

Insights into the Kingdom of God

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

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(*SERMON NOTES*)

A couple of time a month I meet with some pastors in a study group. We are currently reading a book by Brian McClaren entitled, Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crisis and a Revolution of Hope. The book captured my attention early. I think that it also speaks to our understanding of what the Kingdom God—or Kingdom of Heaven, in Matthew’s gospel—is. The two terms, by the way, are synonymous. Matthew, writing to a predominately Jewish-Christian community—respected the Jewish sensitivity of never saying or spelling the name of God. The prohibition dates back to the call of Moses and the burning bush. To this day, some forms of Judaism continue to prohibit the use of the word God out of respect. If you ever receive a letter or email from someone that ends with “G-d bless” you know that they come from this tradition.

In the book McClaren writes about attending a pastor’s meeting near Bujumbura, Africa. One of the participants was a man named “Claude). He spoke in his native Kirundi and translated.

“Friends,” he said, “most of you know me. You know that I am the son of a preacher, and as a result, I grew up going to church all the time, maybe five times a week. What may surprise you, though, is to learn that in all of my childhood, in all the church services I attended, I only heard one sermon.” The pastors were surprised and confused. Only one sermon?

Claude continued, “That sermon went like this: ‘You are a sinner and you are going to hell. You need to repent and believe in Jesus. Jesus might come back today, and if he does and you are not ready, you will burn forever in hell.’”

The pastors smiled to one another. They weren’t smiling at going to hell or the idea of believing in Jesus; they were smiling at the recognition that this was the only sermon they had ever heard too.

Then Claude got serious. “When I got older, I realized that my entire life had been lived against the backdrop of genocide and violence, poverty and corruption. Over a million people died in my country in a series of genocides starting in 1959, and nearly a million in Rwanda, and in spite of huge amounts of foreign aid, our people remain poor, and many of them, hungry. This is the experience we have all shared.” The pastors leaned closer to hear what Claude was saying.

“So much death, so much hatred and distrust between tribes, so much poverty, suffering, corruption, and injustice, and nothing ever really changed. Eventually I realized something. I had never heard a sermon that addressed these realities. Did God only care about our souls going to heaven after we died? Were our hungry bellies unimportant to God? Was God unconcerned about our crying sons and frightened daughters, our others hiding under beds, our fathers crouching by windows, unable to sleep because of gunfire? Or did God send Jesus to teach us how to avoid genocide by learning to love each other, how to overcome tribalism and poverty by following his path, how to deal with injustice and corruption, how to make a better life here on earth?

“Over the years, I have come t realize that something is wrong with the way we understand Jesus and the good news. Something is missing in the version of the Christian

religion we received from the missionaries, which is the message we now preach ourselves. They told us how to go to heaven. But they left out an important detail. They didn't tell us how the will of God could be done on earth."

As McClaren reflected upon Claude's words he wrote, "The message of the kingdom—contrary to popular belief—was not focused on how to escape this world and its problems by going to heaven after death, but instead was focused on how God's will could be done on earth, in history, during this life." (pages. 18-21, selected)

Throughout his ministry Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, or Heaven. Many of his parables are about this Kingdom. So what does it look like? We get a glimpse of this Kingdom in Luke's Gospel when Jesus walked into the Temple and read from the scroll which was open to the daily reading, Isaiah, chapter 61.

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
Because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind,
To set the oppressed free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

The Kingdom of God, then, is not other worldly but involved in the nitty gritty of this world. In very practical terms this means that the Church doesn't have a mission but the *mission of Jesus Christ has a Church*. From today's lesson we get several insights into the Kingdom of God and our place in it.

First, the Kingdom of God starts small. It is like the mustard seed.

In the movie, "Bruce Almighty", Jim Carey plays a self-centered, corporate climbing TV reporter named Bruce who, when he loses an anchor position that he thinks that he deserves, challenges God's competence. "You're not doing your job!" he complains. This is Bruce's mantra. Finally God, played by Morgan Freeman, calls Bruce's bluff – "You want the job – you got it."

Bruce doesn't do a very good job. One of the first things that he does is to get even with people whom he doesn't like. Then he finds that it is too hard to listen to everyone's prayers so he simply answers all of them "yes." Well, this may seem like a good thing until there are riots in the streets of his city because *everyone* who bought a Jack Pot lottery ticket wins! Their prize? About \$7.87! Finally, a humbler Bruce comes to God one again. Things didn't go as Bruce had planned.

God tells Bruce, "Your problem, Bruce, is that you spend too much time looking up. All the things you've been doing with the power I gave you – they're not miracles – just magic tricks. A single mother, working two jobs and keeping her kids in school and off drugs – now that's a miracle!" (How many of our own examples could we add to the mix?) "Stop looking up all the time," says God, "and stop looking to me all the time. Look at yourself – you be the miracle!"

You be the miracle. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. You be the mustard seed. You make the difference.

Edward McDonald once wrote: "When God wants an important thing done in this world or a wrong righted, he goes about it in a very singular way. He does not release His thunderbolts or stir up His earthquakes. He simple has a tiny baby born, perhaps in a

very humble home, perhaps of a very humble mother. And he puts the idea of purpose into the mother's heart. And she puts it in the baby's mind, and then—God waits.

The great events of this world are not battles and elections and earthquakes and thunderbolts. The great events are babies, for each child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged with man, but is still expecting goodwill to become incarnate in each human life."

I recently read a teacher's blog that contained that teacher's favorite quote.

One man, a CEO, decided to explain the problem with education. He argued, "What's a kid going to learn from someone who decided his best option in life was to become a teacher?"

He reminded the other dinner guests what they say about teachers: "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach."

To stress his point he said to another guest; "You're a teacher, Bonnie. Be honest, what do you make?"

Bonnie, who had a reputation for honesty and frankness replied, "You want to know what I make? (She paused for a second, then began...) "Well, I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could. I make a C+ feel like the Congressional Medal of Honor. I make kids sit through 40 minutes of class time when their parents can't make them sit for 5 without an I Pod, Game Cube or movie rental... You want to know what I make?" (She paused again and looked at each and every person at the table."

I make kids wonder.

I make them question.

I make them criticize.

I make them apologize and mean it.

I make them have respect and take responsibility for their actions.

I teach them to write and then I make them write.

I make them read, read, read.

I make them show all their work in math.

I make my students from other countries learn everything they need to know in English while preserving their unique cultural identity.

I make my classroom a place where all my students feel safe.

I make my students stand to say the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag, because we live in the United States of America.

Finally, I make them understand that if they use the gifts they were given, work hard, and follow their hearts, they can succeed in life.

(Bonnie paused one last time and then continued) "Then, when people try to judge me by what I make, I can hold my head up high and pay no attention because they are ignorant..."

You want to know what I make? I MAKE A DIFFERENCE. What do you make?

The second thing that our parables tell us about the Kingdom is God is that it *grows*. It is like yeast mixed with three measures of flour. Before long that yeast has grown and made possible the baking of 150 loaves of bread.

Healthy things grow. Babies are taken to doctor's offices and their growth is charted on "well baby charts." If a child is not progressing as it should the baby is diagnosed with "failure to thrive" and new measures are taken to ensure that the child has the best possible change of "thriving"—growing!

The Kingdom of God starts small, it grows and takes on a life of its own, *and* it is of great value. It is like the treasure that a man finds in a field. He sells all that he has so that he can buy the field and own the treasure. It is like the pearl that a merchant stumbles across. He sells all that he has in order to have the pearl.

In this world everything that we have will one day perish. Jesus got into a lot of trouble when he pointed to the Temple that stood in the heart of Jerusalem, the pride of the people, and said that the day will come when not one stone will be left on another. In other words, the Temple would be utterly destroyed. The people couldn't hear it! Some plotted his death.

Earlier in Matthew's gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his listeners, *Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where rust and moth corrupt and where thieves can break in. Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moths nor rust corrupt and thieves cannot break in.*

In his first letter to the Corinthian church the apostle Paul considered those things that the world called "important" or "great" and he drew a different conclusion. He said that there are only three truly important things, eternally important things in life. They are *faith, hope and love*. And of these three, the greatest is *love*. "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, your strength and your mind," Jesus said. "And love your neighbor as yourself." The Kingdom of God is about *people*.

The Kingdom is also *universal*. It is like fishermen who cast their net and haul in all of the great variety of fish. God is not provincial, not territorial. God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us. *For God so loved the world*, the gospel of John tells us, *that he gave his only son... God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him*. Because God loves, we ought to love what God loves, *whom* God loves. That includes everyone, no matter where they were born, or where they work or their nationality or the color of their skin.

So, what can we say about the Kingdom of God? We can say that the Kingdom is not other worldly—but this world. The Kingdom starts small—maybe with you. The Kingdom, by its very nature grows. The Kingdom is of infinite, even eternal value. And, the Kingdom is universal. It includes all of us, even if we don't know. And for that, we can say, "to God be the glory." Amen.