

"Thy Kingdom Come"

A sermon by Rev. Trish Greeves
First Congregational Church of Minnesota
June 14, 2009

Reader's introduction to the reading of Mark 4:26-32:

The first words that Jesus speaks in the gospel of Mark are recorded in Chapter One, Verse fifteen: *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

The kingdom of God metaphor is used throughout the gospels as a shorthand way of summarizing the message, vision, and purpose of Jesus' ministry. In this morning's scripture reading from Chapter 4 in the gospel of Mark, Jesus is trying to describe what he means when he talks about the Kingdom of God. Reading of Mark 4:26-32.

The Sermon:

A few summers ago, I went to visit some older friends at their family cabin in Alexandria. I had barely gotten in the door when Carl said, "Trish, I have a question for you: Just what is it we're praying for when we say, 'Thy kingdom come' in the Lord's prayer?"

As I recall, in true UCC style, I hedged a little at first: "Well, Carl, I suspect people may mean different things when they say that. But I think Jesus was asking us to pray for God's will, God's vision, to be fully realized in this world. We went on to envision

- Peace, harmony, and reconciled relationships
- The lion and the lamb lying down together
- A world where everyone is included at the banquet table
- A place where perfect justice prevails; mercy is ever flowing; and love never fails.

If I had already read Marcus Borg's *Heart of Christianity*, I surely would have concluded the discussion with Borg's definition. Borg says, "The Kingdom of God is what life would be like on earth if God were king and the rulers of this world were not." (p. 132)

(These days many people prefer to say the *reign* of God or the *commonwealth* of God to avoid the sexist and patriarchal overtones associated with the word *kingdom*. However, since *kingdom* is the word used in the NRSV text we heard read this morning and is still what we say in the Lord's prayer, I'll be sticking with *kingdom* this morning.)

Linda's introduction to the scripture reading has already reminded us how central the proclamation of the Kingdom of God was to Jesus' ministry. Those words, "The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has drawn near" were, in effect, Jesus' inaugural address.

And the people are hungry to hear this good news! Disciples drop their nets and follow Jesus. The people in the synagogue sense in Jesus something more authentic than they've ever seen or heard from the scribes. Jesus confronts the demons of the day. He heals the sick. He preaches throughout The Galilee. Larger and larger crowds are gathering wherever he goes.

BUT Jesus also violates the religious and purity codes all over the place. He eats with sinners and tax collectors. He says people's sins are forgiven--right there on the spot--

without first following the prescribed institutional procedures and practices! Yes, and it gets worse. His disciples don't fast. When people are hungry, Jesus tells them to pick some corn and not to worry about it's being the Sabbath. He tells them that the Sabbath exists for the people, not the people for the Sabbath.

In the synagogue, Jesus cures a man with a withered hand. In response to the raised eyebrows and clucking tongues in the crowd, he says, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath? To save life or to kill?"

By the end of Mark, chapter 3: The religious authorities are watching Jesus closely and trying to discredit him with the people. His frightened and embarrassed family members are trying to get him to tone it down a little. And the Pharisees and Herodians are conspiring to kill him!

Not surprisingly then, the disciples who so readily signed on to be in the inner cabinet of God's kingdom, are now feeling a little shaky about this rapid decline in Jesus' favorability ratings. I imagine them saying things like: "Lord why isn't everyone taking to this good news we are sharing?" "You say the Kingdom of God is at hand, but nothing really seems very different at all: People are still robbing and cheating each other. The Romans still have us by the throat. And in spite of your wonderful healings, many other people are still sick and dying and the poor suffer the same as always. Even some of your own followers have drifted away."

Well that's the general setting for these "seedy" parables recorded in the fourth chapter of Mark. The first and longest one is about the sower and the seed. It wasn't read this morning but perhaps you remember it: The farmer scatters seed. Some seed falls along the path where the birds devour it. Some falls on rocky ground where it springs up quickly but withers in the sun because it has no roots. Some falls among thorns, which choke it out. But some seed, Jesus says, falls into good soil where it grows and yields a bountiful harvest. Jesus is telling the disciples that they don't have to bat 1000 to prevail.

And then come the two brief parables that Linda read today. The Kingdom of God is like someone scattering seed on the ground and then forgetting about it and getting on with their daily routine. The sower really has no idea how it happens, but the harvest comes. Hmmm.

And the Kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet it grows to become a huge, sheltering shrub where the birds can make their nests. Hmmm.

I wonder if the disciples were somewhat under-whelmed by Jesus' explanation of the Kingdom. After all, a field of grain, a shrub and a bird's nest doesn't ring like a blockbuster of a campaign platform.

And what about us gathered here at First Church this morning? How does this Kingdom of God image that was so important for Jesus speak to us? Back to my friend Carl's question: We pray for it every time we say the Lord's Prayer, but what does it mean to be the petitioners for such a kingdom? How does being a Kingdom of God person shape one's identity, purpose and lifestyle?

These are very open-ended parables and each of us might well highlight different

possible answers to these questions, but here's where they took me this week.

First and foremost, the Kingdom of God is a proclamation of promise and hope that invites us, as Kingdom People, to trust that God is indeed engaged in the life of our world, and that God's vision of a new creation in which all things are made new, will be realized.

Like the disciples questioning Jesus about the great discrepancy between life in the real world and the promised like of the Kingdom of God, it's easy for us to get discouraged, to become cynical, to relegate whatever we mean by God to pipedreams, lovely rituals, and comforting prayers. That is, we can practice a faith out of habit, even when we are no longer engulfed by its power.

Kingdom People, however, affirm that God is at work even when God seems not to be present at all. It's God's show, not ours. Kingdom People acknowledge that this is a mystery. We don't, won't, and can't understand the secrets of life and the spiritual forces at play. We can, however, try to align ourselves with the movement of the Spirit, which is what we are doing when we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Or, as one great teacher I had used to say, "At the very least, try to stay out of God's way."

Well now I'm guessing that this may sound a bit too passive for some of us in the First Church community. We want to do the word and fix the world. I've always liked St. Augustine's take on this dilemma. He said, "Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you."

I think this sentiment is supported by Jesus' seedy parables of the Kingdom as well and that becomes my second Kingdom observation. Just as Jesus called disciples long ago, we are enlisted in service to the Kingdom in our day as well. There is soil to be prepared. There are seeds to be sown. And we must be prepared to pick up a sickle to harvest, process and distribute ripened grain wherever we find it:

The grain that will provide health care for all

The grain that will become quality education for every child

The grain of sustainable practices to counter our over-consumption

The grain, ripening even in dense thickets of distrust, hatred, and war, which might lead to reconciliation and peace

These are the kinds of grain that God and God's Kingdom People work together to produce in the world.

My third observation is that these parables point us to some interesting and counter-intuitive perspectives when it comes to planning and measuring Kingdom success. The whole size issue is inverted. The kingdom of this world assumes bigger is better, the strongest will prevail, and speed is power. But in Jesus' parable, it's that little mustard seed that grows 1,700 time it's size to provide shelter for the birds-- which is itself measuring a different kind of goal than that of a typical economic analysis.

In a recent book,¹ feminist economist, Ann Cathrin Jarl, questions the assumptions and outcomes of our mainstream economic system where value is determined solely by market forces, costs, and profits. She, and many others, argues for a more just, communal, responsible way of managing our world household so that all may participate in life to their fullest capacity. They envision a system designed and managed so that everyone has food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, education, employment, physical security, dignity, and cultural identity.

"What," Jarl asks, "if the task of satisfying people's basic needs were the goal and organizing principle of our economic research, incentives and rewards?" Now that, I thought to myself, is a Kingdom of God kind of question and a Kingdom of God way of measuring.

And, unlike my grandson Michael, who kept digging up the seeds from his preschool project to see if they had germinated, Kingdom time knows how to wait with confidence. I offer these great words of Martin Luther King, Jr. as an example of Kingdom perseverance at its finest:

I must confess, my friends, the road ahead will not always be smooth. There will still be rocky places of frustration and meandering points of bewilderment. There will be inevitable setbacks here and there. There will be those moments when the buoyancy of hope will be transformed into the fatigue of despair. Our dreams will sometimes be shattered and our ethereal hopes blasted . . . Difficult and painful as it is, we must walk on in the days ahead with an audacious faith in the future . . .

*When our days become dreary with low hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.*²

When we pray "Thy kingdom come," we remind ourselves that the Kingdom of God is about a holy partnership that is very much concerned with the state of affairs in this world -- an arrangement in which God is the senior partner. As Kingdom People, we are called to audaciously proclaim the good news of this kingdom, to pray for it's coming, and to boldly live into it as a present reality with every fiber of our being. Our faith, trust, hope and prayers are inseparable from human action, where God's Kingdom People are fully engaged tilling the soil, sowing the seeds, and harvesting the love, justice, and peace that define the Kingdom of God.

I think Jesus would agree with this observation from Evelyn Underhill as a great description of Kingdom People: "They do not stand aside wrapped in delightful prayers, feeling pure and agreeable to God. They go right down into the mess . . . [They] knock down the walls between the church and the street, even if it means tobacco smoke and

¹ *In Justice: Women and Global Economics* by Ann Cathrin Jarl

² From his address to the Tenth Anniversary Convention of the S.C.L.C. in Atlanta on August 16, 1967.

incense get a bit mixed up." ³

I now invite you all to add the last words to this closing prayer with gusto: ⁴

Help us, O God, to become Kingdom People.
May our reason be shaken by astonishment,
our opinions tempered by wonder, and
our studied assumptions undone by new horizons
of faith and experience.

Free us, O God, to live in the creative, promised, hope-filled moment
that Jesus called: THE KINGDOM OF GOD. ⁵ Amen

³ As quoted by Susan Rakoczy in *Great Mystics and Social Justice*, page 108, and modified somewhat for oral clarity and present circumstances.

⁴ Prayer adapted from *Seasons of the Spirit* materials for this Sunday.

⁵ I'm happy to report that the congregation passed this little sermon test.