

Akron Christian Reformed Church

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Isaiah 6.8-13; Colossians 1.9-14; Matthew 13.10-17

Kingdom 1: Seeing the Kingdom of Heaven

Prayer: Merciful God, we enter your presence this morning so that we may see, because we are blind. We are blind to your presence and your action. We are blind to your Kingdom that surrounds us. Truly, our lives are consumed by the temporal and we rarely even contemplate the eternal.

Help us today to see. As we hear your creative word, heal us. Open our eyes, open our hearts, open our minds, to your Kingdom that surrounds us. Overpower our prejudices. Destroy our chauvinisms. Eliminate our tendency to sort people into categories. And allow us to marvel at your creation, including all people and all cultures. We need help dear God, to live and act as your ambassadors of love within this world. Come to us now and speak to us. Amen.

Before we read scripture let me say this: In our culture and certainly within much of the American Church it is increasingly difficult to talk about the Kingdom of Heaven because words like "King" or "Kingdom" are considered to be too male, too parochial, too colonial, too patronizing. Therefore, parts of the church are losing the ability to talk about what is probably the most significant theological insight of the New Testament the arrival of the Kingdom with Jesus. This is one tragedy. The other tragedy is that there are other parts of the church who still can't hear Jesus and they cannot see how the Kingdom of God is the organizing center of our faith. They can't see past the church. We'll talk about that later.

I have to admit that over the past few years, Jesus has crawled into my brain and has messed me up. He keeps talking about the Kingdom of Heaven, and scrambling much of the theology I learned throughout my life. Over and over and over, Jesus brings up the Kingdom of Heaven.

It's Jesus' fault that I no longer think all that much about nations, or races, or, really, even the church. I think much more about the Kingdom of Heaven. Those other organizing categories -- nations, races, the church, and the like -- are all temporal structures that help to keep order, but every one of them will eventually disappear -- even the church. But the Kingdom is eternal and has very little concern with maintaining order within this world.

Even though the Kingdom is concerned with what is God's and who belongs to God, the Kingdom is not willing to powerfully or forcefully exert its presence. Instead the Kingdom of Heaven claims us, one person at a time. Here and there. Here and there. Softly, gently, quietly it creeps into our consciousness until we discover that we no longer have much concern about the temporal institutions that keep order in this world. As the Kingdom grows in our consciousness, the political realms fade and lose their ability to captivate our energies.

Matthew 13 is Matthew's great teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven. In Matthew 13 Jesus repeatedly uses parables while talking about the Kingdom of Heaven. (The Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew is the same as the Kingdom of God in the other gospels.)

Which leads us to understand that not even Jesus is quite able to tell us what the Kingdom is. There are no words that capture the essence of the Kingdom. Not even Jesus is able to point to anything solid and declare, "See! See right there, that's what I'm talking about." He doesn't have adequate words to concretely define the Kingdom of Heaven. So he can only say, "Well, the Kingdom of Heaven is like this, and it's like that." He can only use similes and create parables.

And these parables make sense to his disciples because they haven't closed their hearts to him. But they do not make sense to the very religious leaders and their disciples because Jesus' words don't fit with the theology that they created. (cf. 13.11-17)

Jesus speaks in parables and only those who follow him, only those who listen closely to him, only those who allow him to be their King, will hear and understand what he's saying.

Because he isn't embracing the political reality of his day. He isn't embracing Jewish national patriotism – which is very powerful. He isn't wrapping himself in the Jewish flag and declaring that nationalism and God go hand-in-hand. But he also isn't embracing the rule of Caesar, or Roman patriotism. He isn't embracing the way of any political party institution found in society or in the temple.

He's embracing God's way and it is counter-cultural. God's way runs across the grain of the politicians of his day, and of the politicians of our day. The Kingdom of Heaven runs against the grain of all politicians, found in any of the other kingdoms.

What Jesus is doing, is he's laying claim to all that there is. To everything that is in heaven and on the earth. He's declaring that the Kingdom of Heaven supersedes any human institution, and only those who follow him will see this and understand this. He's declaring: "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it; the world, and all who live in it...." (Psalm 24.1) That's the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus proclaims.

Eventually, the true disciples of Jesus discover that his Kingdom isn't built upon force, or upon weapons, or upon power, or upon governmental policies, or upon anything else that's cooked up by humanity. His disciples eventually discover that the whole world belongs to Jesus, the King, and that his followers will necessarily work to orient people's eyes to the Kingdom of Heaven and away from the kingdoms of this world. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," you say? Well, truthfully, not much belongs to Caesar except for violence, force and taxes. Let Caesar keep those things. Our King doesn't want them.

And it's not that his disciples will become politically seditious. It's not that they will try to overthrow or transform the kingdoms of this world. It's not that they'll try to convert the governmental, political structures, into Christianity.

But it's more that Christ's disciples will become increasingly indifferent to the messages of the kingdoms; we will become increasingly skeptical of the claims of the kingdoms; we will become increasingly removed from the desires of the kingdoms; and we will become increasingly aware of the omnipresence of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Our friend Tricia Timmer went to the Holy Land last month. Her husband posted a picture of Tricia standing in front of an olive tree planted at Yad Vashem by the Israeli government in commemoration of her grandparents Aris and Bregta Timmer for hiding Jews in WWII.

This reminded me that towards the end of the presentation at the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, there's a long wall, filled with the names of the people throughout Europe who hid Jews and who helped Jews to evade the Nazis. I was proud that the Dutch portion of the wall was one of the largest, even though 80 percent of the Dutch Jews were deported.

I found the names of Tricia's grandparents, the Timmers. I also found Duane's family name right beneath them, the Timmermans. I ran my hand over the carved names, feeling them slipping beneath my fingers, and I prayed that our names would be on such a wall if it should ever be built again.

It's disturbing how the Church did not live the Kingdom of Heaven in the face of the Nazis. Instead, the Church became complicit in the final solution and the quest for world dominance. It

embraced the evil philosophy of “us against them.” It pretended that the Jews are not part of the Kingdom of Heaven and are therefore disposable.

The church, throughout the world and not just in Germany, looked the other way as the Kingdom of Heaven was being murdered right before their eyes. Indeed, the church participated in the shredding of the Kingdom, because she could not see the Kingdom of Heaven as she stared at the political powers who surrounded her.

I think that we must be careful right now in our historical setting, because it’s very easy to focus on the kingdoms of this world and never even notice the Kingdom of Heaven. The political powers are so real, so powerful, so large, so loud, they’re always asserting themselves and flexing their muscles, whereas God’s Kingdom is so quiet and unobtrusive, it’s easy to miss.

But we must, right now, begin to focus our eyes upon Christ’s Kingdom. We must, right now, begin to allow the Kingdom of Heaven to grow, an expand, and dwell within our hearts. We must, right now, hear Jesus calling us to follow him into his Kingdom. Because we may very soon need to care for the people of Christ’s Kingdom who are being ignored and persecuted. I suspect, that time has already arrived.

During the coming weeks listen to Jesus’ message of the Kingdom of Heaven, and allow it to expand until it overwhelms your thoughts.

Don’t imagine that the Kingdom of Heaven is something found over there, away from us, in some other worldly place. Don’t imagine that the Kingdom of Heaven becomes real only after we die and leave this earth. Because the Kingdom of Heaven is right now. It resides within all of us, and it surrounds all of us. It is in us and in our neighbor.

The Kingdom of Heaven is no farther away than our own listening ears, our own seeing eyes, and our own small actions. Right now, the Kingdom of Heaven is wherever God is, and God is all around us. And God is most powerfully discovered among the oppressed, the hurting, the alienated, and the vilified. God is here with us, and with all of humanity, and with all of creation.

We live within God’s Kingdom every day of our life. We’re today part of God’s Kingdom, and so, the question is whether or not we will be able to see this reality and allow it to shape who we are in a world that’s profoundly alienated from one another. The question is whether or not we will participate in uniting humanity or in dividing it. The question is whether we will participate in the protection of the creation or the destruction of it. Those are Kingdom questions. And Jesus wants us to consider them and be transformed by them.

I love that quote from Colossians that we heard this morning. Give “joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1.12-14)

So live, and play, and think, and eat, and drink, and be with your family and friends and neighbors, as those who have left darkness and who dwell in the light of the Kingdom of Jesus.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.