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First Presbyterian Church
14th Sunday of Ordinary Time, July 3, 2016
Text: Selections from Gospels

Thy Kingdom Come

A Reading of Scripture for Three Voices

Thy kingdom come.

At the outset of his ministry, Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

He taught them saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is 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.

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Thy kingdom come.

Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.

Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven.

Thy kingdom come.

With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?

It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.

It is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls.

Or a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind.

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.

Or a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

Thy kingdom come.

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Jesus said to the man whose father had died, let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.

Cure the sick who are there, and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.”

Thy kingdom come.

Jesus said to the crowds, I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.

At the Last Supper he said, “I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

He answered Pilate, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

Thy kingdom come.

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Thy kingdom come.

Sermon

If you asked the average Christian what Christianity is all about, I suspect they would tell you something like this: it's about believing in Jesus who died for your sins so you can spend eternity in heaven. Notice the emphasis on belief, on sin, and on the afterlife.

Yet if you asked the Jesus of the Gospels what it's all about, without a doubt the answer would be: the kingdom of God. It's about the transformative kingdom of God on earth. From the get-go, Jesus, the gospels say, went about announcing the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God was the core of his mission. He himself said proclaiming the kingdom of God was his purpose. The ethics he taught were ethics of the kingdom; his theology was theology of the kingdom; his life, death, and resurrection were a demonstration of the kingdom. The selections you heard read are just a sampling of what he had to say about the kingdom. You can count the phrase "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven" (they mean the same thing) 84 times in the gospels, not to mention the dozens of times "kingdom," alone, is mentioned or alluded to. The transformative kingdom of God here on earth was central to Jesus' life and message.

Yet curiously, Jesus never defined exactly what he meant by "the kingdom of God." He never explained it. Instead he voiced its demands and effects. He described it with stories, images, and analogies. The phrase itself is a metaphor. "Kingdom" he drew from the political arena. By it he meant not a territory but kingship or rule. "The reign of God" might be a more helpful way of rendering it. The reign of God is a condition not a place. It's God's movement in the world. It's God's activity of bringing about his will in human life. You could call it God's ongoing project.

As we look at how Jesus himself participated in the kingdom of God, we see that he did so by deeply centering his life in God. For Jesus, God was the cardinal reality of his life. He didn't simply *believe* in God as an abstract idea. He *knew* God. God wasn't a doctrine but the personal point around which his whole life was oriented and grounded. He paid attention to God. He spent time with God. He was present to God's presence and power in his life. He was loyal to God, committed to God, and trusting of God.

And so we see that Christian discipleship isn't so much about believing, in the sense of assenting to certain ideas, as it is a relationship. It isn't so much about having the right doctrines, as it is about a life deeply centered in God. You can believe in God and act mean as a snake towards God's other children. And you can even explain the Trinity but never ask any one of its three persons for forgiveness. You see, being in a relationship with God is different from believing in God. Living in the kingdom of God means living in relationship to God, where God is the central reality of your life.

The choir sang a lovely anthem last Sunday. It was a setting of the Lord's Prayer called "Appalachian Lord's Prayer." As we proofed the bulletin on Tuesday we told John there was a typo in the text of the anthem. "Kingdom" is missing the "g." It says "Thy kindom come." "It's not a mistake," John insisted. "That's the way the composer wrote it: k-i-n-d-o-m." So we're

talking about a kinship, a relationship when we talk about the Kingdom of God.

When we sign on to this relationship as citizens in God's kingdom, we find out that it involves change. "Repent!" Jesus said. We cannot remain the same people if we participate in the kingdom of God. We must dismount from our thrones of ego and greed. We must let go our scepters of jealousy and control. We must be willing to be transformed. This can be a painful process. Call it dying to self. Call it losing your life.

There's a wonderful image in the Narnia Chronicles of an ill-tempered boy named Eustice. Eustice's selfishness has turned him into a dragon. The process of his "un-dragoning," of his being turned back into a boy, but this time a kind and generous boy, is very painful. The lion Aslan (the Christ figure in the story) rips and tears Eustice's dragon skin off with his claws, throws him into a well whose water at first smarts, and finally dresses him in new clothes. But the pain of changing is worth it. The whole point of the kingdom of God is transformation. God is not content to leave us as we are but desires that we be whole, or healed, or saved, if you will.

To participate in God's kingdom we have to repent. We have to be willing to give up the values of, say, the kingdom of Wall Street or the kingdom of Hollywood and embrace the values of the kingdom of God. God's rule is not about power and control. It's not about glamour or success or any of the usual things the kingdoms of this world teach us are important. On the contrary, it's full of surprises.

In the kingdom Jesus preached, the despised tax agent down on his knees is lauded over the sanctimonious elder who leads the liturgy every Sunday. The prostitute with the heavy eye makeup and too-tight clothes is ahead of the straight-laced legalist who thinks she's without blemish. The humble are exalted. The outcasts are included. The ones we would say are down and out are blessed. And the self-righteous, the proud, the rich are left in the dust. The kingdom is topsy-turvy. It's about grace more than judgment. It's about forgiveness more than keeping score. It's about sacrifice more than being number one. It starts out small and insignificant and is even subversive. The kingdom of God is quite different from the kingdoms of this world.

Nadia Bolz-Weber has written a book of theological reflections called *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. In it she tells stories of various misfits she has known who pretty much stumble into the kingdom. And Nadia herself is a prime example of an accidental, i.e. unlikely, saint. With a history of alcoholism, drug abuse, promiscuity, lying, and stealing, she is now a Lutheran pastor—which doesn't stop her from cussing like a truck driver. She founded a congregation called "House for All Saints and Sinners." True to its name, it attracts a wide diversity of worshipers. In her photo on the book flap, Nadia is covered in tattoos, sports a short spiky hairdo, and is wearing a black sleeveless collared clergy shirt with jeans. She's alternately profane, funny, and sublime. What is so endearing about her is her great vulnerability about the messiness of her own life and her observations of the surprising ways God is at work in it. She writes, "Being part of Christ's bizarre kingdom looks more like being thirsty and having someone you don't even like give you water than it looks like polishing your crown."ⁱ

Now we've been talking about the kingdom of God in personal terms. We've been considering what it means for us as individuals. But clearly there's a wider dimension to it. The transformation God has in mind is not just for individual people but for the whole world. "Kingdom" is a political term and there is a political dimension to it all. It is, of course, not to be identified with any particular political arrangement--democracy, for example. On this Fourth of July weekend we might hear talk of "Christian America" but beware of putting an equals sign

between USA and kingdom of God. They are not nor ever have been the same, though the Puritans may have thought so.

While the kingdom of God isn't to be identified with a particular political entity, it does involve the distribution of power and resources. It is God's dream for a world where there is justice for all, not just the rich and powerful. It is God's dream for a world where everyone has enough. Everyone has enough food, shelter, clothing, and opportunity not as a result of charity but as the product of justice and fairness. It is God's dream for a world where there is peace. Violence has no place in the kingdom of God. So the kingdom of God isn't about just the transformation that takes place in a person's heart, but the transformation that God wishes for societies, systems, nations, and cultures. All of human life is the arena of God's reign.

I read recently about Kakenya Ntaiya.ⁱⁱ As was customary in her rural Kenyan village, she was engaged at five years old and expected to marry at twelve. But Kakenya had other dreams. This gritty young girl convinced her father (a police officer who worked eight hours away and only returned home once a year, and when he did, sold his family's possessions and abused her mother) to delay marriage and allow her to finish high school. She got her wish but at a very high price: female genital mutilation or FGM, a widespread practice in her world. As the rite was performed by an elderly woman with a rusty, unsterilized knife while her village watched, Kakenya thought, "This is wrong. It's something no other girl should ever have to go through."

Kakenya excelled at school and won a scholarship to an American college. Her family was not able to afford her passport and airfare, so she convinced the male elders of the village to help. They had never allowed a woman to leave, much less travel abroad. To gain their support, she promised to return and use her education to make a difference.

She kept her word. She established a boarding school for girls that now has almost 300 students. It requires parents to agree never to subject their daughters to FMG. And students cannot get married until they graduate from high school. From this unlikely mustard seed of a spunky African girl, the kingdom of God is growing and changing cultural norms.

Jesus came to proclaim the kingdom of God. He announced that God's reign is here. His earthly ministry and resurrection embodied it. It's a present reality here and now. But it only takes a glance at the headlines or a peek inside your own heart to see it's not fully here. It's only just begun. It's got an "under construction" sign hung on it. It's here but it's not not fully realized.

An analogy from the end of World War II describes this tension. When the Allied forces landed in Normandy, the decisive battle of the whole war was fought. After that it was certain that Nazi Germany was going to lose. Between D-Day (the day of the invasion) and V-Day (the day the Allies' victory was finally declared), the Germans fought a number of desperate fallback battles across Europe. Many lives were lost and much damage was done before they finally surrendered. But after Normandy, the war was won, even if it was not yet over.ⁱⁱⁱ

Likewise, living between Easter and the final consummation of history, we know the tide has turned. We know God has done something of great significance in Jesus, but it's not fully complete. We experience the kingdom of God as both "already" and "not yet." We get hints of it. It's not always obvious. Looking for it can be like looking in those *Highlights* magazine drawings for the hidden comb or disguised saw. It's there, but you have to recognize it. Or it's like catching glimpses of a particular face in a moving crowd. We see it in snatches here and there.

We might look back over our day and realize that God did something beautiful through us despite the fact that we are jerks a good bit of the time. We might experience some grace in the presence of a friend amid a time of terrible suffering. Like a shaft of light coming suddenly and fleetingly from a dark cloud, we see the kingdom in snatches.

A prison caseworker starts a program to teach inmates how to knit. A woman prisoner proudly shows her booties she has knitted to donate to hospice patients to keep their feet warm. She is beaming. This is a woman who has only known negative and destructive forces in her life who experiences for perhaps the first time something positive and creative. But just after she shows the case worker the booties, she scowls, grabs a skein of yarn from another inmate, and yells, “Hey, that’s mine!” Glimpses and snatches of the kingdom.

Or, take an example from the world scene. We celebrated to see the Cold War melt, the Soviet Union collapse, and freedom begin to blossom where oppression and terror had reigned for so many years. But over two decades later, we see corruption, wrangling among the former Soviet states, and a Russian economy still with a large divide between the haves and have-nots. Glimpses and snatches of the kingdom.

Which brings us to the Lord’s Prayer. In it Jesus teaches us to pray, “Thy kingdom come.” That phrase is a prayer of longing. It is a prayer that is acutely aware of the gap between the already and the not-yet aspects of the kingdom. It is a prayer that yearns for God to finish what God has started. “Set the world right,” it says.

When we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” we acknowledge that indeed God is the sovereign who can and will set the world right. But when we pray those words, “Thy kingdom come,” we are also acknowledging that *we* are willing to be part of the process. We are volunteering to get on board with what God is up to in the world. We are opening ourselves up to the transformative rule of God in our own lives. We are pledging our allegiance to a kingdom that dethrones all else and puts God at the center. We are saying we want God to change not only our world but us here and now—on earth as it is in heaven.

The kingdom of God was the core message Jesus came to deliver and embody. The kingdom of God with its unconventional values, its re-orienting ways, its transformative power to shape us and the world into what God dreams—this is what Jesus teaches us to seek and pray for. Thy kingdom come.

ⁱ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, (New York: Convergent Books, Penguin Random House, 2015), p. 48.

ⁱⁱ “Empowered by Education: Kakenya’s Story,” *Randolph: The Randolph College Magazine*, June 2016, Vol. 7, No.3, pp.207.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 284.