

“Kingdom Stories”

Psalm 105:1-11; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33-44-52

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Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven....we pray it every week. But what the heck is it, this Kingdom of God, and why do we pray for it?

Like many things of the Spirit, there is a certain mystery about the Kingdom. So what do we know about it? We know it uses a magisterial image—monarchs and subjects—to describe the relationship between God and us. As such, it is a bit dated, and some writers speak of the realm of God or the commonwealth of God. But most hold on to this image of a ruler and subjects.

We also know that this realm or Kingdom is less a place and more a way of being in relationship where life as God wants it to be is realized. Kindness, goodness, beauty and truth supplant meanness, ugliness and lies. Unless one is completely self-absorbed, it’s hard to be against such things.

We know that Jesus began his earthly preaching ministry, according to two of the four Gospels, declaring “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand (or “has come near”).” (Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:17).

We know there is a tension in Kingdom theology, described most commonly as “not yet, but already.” That is, the kingdom is “not yet” here, which is why we pray for it to come. Yet it is also “but already,” that is, it is breaking in on us even while not yet fully realized.

It is this latter understanding about God’s kingdom—that it is breaking in on us even while it is not yet fully here—that helps us understand the “kingdom stories” from today’s Gospel.

When something momentous happens we expect it to BE momentous, do we not? With apologies to those unfamiliar with professional basketball, when LeBron James leaves Cleveland to go to

Miami we expect it to be big. And when he leaves Miami to return to Cleveland we expect THAT to be big, too. Even in the orbits of our own worlds, momentous events call for “selfies” and “Facebook” postings at the very least. If we “tweet,” so much the better (or so we think).

Jesus takes a different tack with these kingdom stories. The implication is that God’s work in our world is far more subtle than we realize; requires more patience and faith than many of us have; and, in the end, asks something of us if we really mean the prayer we make every week “*thy Kingdom come, thy will be done.*”

One of the privileges of living so long is having lots of stories. So using the five stories Jesus tells today as templates, let me tell a few Kingdom stories of my own.

A small seed that grows into a big plant....

It was right after World War II. Factories were shutting down. Life needs of urban residents were on the rise. Pastor after pastor in this busy Connecticut city found they could not keep pace with the urgent needs requested of them. The downtown churches got together and hired a social worker. They formed an organization, “The Council for Inter-church Cooperation.” Churches joined. Individuals supported it, too. Later on came services for homeless youth, ex-offenders, hungry people and children trying to learn. Now, nearly 70 years later, The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport “leverages hope and changes lives” through a staff of 17 and a budget of over \$1.5 million. It was a ministry I was privileged to serve for 16 years, six of them as chief executive officer. All from hiring a social worker. *A small seed that grows into a big plant....*

A little leaven that rises a whole loaf....

The Sunday School Superintendent nearly burst into my office, without an appointment, my second week as pastor. “*WHAT are you going to do about the Sunday School?*” she demanded. “*I don’t know, Nancy, what is wrong with the Sunday School?*” I asked. “*You mean they didn’t tell you?*” she asked incredulously. “*Tell me what?*” I

asked. *“That we have no more room! That there is not enough classroom space and too much clutter in the few classrooms we have.”* So began an hour-long conversation about the need for space. Nancy, the leaven in the loaf, caused the whole congregation to rise to the challenge of providing updated and expanded facilities for a growing church. Joined by others with expertise in building, engineering and fund-raising, we conducted a \$400,000 renovation of existing classrooms and doubled the square footage while updating the exterior of the Huntington United Methodist Church in Shelton. *A little leaven that rises a whole loaf....*

A treasure hidden in a field....

Christine died of a massive stroke at age 48 while sailing on the Chesapeake Bay. Al also died young from heart-related causes. Their spouses, Joe and Liz, couldn't have been more different from one another. He was quiet, worked with his hands, Methodist. She was gregarious, the entertainer, Roman Catholic. Yet in one another, in the midst of their grief and loss, they found a treasure. They sold his pre-Revolutionary War colonial that he had personally restored. They sold her ranch that she and her late husband had renovated. In that year they changed everything about their lives for the sake of *a treasure hidden in a field....* And me? I had the solemn privilege of presiding as Christine's funeral and the joyful privilege of co-celebrating their marriage.

A jewel merchant finding a flawless pearl....

They were the fifth generation owners of a Connecticut family farm. Subdivisions were pressing in, causing real estate values to rise and, with them, taxes on the farm's already-thin profit margin. They considered selling, moving to upstate New York and starting over. Then, the 100+ acres of the hill farm across the valley, their pristine view, was put on the market. Surely it was going to go the way of other farms, into more housing subdivisions.

Well, they didn't quite sell everything. But they leveraged the heck out of what they had to buy that hill farm. It was rough going at first and there were days and months where they weren't sure they'd make it. But they did. So for over 30 years now individuals, families and school and community groups have made the trek to Pumpkinseed Hill in Shelton to pick pumpkins (and more recently strawberries and blueberries) on that portion of the Jones' Family Farms. Which is now in its 6th generation with Cornell-educated Jamie Jones. *A jewel merchant finding a flawless pearl....*

A fishnet that catches all fish and sorts the good from the bad....

Catching all kinds of fish. Whether at the beach or in the sanctuary. Inviting, equipping and sending disciples as close as last Wednesday and Thursday's community suppers and as far as Maine and the Caribbean. And "all kinds" means "all kinds." No exceptions. *"Whoever you are, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here."* Recognize any church you know? Yes, I believe it's us! The sorting: we leave that to the angels because if it's perfect people and a perfect church we're looking for, this isn't it. But faithful? Yes, faithful. Growing, going on to perfection, seeking our neighbors well-being? This is the place. Find yours as you discover the Kingdom!

Today's passage concludes: *Every student well-trained in God's kingdom is like the owner of a general store who can put his hands on anything you need, old or new, exactly when you need it.* I think that's what an encounter with the Kingdom does to us. It so tunes us to the spiritual riches that when the time is at hand God gives us the words and the wisdom to deliver the right stuff. That's my challenge to you today. If you are indeed praying for the Kingdom to come, pray also that God will well-train you in love, compassion, mercy, righteousness and all the characteristics of the Kingdom, so that you can indeed be that general store owner for the sake of Christ's love. All right, maybe we won't have exactly the right thing every time. But if not, we'll know where to get it and who to get it from. In so doing we build relationships of love. Relationships of the Kingdom.