

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Up Close and Personal”

Building towers out of blocks is a skill I’ve rediscovered since the birth of grandchildren. Young kids love to build things. Well, they like to build things and then knock them down. My granddaughter, Nora, received a uniquely shaped set of building blocks at Christmas. They are rainbow colored and in the shape of an arc. You can put the shapes together in a typical rainbow display or think outside of the box and use each wooden arc like a bridge, where stacking them one on top of the other creates a 3-4 foot high tower. I had fun doing that, building a tower. “Hey, everybody,” I said, “look what Papa did.” Nora came over and marvelled for a brief moment at what I’d constructed and then she looked at me with eyes that said, “That’s great, but can I knock it down?” I nodded, giving her the go-ahead and down it came. Now, here’s what we know. Knocking things down is easier than building them up. I suppose we could pause on that thought and reflect on the way we experience this truth in our lives. It’s easier to knock things down than build them up. The building up depends upon a solid foundation. That’s the key. For anything to stay strong or to grow and expand, there has to be a foundation that provides the base on which everything is built.

In the opening chapter of Mark’s Gospel, we find a description of what happened as Jesus began his mission to bring the reality of God into the world. Jesus starts with the foundation upon which everything else will depend. This foundation is captured through his words, the message he speaks, when he says, “the kingdom of God has come near.” (Mark 1:15) Everything will depend upon this. Now, the kingdom is not so much built up physically as much as it is a reality we experience. Instead of blocks and buildings, think influence, and presence, and authority. The kingdom of God is the way God’s purpose permeates every aspect of our lives. The kingdom is not a place. The kingdom of God is not a destination. The kingdom of God is an orientation that acknowledges God is at the center of what we think, feel, and hope for. God’s kingdom is the ultimate influencer, impacting what we say and do.

As the gospel story unfolds, Jesus teaches important kingdom lessons along the way. He teaches about forgiveness. He heals what is broken. He brings freedom to those who are captive, especially those held down by worldly assumptions that exclude or minimize certain groups. As the kingdom bearer, Jesus is always moving the circle outward. And we learn that Jesus not only talks about the kingdom of God, he embodies the kingdom of God. And this is why his crucifixion becomes the ultimate sign of the kingdom’s power. First, on the cross light and love defeat death and darkness. It’s at the cross that Jesus’ sacrificial love tells the world what matters most to God and what should matter most to us. God’s kingdom is peace. The rule of God is grace. To live in God’s kingdom is to be shaped by a love that has no end. But, before any of the lessons of the kingdom or its saving power can impact our lives, the foundation block must be set in place. This foundation is the acknowledgement that the kingdom of God is here. Nothing else makes sense unless we recognize God’s authority. There is no building up of the faith in us if the foundation has not been laid beneath us. I’m reminded of the words of the old hymn:

*How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word
What more can He say than to you He has said
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?*

When we turn to Jesus and before we ask him for whatever we need, he names the reality upon which we stand. The kingdom is here. Everything depends upon it. “Thy kingdom come,” and so, the moment is now. The influence of God is upon us. This is where it begins. It is so important to see that this is the beginning of the story, not the end of it. Sure enough, “God is here.” That’s where everything begins. But, what do we do now? How will we respond to the reality of the kingdom of God in our lives?

Did you hear how the gospel not only tells us the first thing Jesus says but also tells us the first thing Jesus does? Jesus calls others to follow him. When the kingdom of God shows up we are invited to respond. Peter and Andrew, and James and John, were fishers. This was hard work. Making a living in the fickle waters of the Sea of Galilee was not easy. Empty nets meant empty bank accounts and empty bellies. Many of us know how tough life can be. We are well aware that believing in God and listening to Jesus does not magically lift us out of life’s challenges. The first disciples had rough times, too. They were hard working, salt of the earth kind of folk. This is the gospel’s way of saying that if the Galilean fishermen were candidates for discipleship then anyone has the credentials to live their lives with Christ. There’s no training needed. There’s no education that has to come first. There’s no status that we need to first make us look good in God’s eyes. Jesus calls, and if he calls the likes of the fishermen then every one of us is on the recruitment list, too. This is what Jesus does when the kingdom has come.

He calls, and we are all gathered up in that invitation. The fishermen responded to Christ without hesitation. They dropped their nets and followed. Without a second thought they were ready to fish other seas. The call to follow Christ is laid on our hearts. How will we respond? Will we do so immediately? Will we respond completely? Will our response be passionate and purposeful? Will we say “yes” to Jesus without condition or control?

I’ve thought about ending the sermon right here. God’s kingdom influence is now. And so, what’s our next move? This is really up to each one of us, but I want to give a little more to think about before I conclude. There’s an experience in our spiritual lives called “discernment.” The process often involves prayer. It sometimes includes reflecting on scripture or other holy writings. Discernment can involve conversations with others, as we listen for God’s voice through those who know us and care about us. Discernment is very helpful but sometimes God calls with more urgency. The first disciples dropped their nets and followed. Sometimes whatever is happening in the moment is waiting for our immediate response. A couple of evenings ago, we decided to order food online from a local restaurant. I checked the menu, reading the descriptions of various dishes, and I couldn’t decide. Nothing jumped out at me. I felt like I might as well just close my eyes, circle my finger, and drop it on the page to make my selection. God’s call in our lives isn’t an invitation to consider an overwhelming number of options. Responding to Jesus involves recognizing that he comes alongside me in the specific circumstances of my life and asks me to follow God’s path in that moment and in that context. Do we want to take time to discern about that decision? Probably. Should we spend time in prayer about it? I think so. But using discernment or prayer as a way of prolonging our response to God is to risk missing the moment. Sometimes it’s urgent, what God asks of us. Sometimes, God is so real to us that responding completely and immediately is what is required.

I mentioned earlier that throughout the gospel story the reality of the cross leans back and shapes whatever is happening in the moment. Through the cross, the deep love of God is impacting what’s happening now. When it comes to love, we don’t so much discern about it as we decide to do it. Love is a decision. Love is often urgent and immediate. To respond in love is to say “yes” to Jesus in the midst of whatever is happening in the world. When we disagree, when we worry about our future, when we are hurting or when others hurt us, Jesus says, “Follow me,” and this is his invitation to love now in whatever way is needed. The first disciples responded to Jesus quickly and completely because they sensed he offered something more valuable than what they were holding. I think it was God’s love that made their response possible, and it’s love that makes it possible in us, too.

I invite you to pray with me, to discern, where in your life just now God is calling you to respond in love. We’ll take a little time today to think about this, but only so we can hear God’s more clearly and more closely, and then respond to God more firmly and fully. Love is here. Love is calling, and Love is waiting for our response.