

Gary L. Bagley
Hilton Presbyterian Church
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The Kingdom Within
John 18:33-37

One of the most difficult things about believing in God is trying to talk about it. Someone asks you why you believe or how your life is different because you do, and there are no words that are true enough, right enough, big enough to explain. You rummage around for something to say, but everything sounds either too vague or too pious. You could talk about how your heart feels full to bursting sometimes, or about the mysterious sense of kinship you feel with other human beings. You could talk about how even the worst things that happen to you seem to have a blessing hidden in them somewhere, but the truth is that it is impossible to speak directly about holy things. How can the language capture the reality of God? How can words describe that which is beyond all words?

Today is the Christ the King Sunday—the last Sunday of the Church’s year. Next Sunday, we start all over again with the First Sunday of Advent. Today, the reading from second Samuel contains the last words of King David. And from the Gospel of John we get a glimpse of the conversation between Pilate and Jesus. Pilate was obviously intrigued by the person of Jesus. After all, Jesus staged a peaceful protest by riding in to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives to the east on a symbol of peace—a donkey. On that same day, the Roman Governor, of the province of Judaea, Pilate, rode in with a troop of Roman soldiers from the west on a war horse to Jerusalem. Jerusalem, as you know, was the place of the Jewish temple and the center of worship for the Jewish people.

Jesus was being tried for insurrection. With a combination of jest and insult, Pilate asks, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

Jesus responded, “Are you asking this on your own, or playing off what others have said about me?”

“I’m not a Jew. I could care less about your religion,” Pilate quipped.
“What have you done?”

“My kingdom is not from this world. If it were, my followers would be fighting on my behalf,” Jesus said. “My kingdom is among you; it is within the individual. I came to testify to that truth.”

Even Jesus struggled with language of God’s Kingdom. He used parables, metaphors, and similes.

Our language of God’s Kingdom is shrouded with comments like:

Being lost and then being found;

Being blind and receiving new sight;

Falling in love;

Seeking and sowing and casting burdens;

Coming home;

Being saved;

Getting struck by lightning;

Having the lights turned on...

We can’t say what it is exactly, but we can say what it is like.

In the gospels, Jesus used this kind of language all the time. Sinners are like lost sheep. The word of God is like seed sown on different kinds of ground. The kingdom of heaven is like a wedding feast. God is like the owner of a vineyard. “The Kingdom of God is like this...” Jesus said over and over, telling stories about sheep and shepherds, wheat and tares, pearls, treasures, and coins.

In the 13th chapter of Matthew, Jesus zinged his listeners with five examples of the Kingdom of God, one right after the other like scenes glimpsed through the window of a fast-moving train. The Kingdom of God is like this and this and this. It is like he does not want us to get stuck on any one of them but to be dazzled by the number and variety of the things the kingdom of God is like.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed or a handful of yeast—nothing much to look at, not very impressive...at least not at first. But give each of them something to work on—sow the mustard or mix the yeast with flour—and the results can be astounding. The mustard seed becomes a tree big enough for birds to nest in, and the yeast in the flour becomes bread enough to feed the family for a month. If the Kingdom of God is like that, then it is surprising, and potent, and more than meets the eye.

Some of Jesus' comparisons were more difficult. The kingdom of God is like someone who finds buried treasure in a field, covers it back up, and sells all that he or she owns to buy the field. He is a poor man who becomes a rich man through luck. Or, the Kingdom of God is like a merchant who searches for and finds a pearl of great price, selling all that she owns to buy it. In either case, rich or poor, each finds something of great value and sells all that he or she owns to make it his own. Each person finds something that makes everything else he owns trivial by comparison and she doesn't think twice about trading it all in. If the Kingdom is like that, then it is rare but attainable for those who are not only willing but eager to pay the price.

Another comparison used with his followers was that of the Kingdom of God and a fishing net. Thrown into the sea, the net gathers fish of every kind, good and bad, which are sorted out once the net is full. If the kingdom of God is like that, then it is not, in the end, something we find but something that finds us and hauls us into the light.

If the Kingdom of God has something to do with all of the examples of everyday life that Jesus mentioned, while they are difficult to understand, they all have one thing in common—they are hidden, yet present. The mustard seed in the soil. The yeast in the flour. The pearl among all the other pearls. The treasure buried beneath the ground.

If the Kingdom of God is like these, then it is not something readily apparent to the eye but something that must be searched for, something just below the surface of things waiting to be discovered and claimed.

Information like that has always tantalized the human imagination—an authentic letter of Abraham Lincoln found in an old trunk, the old sterling silver spoon found in a box of cheap flatware at a flea market, steel pennies from the World War II years found in a jar of old coins, the old Stradivarius violin found among the dusty junk in someone's attic. It's the stuff legends and movies are made of.

It's easy enough to read about, but where do we go if we really want the Kingdom to be more than words of scripture, songs of idealism, or stories about the saints?

It seems we ought to start with some place really holy, or extraordinary...like The Holy Land, or ancient Christian ruins, or at least retreat centers on mountaintops or seashores.

But then, it may not matter where we are as long as we keep our eyes open for the extraordinary clues wherever we are—listening for the heavenly voices and looking out for the heavenly visions. Because if the kingdom of God is *really* hidden in this world, it is hidden very well, and only the most dedicated detectives among us stand a chance of finding it at all.

Or maybe God has resorted to the oldest trick in the book and placed it in plain view. There is always that possibility, you know—that God decided to place the kingdom of heaven not in any of the extraordinary places that treasure hunters would be sure to check, but in the last place that any of us would think to look, namely, in the ordinary circumstances of our everyday lives, like the unexpected smile of a child, the top to your favorite coffee mug hidden among the clutter on your desk, the pearl that popped off your necklace and is lying where it fell on the rug, or the house key tucked in your pants pocket hanging in the closet.

Jesus understood this unique phenomenon all along. Why else would he talk about this life-changing relationship using images of farmers, women making bread, merchants buying and selling things, and fishermen sorting fish unless he was trying to tell us that his kingdom is before our very eyes. “X” marks the spot, right here where we stand, this moment, this place, in the ordinary people, places, and activities of our lives.

If we want to talk about the Kingdom of God, Jesus seems to be telling us that we have to begin with earthly things like men, women, soil, seeds, fields, rivers, birds, air, bread, children, smiles, laughter, joy, peace. The Kingdom of God is like these things; the Kingdom of God is found in these things. These are the places to look for the will and presence of God. If we cannot find them here we will never find them anywhere else.

Prayer

O Lord, open our eyes that we may see, our ears that we may hear, and our hearts that we may respond to the incredible world of your kingdom that is waiting for us. AMEN.

2 Samuel 23:1-7

1Now these are the last words of David: The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favorite of the Strong One of Israel: 2The spirit of the LORD speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue. 3The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel has said to me: One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, 4is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.

5Is not my house like this with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire? 6But the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away; for they cannot be picked up with the hand; 7to touch them one uses an iron bar or the shaft of a spear. And they are entirely consumed in fire on the spot.

John 18:33-37

33Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" 34Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" 35Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" 36Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." 37Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."