

July 2, 2023

The Kingdom is Among You

Luke 17:20-21

²⁰ Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, ²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

The Kingdom of God. Just sit with that for a minute. What is it? Where is it? When is it going to come? How is the kingdom of God different from the kingdoms of Pharaoh, or Caesar, or any earthly ruler? It stirs our imaginations. Nowhere do we get a clear and precise definition of it, instead we get glimpses of it in the covenant language of the Old Testament and from the poetry of the prophets. And Jesus makes it his life's work. Embedded in the ministry and teachings of Jesus is the Kingdom of God. Jesus not only proclaims its arrival, but he also embodies it. He just didn't explain it.

When the Pharisees asked him directly, "When is it coming?" Jesus tells them it's not something you can point to and say, "There it is!" "It has arrived!" "No," he says, "the kingdom of God is among you." Different English versions of the Bible translate this teaching of Jesus to also read, "the Kingdom of God is within you," and, "the Kingdom of God is in your midst." It gets translated differently because the original language is vague. I like the idea of holding all three translations together. There is

even the possibility that Jesus is talking about himself, he is in their midst. “Within you” gives you the sense that it is a condition of the heart. “Among you” implies it is what connects us as humans. You can see how all three are interrelated.

The simplest way I know to explain it is to say the Kingdom of God is where God rules, not by force but by invitation. It is where God’s will is being carried out and God’s dream of a healed humanity is being enacted, among us, and within us, and in the person of Jesus.

And what we know from Jesus is that God’s rule and reign is vastly different than the tyrannical and self-serving kingdoms of their history. The prophets condemned any rule that neglected widows and orphans, or mistreated immigrants. And the picture of God that emerges is a God that shows special concern for those at the margins, the vulnerable, the destitute, the enslaved. Along comes Jesus and we see that concern manifest in the actions and teaching of Jesus. He ministers at the margins to the demonized and the despised, the cast out and cast off. And a picture begins to emerge of a kingdom rooted in the values and ethics of compassion, inclusion, forgiveness, service, and love. These values and ethics are not the end in themselves, instead, they move us in the direction of God’s ultimate goal – kinship – a community where there is no “us” and “them,” just “us.” As soon as we label someone, or categorize them as “other,” we shift from seeing that person as kin – as a fellow human being – beloved by God – made in God’s image. Kinship is being one with the other. When Jesus ate with tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners, it was a family table. He wasn’t there to straighten them out, but to lift the veil of whatever shame or disgrace that obscured their true identity as fellow human beings – beloved by God – made in God’s image.

When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, and as he enacted the Kingdom of God in his ministry, we start to see where all this is headed; a

circle of compassion, where no one is on the outside. Jesus lived and served on the margins of that circle, saying, “Yes, you!” And by example, he teaches us that the kingdom is manifest wherever and whenever radical kinship is realized.

Mother Teresa once said, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.” We belong to each other.

We can be well-intentioned, generous, and serve our neighbors – thinking to ourselves this is what God requires of us. But the Kingdom of God – the Kingdom of God is about much more than what God requires but what God desires for us – that we may be one – that we are no longer “us” and “them,” just “us.” Only then will we have peace. Only then will there be justice. May this be our life’s work.¹

The other night I had the opportunity to hear Bryan Stanlow share about his work. He had me both laughing and crying. As he shared, I caught a glimpse of the kingdom that Jesus says is among us and within us. So, I asked him if he would share with us and he said, “Yes!” Please welcome Bryan Stanlow.

Bryan shared several stories as a chef cooking for unhoused individuals at the Illumination Foundation shelter.

¹ Some of the things I have shared in this sermon come out of two different videos of Father Gregory Boyle talking about “Radical Kinship” and his work with Homeboy Industries. I quote him often because I resonate so much with his message. Here are the links to these two videos and I encourage you to read any of his books: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guW1-mBfaOk>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyKHDfFy7wI>