

Title: The Kin-dom of Heaven

Date: 8/20/2023 (Proper 15, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Genesis 45:1-15](#); [Psalm 133](#); [Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32](#); [Matthew 15: \(10-20\), 21-28](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/tQLETU8jupE?t=1564>

Oh, how good and pleasant it is, when kindred live together in unity!
For there has God ordained the blessing: life for evermore. (Ps 133:1,5)¹
Amen.

This summer, we've heard several parables about the Kingdom of Heaven. A few weeks ago, I encouraged us to think of that kingdom not just as a noun that is strictly defined and static, but as a noun that's taking some kind of action or undergoing some kind of transformation. It is alive and in motion; it is an ever-moving destination.

When we talk about engaging with the Word of God, that's what it should feel like. In the Bible, whenever chief priests or Pharisees or scribes or lawyers ask Jesus a question, often they are trying to pin him down so they can get him in trouble. Jesus sees what they're doing, so he often avoids giving direct answers to the questions they ask. Instead, he responds with parables, or a question of his own; he shifts the foundation of their understanding right under their feet.

When Jesus does this, he's not just leading his followers to a new place; he's showing them the way. He walks them through the process of how he got there so that they can do more than retrace his steps. He equips them so they can find a way when there seems to be no way, when they are facing a different situation or trying to answer a different question.

For example, the Bible doesn't have stories about Jesus facing the tension of caring for his aging parents as his children become teenagers. There are no recorded teachings from Jesus on Artificial Intelligence or the opioid crisis or the aftermath of the devastating wildfire in Maui. But, with the Holy Scriptures in hand, we can look toward where he's pointing. We can build on the knowledge of what he has done and how he has lived his life to map out our course.

One way I've seen people do this is to reframe the Kingdom of Heaven as the kin-dom of heaven. Just as Jesus gave his followers a new understanding of who the Messiah is and what the Messiah came here to do, I've seen this principle applied to the Kingdom of Heaven.

What comes to mind when you hear the word kingdom?
How about kin, as in k-i-n, short for kindred?

A kin-dom is made up of kin, meaning siblings and other people we consider family. This is a reaction to the ideas and values that are associated with the word "kingdom." Look at the history of kings and royal families in Israel, in England and other European countries. Think about the difference between a castle and a home.

In a kin-dom, there is no king, no ruler or system of government imposing the will of a few on the lives of many. God is the head of the household, and we govern ourselves by the example set by Jesus. People will know that we are part of this kin-dom by our love, by the way we love our enemies and love our neighbors as ourselves.

In a kin-dom, there is no hierarchy of the many serving the few. All children of God are our siblings in Christ. We are called to care for one another, for strangers, orphans, widows, for anyone who's in a vulnerable situation, physically, emotionally, spiritually, or financially.² Wealth and power are not inherited or hoarded, but poured out for the benefit of everyone because there is always more than enough, more than we could possibly imagine.

When we start reimagining kingdom as kin-dom, it's not about being clever or cute. It's about dreaming a new way of being, a new way of opening up our lives and recognizing our interconnectedness.³

This leads us back to perpetual questions like: How do we know this is where Jesus is pointing? How do we know this is the path Jesus would have taken?

Who's familiar with the acronym WWJD? It stands for... (What Would Jesus Do?)

When I hear people ask that question, I feel like they're looking for a definitive answer. It reminds me of all those times my old bosses asked me what I thought when they were really waiting for me to come up with the answer they already had in mind.

Perhaps it's more helpful to wonder "How would Jesus approach this?" or "What questions would Jesus ask?"

Rather than pushing us toward a definitive answer, these questions keep us from memorizing traditional answers at the risk of applying them in a harmful or, at best, a suboptimal way.

For example, in today's gospel, Jesus criticizes the crowd's framework of impurity. He pushes and stretches their understanding by explaining it's not about what goes in the mouth and through our body; it's about what comes out of the heart and through the mouth.

If Jesus were teaching today, not speaking out of evil intent, murder, adultery and so on feels like a baseline; that's the least we could do. If Jesus were teaching today, he might push and stretch our understanding of impurity to cover the things we've left unsaid as other people speak out of evil intent, murder, adultery and so on. Neutrality doesn't protect us from impurity. Avoiding conflict doesn't protect us from impurity. When we allow those kinds of comments to stand, when our silence gives those kinds of beliefs credibility, we are part of the impurity.

If Jesus were teaching today, he might point out the things we've left undone as other people carry out agendas that build up their private kingdoms instead of benefiting the broader kin-dom. Jesus didn't ignore the sick, the poor, or anyone who was on the margins of society. He went among them, and he ate with them. He didn't just take care of them; he proclaimed to them the good news that they too were part of the Kin-dom of Heaven.

In the second part of gospel, we get one of those stories that pushes and stretches our understanding of Jesus. He doesn't exactly come off very well, and some people jump to his defense. "He was just playing a part so the woman could prove her faith." "He's setting an example about the point he just made about the problematic way people uphold traditions."

Other people try to make this a debate about whether God can be wrong, whether God is prejudiced, or whether God's mind can be changed by anyone, especially *gasp* a woman.

This story reminds us that Jesus is not only the Son of God but the Son of Mary. I don't say that to criticize her parenting, but to remind us that he was not just fully divine, he was also fully human. He felt anguish and impatience and anger. He felt human limits; he had to go away from the crowd to pray and recharge. Jesus wasn't super human; he shows us what it means to be a human who is fully aligned with the way of God.

Following the way of God isn't about achieving perfection; it's about faithfulness.

It's recognizing when God is speaking to us through unlikely and unexpected sources.

It's admitting when we're wrong and changing our ways, instead of doubling down and making a bad situation even worse.

It's recognizing our boundaries and limitations, and pushing and stretching them as Jesus did for himself and others.

To be clear, Jesus isn't telling us to work ourselves to the bone to prove our faithfulness. Jesus was already drawing a crowd as it was. Maybe he didn't think he had enough to give; maybe he didn't think the little bit he could give this woman would be sufficiently helpful.

As I hear this story, I have in my heart and mind the people in this congregation who have recently lost loved ones or are on the verge of losing loved ones. There are people who are stretched by caring for their children and/or working their jobs while also worrying about the well-being of their parents and extended family. These are the challenges I know about, and I know y'all are weighed down by so much more that I don't know about.

There is so much evil to speak against; there is so much hurt to heal. There is so much pain and not enough hope that things **can** be different, that things **will** be different. It boggles my mind that companies are trying to get residents in Maui to sell their land in

the wake of the wildfires, taking advantage of the fact that some might not have the resources to rebuild. It breaks my heart that so many of us know someone who is dealing with an illness or hurting terribly or actively dying or is that person themselves.

In moments like this, pushing and stretching the boundaries of our understanding looks like recognizing that what feels like a small gesture to us, a phone call, a meal, a text, may be big for someone else. It may be big especially when it's combined with small gestures from many others.

A small gesture can be a powerful reminder that they are seen, not forgotten, that they are loved and not as alone as they feared.

Pushing and stretching boundaries looks like asking ourselves what is it that we really want to do, that we feel called to do. When Dr. Catherine Meeks, the executive director of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing was asked about how we know we are hearing God's call, she started with a quote from theologian Howard Thurman, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."⁴

She observed that "people start discernment with the question 'What does God want me to do?' That's the wrong question. God wants you to do what is the deepest desire in your heart to do. When you get to that, nothing can stop you because then you're operating out of your own core, and the energy that you need is being generated somewhere that's not external to you."⁵

Just as Jesus pushed and stretched externally imposed boundaries of what it means to be the Messiah, he asks us to push beyond externally generated ideas about what we're supposed to do, what we should do. He asks us to stretch beyond our understanding of what society, families and even churches expect of us as child, parent, spouse, caretaker and so on.

Instead, let us ask ourselves what it means for us to feel right with God, to be fully ourselves, to be fully the child of God we have been created to be. Are we being ourselves or are we trying to be someone else? God doesn't even want us to be Jesus; God wants us to be **us**.

When we spend a lifetime listening to God and making course corrections that get us closer and closer to pushing and stretching boundaries of kingdoms and kin-doms the way Jesus would, the Spirit will be the deep fire at our core that keeps us going.

This is the blessing God has ordained for us. We are each of us and all together more than we could have expected or imagined. This is the dream; this is the way to the kingdom of heaven.

Amen.

¹ The Saint Helena Psalter

² <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2022-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2021-dealing-with-unexpected-expenses.htm>

³ <https://sojo.net/articles/kin-dom-christ>

⁴ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2021/07/09/come-alive/>

⁵ https://vimeo.com/854177215?fbclid=IwAR0kO-yeyQ5Hn7pTRDe4Rc6yde_CopxZFEJUQ_VwddkUiNOXG8WRuGdXoiQ