

Sermon for Sunday, January 22, 2017

The Kin-dom of God

I can't actually remember learning the Lord's prayer. Growing up in the church, it was woven into every aspect of our life together, we prayed it during worship, before meals, and on special occasions, we even sang it in Sunday school—as far as I can remember it was never taught—it was ingrained. But I do remember the first time I had a professor in college ask: "What is the kingdom of God? And what does it look like?" Hearing those questions, my mind kind of halted—"what do you mean what does it look like?" For me a "kingdom" had a specific geographical location as well as a king or queen who ruled over it...so therefore—to my college age self, the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, looked like a kingdom where God was king.

But obviously—my logic had faults...

My professor went on to talk about how, in the Lord's prayer—we ask for "God's kingdom to come, God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." This petition implies that God's kingdom is different than anything we have ever known, seen or experienced here on earth. In fact, the Greek word for kingdom is *basileia*—and while one translation is kingdom, it can also be translated as "reign, rule, and empire". Outside of the 4 gospels-of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John-the word *basileia* has been used to refer to kingdoms and even empires like Rome.

So what does the word "Kingdom" mean for the author of Matthew? And what does the kingdom of Heaven look like?

In today's story—we get a glimpse of what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like as Jesus officially starts his ministry. After John the Baptist had been arrested Jesus picked up where John left off. He began using the same cry John had been sounding in the wilderness: Repent: for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

But Jesus added a twist...John had paired that phrase with baptizing people in the river Jordan for the forgiveness of sins. But Jesus, chose to put those words into a different action. It's right after this pronouncement that Jesus calls his first two disciples. As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, called Peter, and Andrew his brother. They were going about their business, doing what fishermen do—when Jesus called out, "follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him."

I can't help but wonder...What in the world would make these fishermen immediately leave their nets and follow Jesus? Did they know who he was? Had they heard him speak in the temple and were really impressed by what he said? Or was fishing just really bad that day and they didn't have anything better to do? Because all he said was "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Why in the world would that compel them to leave their boats and their business to follow this itinerant Rabbi?

I wonder if what they heard in Jesus call, Jesus wasn't a fisherman—he was a carpenter by trade, but he wasn't calling them to come be apprentices in his shop--this wasn't a lucrative job offer—or another rung up the ladder of success...Jesus was up to something else. He was calling them to something greater—something beyond what they had ever been offered before. In his blog titled "Fishers of people" David Lose writes that "Jesus...calls these first disciples into relationship – [relationship] with himself, with each other, and with all the various people they will meet over the next few years and, indeed, the rest of their lives."¹ This call wasn't about finding success but meaning. Instead of fishing for...fish...the disciples are invited to fish for people—to enter into genuine, authentic, messy, slightly frustrating but ultimately life giving-relationships—with God, each other and everyone else along the way—and the offer was just too good to pass up.

As Jesus and his new followers continued on their way, Jesus began teaching and healing. It's interesting to note, that Jesus ministry is full of healing stories. I can't help but wonder, why all the stories of healing? Was Jesus just hanging around people who were sick or were people much more prone to illness in Jesus day?

In his commentary on this text, Warren Carter explains that:

"Roman imperial structures and practices were bad for people's health. Some 70-90 percent of folks in Rome's empire experienced varying degrees of poverty -- from the very poorest to those who temporarily fell below

¹ David Lose, "Fishers of People," <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3018>, (January 20, 2014).

subsistence levels. Understandings of hygiene were limited; social stresses were high; water quality poor, food insecurity was rife with low quality and limited quantities. Such factors resulted in widespread diseases associated with poor nutrition (blindness; muscle weakness etc.) and a lack of immunity”²

Attempting to live a healthy, productive life was not only challenging but also not completely a choice. So as Jesus proclaimed the good news of God’s kingdom by teaching in the synagogues, he also went out and began healing those who were suffering under the Roman rule.

Through Jesus ministry we begin to catch a glimpse, that the Kingdom of heaven is different than any kingdom or empire we have ever known...It consists of calling people together, building relationships and restoring people in body, heart, mind and soul.

In the wake of the election and now the Inauguration I think it’s safe to say—it feels as though our country is divided. And I don’t think it stops there. Division seems to be seeping in everywhere—in our schools, places of work, our car pool lines, Facebook feeds, in our church pews and in our own homes. We may even feel division in ourselves. It’s easy to get sucked in—and I’ll be honest I don’t have the answer in how to fix it. And yet this passage serves as a reminder, that through Jesus’ ministry God is on the move.

I titled this sermon “The Kin-dom of Heaven” because we need to be reminded that God’s kin-dom- -is unlike any kingdom or empire we have ever seen-so we need a title that jars us slightly—one that reminds us that the kin-dom of heaven is not tied to a geographical location but transcends time and space. We need to be reminded that the kin-dom of Heaven isn’t ruled by a king or queen who rules their subjects from afar--but by a God who loves us so deeply, God chose to come and experience what it’s like to be human. We need to be reminded that the kin-dom of Heaven, isn’t about being first, having the best job, earning the most money, attending the best school, building the biggest house or having the most followers on Instaram. It’s about being in relationship—relationship with God, each other and everyone else we meet along the way. Because just like the first disciples, Jesus calls you and me to be fishers of people. To enter into genuine, authentic, messy, slightly frustrating but ultimately life giving-relationships...

And part of that same call is also to seek the healing of others—this is where it gets tricky—because I’m not talking about healing people from physical illnesses—that’s why we have wonderful doctors and nurses who have skills and gifts God has equipped them with—but I am talking about seeking healing on other levels. Healing that comes through conversations—where we listen to each other, not with the hope of winning an argument, but of hearing, understanding and seeing the humanity of the person we are engaging. Healing that comes through getting to know and connecting with people who live on the margins of society—who live outside of our own little bubbles—learning from and engaging their stories while learning to tell our own. Healing that comes through sharing our own understanding of who God is and listening so one else with the hope of gaining a broader picture who God is and what God’s kin-dom looks like. This is radically different than the kingdom’s and empires around us. And we are invited, not only to live in the reality of the kin-dom of heaven, but we are also called to proclaim good news, to be in relationship and invite others to experience restoration and healing that can only be found in the kin-dom of heaven.

May we seek to live it and invite others to experience it-and in so doing, reflect the light of Christ’s love.

In the name of the father, and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

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² Warren Carter, Commentary on Matthew 4.12-23,
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3138