

THY KINGDOM COME

Luke 6:20-31

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
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There are people who are most inspired by visual imagery; they feel closest to God when they see a sunset or a mountain range, or a beautiful painting. Usually those same people are artistic themselves - the kind of people who know how to choose the right paint color and arrange furniture and make a table look gorgeous. Then there are people who are primarily auditory. The ear is their favorite of the senses. They are most moved by music and always want to have their favorite music nearby. Then there are people like me who are primarily word people. I love beauty I see with my eye and music that lifts my spirits, but I gravitate mostly towards words. I copy and paste my favorite quotes so I can remember them. I always have a book or two going. And I waste more time than I want to admit to you playing Words with Friends and online Scrabble. I am a person who loves words.

Whether you are primarily a word person or not, all of us can acknowledge that words have power. Encouraging words of praise can make us feel like we're on top of the world. Demeaning words can wound us deeply, and somehow, unfortunately, they stick with us longer.

Throughout the Bible, we see the power of words. Sometimes it's a name that is given. "You are no longer Abram; now you are Abraham, the father of a great nation." "His name shall be called Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" "From now on, you

shall no longer be called Saul; your new name is Paul.” The new name signifies a new identity.

Jesus frequently heals people with a word. His parables tell stories that have layers of meaning; they continue to speak to us, even though our lives are so different from those of his original audience. They are words with the power to change lives.

And they are the only way he has of describing the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God. For how do you describe something that you’ve only glimpsed? How do you describe something that you can feel in moments but never fully? Something that will only be completely present in the future?

Let’s say that you go to a concert - you hear your favorite group - it may be a rock concert, it may be the Cleveland Orchestra. You love every minute of it. You soak it up. You feel transported. Then you come home and the next morning, you see your neighbor who has never been to a concert, never heard live music. Your neighbor says, “How was it? What was it like?” What do you say? Without a frame of reference, how do you describe a transcendent experience?

Jesus speaks in metaphors, the only language available. He says, “Well, let’s see, how can I describe it to you?” He searches to find experiences in his listener’s lives that might be comparable. And in our teaching for today, he describes what it’s like to live in the experience of God’s reign.

The best way for us to know what God’s Kingdom is like is to look at the life of Jesus. What matters in God’s Kingdom are the things that matter to Jesus. Welcome matters, inclusion matters. God’s Kingdom occurs in places where no one is excluded. What doesn’t matter is wealth or power or prestige. Where there is love, where there is

healing, where there is peace and wholeness and well-being: there you will find the Kingdom of God.

It's a place where the lost are found, whether those lost things are coins or sheep or people. Remember those parables about the woman finding the lost coin, the shepherd searching for the lost sheep, the father welcoming home the prodigal son? Those are descriptions of what God's kingdom is like.

It's not a place, it's not a time. It's an experience. In one of Paul's most poetic writings, he says, "Now we see through a glass darkly; then we will see face to face." In other words, in this life, we catch glimpses of what God's kingdom is like." And it is those momentary experiences of the Kingdom that Jesus is interested in describing for us.

Last summer when I was a part of the junior high mission trip in Cincinnati, I watched with awe the way the pastor of Washington UCC talked to the children. Every single one of the children in her summer program come from difficult family situations, and, of course, they bring the unrest and distress of their home life with them. She says to them, over and over, "That's not the way we talk here." Correcting them, she'll say, "This is the way we talk here." "We live in a peace village here. How do people live in a peace village?" Her words and her presence convey a power, and they help these children to see that a different way of life is possible. Over and over again, she says to them, "This is who we are. These are our values." And little by little, these children's lives are shaped.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor and blessed are those who weep" not because he thinks we should all be poor and weeping. These aren't prescriptive words; he's not telling us how to behave. These are descriptive words. He's saying that when we look at the lives of the poor and the sorrowful, we will see the kingdom of God at work, because

God is always close to those who are most in need. And when we are at our most vulnerable, when all of our bravado is stripped away, we are more likely to experience God's grace.

And when we love our enemies, when we give away our possessions, when we show extravagant love and hospitality and generosity, we are helping to bring about those Kingdom moments that we, and others, can glimpse.

There are Kingdom moments happening here on Wednesday nights as people gather in this room to learn about other religions. In a time when misunderstanding is rampant, we are building bridges of understanding; it is the work of the Kingdom.

Two weeks ago in the Cleveland Plain Dealer, there was a story about the Kingdom of God. At least that's how I perceived it. The Kingdom appeared, as it often does, in an unlikely place - on the high school cheerleading squads in Medina County. At three different high schools, squads of cheerleaders have welcomed students with mental and physical disabilities to join their groups. The students with disabilities have uniforms, and a buddy, and everyone involved agrees it's been a beneficial program. The students involved are learning - and modeling - patience, understanding, and depth of compassion. They are practicing inclusion.

Thursday night I had the privilege of hearing the novelist Khaled Hosseini speak. Hosseini was born in Afghanistan but fled the country when he was eleven years old. He and his family were political refugees who found a home in northern California. Hosseini became a medical doctor but felt another calling. He started getting up at 4 in the morning to write and eventually completed a novel called The Kite Runner which became an international best seller. After that book was completed, he returned to Afghanistan for his

first visit in 27 years. He found a country beginning to rebuild, facing seemingly insurmountable odds. 6 million refugees were returning, many of them living on the ground or in holes cut into the ground. Hosseini went on to write two more novels and has left the practice of medicine, but he knew he had to do more than write. He established a foundation which is working with the United Nations to provide shelters, drinking water, education, health care, and economic opportunity for the people, especially the women and children, of Afghanistan. As I heard him speak about his foundation, I glimpsed the Kingdom of God. This is a man whose three novels have made him wealthy. He could spend the rest of his life speaking, lecturing, and otherwise living the life of leisure. But that is not what brings life meaning.

When we pray, “Thy Kingdom come”, we are praying for God’s vision of the world to become a reality. It is a powerful prayer. It is even a radical prayer, if by radical we mean that it shakes the world by its roots and turns it upside down. If we really mean what we say, then we are committing ourselves to the work of noticing and then bringing about Kingdom moments. Wherever we are, within our own sphere of influence, keeping our eyes open to the needs of others, to inequality, and injustice. It means speaking out. It means leaving our own comfort zones. It means looking for the lost, welcoming the lonely, forgiving those hardest to forgive.

Let us pray. When we pray, O God, may we realize what it is we are asking. If your kingdom comes, it means you ushering in a whole new world, and it means that our own lives are shaken up, turned upside down, for your glory. May it be so. Amen.