

November 29, 2020

Matthew 25:31-46

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"The Kingdom People"

"We make heaven on earth ourselves" this is a quote that a mother of one of our congregation members used to say a lot. "We make heaven on earth ourselves." This quote speaks to this deep reality that we pray every Sunday, let your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. This is our deeper call as Christians to not only live our lives in anticipation of what will come after our death but live our lives as active participants and partners with God as God's kingdom emerges here and now.

The context of today's passage in Matthew's Gospel is found in the very last portion of the gospel and scholars refer to the portion as judgement discourse or some scholars call it "clash of kingdoms." I love this title "clash of kingdoms." There is a juxtaposition of God's kingdom and the kingdom of the earth. Juxtaposition of a kingdom of God that is rooted in the abundance of God's goodness, life-giving, bringing peace and justice, love and compassion and a kingdom of this earth, broken and in pain, hungry for more and more power with no care for others. And we see this clash in this parable that Jesus shares. We see a juxtaposition of lives of those that responded to the needs of those around them, in very tangible and perhaps intangible ways and lives of those have turned away from a neighbor in need.

Yes Jesus is talking about here the kingdom of heaven that will inherit the kingdom. And it seems that caring for those in need and all around us is crucial for inheriting the kingdom. What is very interesting to me is that the people who are inheriting the kingdom of God in this parable have already been living this reality of the kingdom on Earth. They already have been caring and sharing their love and compassion with those in need. So for them inheriting the kingdom and participating in it is a continuation of the life that they lived.

Of course the question is that they are asking how exactly they fed Jesus, visited him in prison, gave him something to drink, gave him clothing. I think some of us are wondering the same question. How does sharing our love with others connect to our relationship with God and directly impacts God? I was asking that question myself as I was reading our text. And in this week's meditations that come from the Center of Action and Contemplation under the leadership of Father Richard Rohr, one of their *faculty member, Cynthia Bourgeault*, talked about God's kingdom and connection between us and God, each and other. What she wrote really intrigued me and I want to share that with you as well. She writes,

"The Kingdom of Heaven is not later, but *lighter*—some more subtle quality or dimension of experience accessible to you right in the moment. You don't die into it; you awaken into it. . . .is not a place you go to, but a place you *come from*. It is a whole new way of looking at the world, a transformed awareness that literally turns this world into a different place. . . The hallmark of this awareness is that it sees no separation—not between God and humans, not between humans and other humans..."

So in God's kingdom, we are one, like branches of one vine. We are one with God and we are one with each other. We are connected to all people and God's image lives in each of the human beings. Living in the reality of God's kingdom is about recognizing the face of God in each person and share in the common experiences as humans.

Several of other members of our congregations and I just finished participating in a program that opens up space for conversation on race and racial reconciliation. This program is called "Undivided." There were probably 25-30 people of different races, white, and black, and mixed race. And we were invited to learn and engage in conversation with each other on the difficult topics of racism and the impact it has on the well-being, education and job opportunities, health and family life for those who are of a darker or a different color of the skin that the majority of those who live in the United States. In one of the sessions, we did an exercise and then talked about using cognitive empathy as a tool and a way to have conversations and engage with those whose experience is different than ours.

We were shared a series of photos and asked to respond in chat our immediate emotional reaction to the image. The image I identified with is an image of a young woman in hijab standing in front of the US flag. Beautiful dark eyes, black hair, with darker olive skin. However, on the background of the flag there were words. They said "extremist." "terrorist." "ISIS" "war" As I was looking at this image tears started to fall down my cheeks, I could not believe that such words could be used for such a beautiful young woman whose future is all before her, so many opportunities, so much to experience. I could not believe that just her appearance could gauge such stereotypes and words of hate. So after we all identified with the image, we got to practice cognitive empathy. The first step in this process is to simply decide that this person is worthy. Worthy of my connection, of my time, but most importantly worthy of God's love. And this first step invites me then to see the emotion that person experienced, identify with this emotion recalling a similar experience in my life and then lean in with curiosity and open ears and hearts. This experience taught me to first of all constantly remember that each person is worthy and that however different the story/background/skin color is from mine, we still share our common human experience and that we are connected through God.

By responding to those around us with empathy, we are experiencing glimpses of God's kingdom, moreover, participating in God's Kingdom here on earth, as we see them bearing God's image. I am not sure if those faithful ones in Jesus' parable knew about such tool as cognitive empathy, but what seems to me is that they have practiced it for sure. Friends, what is important about the words that Jesus shares in this parable is that they are the very last words that Jesus speaks before he was arrested and taken to die on the cross. The message of sharing our care and love with others is very significant and very much in line what Jesus came to preach about and fulfill. This is what we are called to do, no questions asked.

Back to here and now - Thanksgiving week of 2020. Thanksgiving this year will not look like other years'. Some of us already have cancelled our travel to visit our extended families, we cancelled large family gatherings around a table with good food. This brings us so much sadness and grief. I think we all feel this Covid fatigue. We are tired and done with the social distancing and masks. We are tired and done with living in this unknown space of not being able to plan far ahead. We are tired of online learning and Zoom meetings that drain us so much. Our mental health is suffering, with so much anxiety and depression. We want things to go back to normal, so we can gather with our families, see those who live far from us. Go out and just enjoy ourselves. This reality strips us of the joys of getting together and living normal life, experiencing holidays. And it seems like there is a clash of the realities, the reality of the state of the world in november 2020 and the reality of God's kingdom! Because God's kingdom is within us and it is

here and now, this reality of pandemic cannot strip us of the reality of God's kingdom and what it brings into our lives. This reality cannot strip us of the joy that we share in faith, when we worship wherever we are and continue to be the church. This reality cannot take away the gifts of empathy and compassion when we continue to do what Jesus asks us to do, to care and love those around us. This reality cannot strip us of God's love that lives in our hearts. This reality cannot strip us of gratitude that comes when we open up our hearts to the abundance of God's goodness all around us.

And here is more good news that we here at Powell UMC have been living this reality in the past nine months. In the way that we have connected with those in need through our generosity and compassion. God's kingdom looks so beautiful here at Powell UMC. It looks to us like buying some extra grocery items and toiletries items at a store and bringing those to share with those who are in need right now. And we gathered more than 3 tons of food for those in need. God's kingdom looks like writing Christmas cards and letters to those who are in prison to let them know that they are not forgotten. God's kingdom looks like sharing gifts with children here in Delaware county and across the globe. God's kingdom looks like continuing the conversation on race and being vulnerable to be truthful and honest in sharing our story but also being able to listen to other stories.

My brothers and sisters, let us continue to live responding to the reality of God, in the reality of abundance and goodness, our hearts are grateful and thankful for this reality and we share that blessing with others and fulfill God's purposes here on earth as it is in heaven.