation of the importance of the kind of spiritual life we try to work with here. A life of commitment to following Christ, a life with spiritual practices, or disciplines, that keeps us on that journey of seeking and finding. It doesn't just happen by itself. There are too many things about our culture that work against a life centered on finding and living out of God's kingdom. The

kingdom of God is always there, always real and growing according to God's wisdom and will. But in order to touch it, perceive it, and give our lives to it, we need to give our lives a pattern and shape that keeps us focused on that search and on the letting go of things that get in the way.

I have been rereading a book entitled *The Soul of the Indian*, by a Native American named Charles Eastman, whose Indian name was Ohiyesa. It was published in 1911 to tell of the spirituality of the native people. The Indian was astonished by the inconsistencies he saw in the whites who came to "save" him. They heard the teachings of Jesus about the dangers of wealth and power, and fully agreed with them. But they did not see this in the very ones who told them their salvation depended on accepting another religion. The Indian lived a materially simple life, one of complete sharing, and had a deep and real sense of the Great Mystery—God—without feeling the need to talk about it! Jesus knew the vital relationship between simplicity and the need for disciplined living, and our awareness of the kingdom of God.

At the heart of it all is JOY. With joy the person goes and sells everything in order to buy the field where the treasure is. And joy is fully assumed in the story of the merchant finding the pearl of surpassing value. There is joy because what we discover is the richest, deepest, and fullest meaning of this life. We discover what makes it all worthwhile and full of purpose. It is the joy that floods into us when we connect with another person at the level of love, of mutual understanding, respect, and caring. It is the joy that arises in us when through some person or experience we really feel that we are accepted and loved as we are, unconditionally, so that God's grace is no longer just an idea but a reality that surrounds and enfolds us. It is the joy that comes when we give ourselves to some mission of sharing our gifts with the world, touching a need somewhere, a joy that sustains and undergirds us in that work through the most difficult times when it all seems futile and feeble.

In all our important work with the serious matters of spiritual disciplines and call and commitment, we must always remember that the heart of this has to be joy. It is the joy of searching for and finding and giving ourselves to the kingdom of God, the way life is meant to be, and the way our lives are made to be lived.

It's for Everyone

The last parable is the seine net that scoops up "every kind of fish." It isn't particular and selective. This is a figure for God's expansive and inclusive love, a great net thrown out over the whole world. The word of the kingdom of God is for everyone who will respond to it, whoever they may be. Ours is not to decide who is right for it and who is not, who is good enough or moral enough or theologically correct. Ours is to respond ourselves to the kingdom and to let it grow in our own lives.

It is sad these days to see how the religious communities of our society and of the world fall so quickly into division and collecting themselves into self-righteous groups. Christianity is the worst of the bunch when it comes to this! This week I, along with everyone else, received an unsolicited newspaper from Liberty University. Its pages were filled with anger, hostility, and violent language toward those of other faiths or Christians who hold a different view.

There was nothing of the spirit of Christ there, nothing of God's kingdom, but another kind of kingdom. Yesterday I was in Barnes and Noble bookstore, and on the shelves I saw so many books of hostility and aggression toward Muslims and "liberals," and others. Sadly, these apparently are the "big sellers" today.

This little parable speaks against all of that. The kingdom of God, the realm of God's love, is thrown over ALL people. So should ours be. The ultimate judgment of good and evil, righteous and unrighteous, faithful and unfaithful has nothing to do with us. Our job is not to decide who is in and who is out, who is a beautiful rainbow trout and who is a bottom feeding carp. The net of God's reign gathers everyone in, and the parable is absolutely clear that the final assessment of who is a "good fish" and who is a "bad fish" is up to God, not us.

I think these little parables of God's kingdom are themselves pearls of insight for our community. They speak of the hiddenness and preciousness of God's reign, of the importance of the search for it and the giving of our whole lives to it. They speak of how things begin in small ways, when we give ourselves to the call of God in our lives to offer our gifts in some way in the service of life. They affirm the importance of that search as the central journey of our lives, guided and supported by spiritual practices that keep us focused and centered. They remind us that God's love, God's realm, is for everyone, not just a few and not just those who think themselves special. And perhaps most important of all, these little stories remind us to keep our lives in touch with the joy that comes when we touch the true nature of life itself—the realm of God's love that is our true home.