

Kindom – Reflection for Sunday, July 30, 2023 – Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

I wonder: if I were to ask you what one thing might be worth giving up everything you own, what would that be? If you are like me you might be thinking “but if I gave up everything, where would I live? What would I eat? Could I keep a few changes of clothes? Don’t go there! That’s not the point, is it? Just think what might have that much value for you. If you spend the rest of your time here today considering that question, I think it might be worth your time.

But I want to talk about this idea of kingdom (or Kindom since Jesus rejected any idea of kingship) Jesus keeps bringing up throughout the gospel accounts. Whatever it is it’s of foundational importance to what Jesus is trying to teach. Matthew uses the phrase “Kindom of Heaven” which often leads one to assume it is the place you go when you die. But Jesus himself specifically contradicts this interpretation when he says “The Kindom of Heaven is within you” (that is, here) (Luke 17:21) and “at hand” (that is now).

Other gospel writers use the phrase Kindom of God or Reign of God in their writings. The phrases seem to be interchangeable.

So what is the Kindom? Biblical scholars have debated this question for eons. Author and scholar N. T. Wright tells us that in Jesus’ day “the phrase Kindom of God denoted not a place where God ruled but rather the fact that God ruled.” This is in reference to Jewish history back to the days of Abraham and Moses when there were no Hebrew kings and God was seen as the ultimate authority. With the oppression of Roman occupation there was a wish by many to go back to those days when there was no king or emperor ruling over them. So we need to remember when reading scripture that the very phrase “Kindom of Heaven” had a lot of emotional attachment and power. But it was not referring to a place.

Today some equate the Kindom of Heaven with an earthly utopia. It would be a realm of peace and justice where we lived together in harmony and fair distribution of economic assets. That rather appeals to me and when I say “Thy kindom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” that is surely what I have in mind and keep striving for. But Jesus shrank from all that when he said “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).

Where is it then? Cynthia Bourgeault, teacher at the Centre for Action and Contemplation quotes author Jim Marion's suggestion that "the Kingdom of Heaven is really a metaphor for a state of consciousness; it is not a place you go to, but a place you come from. It is a whole new way of looking at the world, a transformed awareness that literally turns this world into a different place."

The most certain thing we know about Jesus is that he was a storyteller and a speaker of great one-liners called aphorisms. He was certainly not above using exaggeration and absurdity to get peoples' attention and make his point – like the idea of a camel going thru the eye of a needle. Surely the idea of a mustard seed growing into a tree was one of those.

Jesus was a teacher of wisdom. Wisdom concerns how to live. Author and biblical scholar Marcus Borg says there are 2 kinds of wisdom: Conventional Wisdom and Subversive or Alternate Wisdom. Conventional wisdom is the dominant consciousness of any culture – the most taken for granted understanding about the way to live. We sort of learn it by osmosis from our parents and teachers and general life experience. It is intrinsically based on reward and punishment and creates a world of hierarchies and boundaries. We are constantly trying to measure up to expectations. Subversive and alternate wisdom questions and undermines conventional wisdom and speaks of another way – another path. Jesus was not primarily a teacher of information or morals but a teacher of a way or path of transformation. Aphorisms and parables are invitational forms of speech. Their job is not to confirm but uproot. Jesus used them to invite his hearers to see something they might not otherwise see – to subvert conventional ways of seeing and living and to invite his hearers to an alternate way of life. Throughout the gospels we hear people saying "What is this he's teaching? No one has ever said anything like this before. Where did he get this? Where did he come from?"

Both Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright agree that Jesus was a "movement initiator". Wright says when Jesus talked about the Kingdom it was and an invitation to his hearers to become kingdom people themselves. Jesus was challenging his contemporaries to live as new covenant people, the returned from exile people, the people whose hearts were renewed by the word and work of the living God.

Stories were Jesus' stock in trade. According to Cynthia Bourgeault parables occupy fully 35% of the first 3 Gospels. But one of their most surprising features is that they are not about God. Rabbi Jesus obviously wanted us to look closely at this world, not some other one. It is here and now – all around us in the most ordinary things – that we find the divine presence.

Today's reading encompasses 5 parables referring to the Kingdom of Heaven – each one a sermon in itself. Never would Jesus have thrown all those pithy aphorisms at a group of people all at one time. They would have come up in his speeches so many times that they became memorable and recorded. Both the mustard seed and the yeast start small but become something much bigger. A simple example might be a smile or a kind word. One smile or act of kindness can be contagious and change the whole atmosphere or perhaps save a life. The yeast does its work invisibly. Jesus infers that the Kingdom "invades and influences groups and societies forming and transforming structures. It is something that touches, inspires and enlivens all things from their very centre outward and changes them. But this doesn't happen automatically. Membership in the church doesn't give your instant citizenship in the kingdom. To turn toward the Kingdom means turning away from self to turn from self-centeredness and self-reliance to concern for others and trust in God. (*Rohr Great Themes*) That's where the stories of giving up everything for the pearl of great price or treasure in the field come in. We hear Jesus saying that people can recognize the Kingdom when they find it and when they find it, they are willing to give up a great deal to become part of it. It makes it hard for those of us with privilege who have so much to give up, doesn't it? Have you thought about your answer to my question?

The last parable about the fish in the net is a tough one. I don't even remember hearing it before which makes me wonder if we've all just been avoiding it. Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, a contemporary translation (or paraphrase) of scripture, who usually doesn't pull any punches has a softer version of this – he writes: God's kingdom is like a fishnet cast into the sea, catching all kinds of fish. When it is full it is hauled onto the beach. The good fish are picked out and put in a tub; those unfit to eat are thrown away. That's how it will be when the curtain comes down on history. The angels will come and cull the bad fish and throw them in the garbage. There will be a lot of desperate complaining, but it won't do any good.

Jesus asked “Are you starting to get a handle on all this? They answered “Yes” (!!!) He said “Then you see how every student well trained in God’s Kindom is like the owner of a general store who can put his hands on anything you need, old or new, exactly when you need it.”

Remembering that parables are to be read not literally, but metaphorically, and knowing that no person is all bad or all good, I tend to read this to say that the good that is in all of us is to be retained but that which is self-centered and mean is to be set aside. Which seems like good news to me so why all the complaining? Well, I think some of us – maybe all of us – have attributes we’d rather like to hang on to and our egos are pretty reluctant to give up anything at any time so it would not likely be an easy transition, certainly a life time of effort. But maybe, if we really started living into God’s Kindom it would be like the general store where we’d have at hand all we really need.

Richard Rohr – a wisdom teacher himself, (pg 10 Great Themes) says living in the Kindom is a matter of living in right relationship. Living in relationships of mutual self-giving with others means we make God’s Kindom something real in this world, even though it’s not a worldly Kindom. Jesus was a living example of that – and one he certainly encouraged us to aspire to.

Bibliography

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