

Sermon

Proper 12, Year A

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http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp12_RCL.html

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

What do you think of when you hear that phrase? You may think of some crazy person on the street, like someone represented in a *New Yorker* cartoon. You know the type—a guy with a long beard, carrying a sign, walking down the street, scaring or amusing people as they walk by.

But actually that phrase has its roots at the center of our faith. The prophet John the Baptist is the first person reported saying it in the New Testament. And then after John’s arrest, Matthew’s Gospel tells us that Jesus took up that same phrase as he began his public ministry.

Now the challenge back then about using that phrase is that it would convey a certain meaning to many people. Palestine of the 1st century was not unlike it is today—filled with turmoil. Many of the Jewish people who lived there back then wanted a change from the status quo; that is, their land being ruled by a foreign empire in partnership with the rich and powerful among their own people. So to hear, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” would offer a promise for a change in who would rule their land.

So the challenge Jesus faced was how to unpack that loaded phrase—“kingdom of heaven”—in order to clarify a different type of hope for his people. Jesus did that in different ways. One way was by what he did—and didn’t do. Jesus didn’t recruit an army and plan a military assault or a political coup. Instead Jesus focused on healing sick people, troubled people, people on the margins, so that they might flourish in their everyday lives. Those actions of healing helped to reveal what Jesus meant by the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus also taught what he meant by the kingdom of heaven. Sometimes he taught in a straightforward way, like when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, what we remember as the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus taught that a key part of our prayers would be to align our lives with God’s kingdom so that God’s purpose would be fulfilled on earth.

Jesus taught three related requests in the Lord’s Prayer that help us to understand what God’s kingdom is about. First, we pray that God will provide what we need to survive; then that God would show mercy to us and that we would learn to live showing mercy to others; and

finally that God would protect us from harm and from harming others. It is a simple prayer and still a powerful rule of life for the person of faith.

So based on Jesus' teaching about "Thy kingdom come," the kingdom of heaven is about something other than power and control over others. It is not about exchanging one set of rulers for another. Rather, based on Jesus' example and teaching, the kingdom of heaven is about offering healing and aligning ourselves with God and God's will; trusting God for our daily provision; learning to live in forgiveness; and seeking God's protection for ourselves and others.

Imagine praying that prayer every day with Jesus for three years. Over time, that should help form what his disciples understood about the kingdom of heaven. But they still needed help to understand. Heck, the church has been praying that prayer for almost two thousand years and we still need help to understand what the kingdom of heaven means.

So Jesus also taught about the kingdom of heaven using parables. In the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, there are multiple parables about the kingdom of heaven. We have heard some of them the last two Sundays and again today. We have heard about sloppy sowers and different soils with varying results; and we have heard about different seeds being mixed together so that weeds and wheat grow in the same field so that it is hard to tell the difference between them until the end of time. And today we get a rapid fire of five more mini-parables about the kingdom of heaven.

Now when you hear these sayings, one after another, it is easy to get confused. One analogy is given and when you are still thinking about that one and maybe saying, "What?" another one comes along. It can be confusing.

Let me offer a brief commercial at this point: Some of you receive an email from me on Mondays with a link to the next Sunday's lessons along with some questions to consider. This gives you a chance to sit with the lessons beyond the few minutes we have on Sunday mornings. So please let me know if you want to be added to that list receiving those emails and you can get a head start on our reflections on Sunday.

Now for those of us who just heard the Gospel today, I invite you to reread it later at home. Here are three points that I got from praying and reading and studying these parables about the kingdom over the last week or two.

First the work of the kingdom of heaven often goes unnoticed though many people may appreciate the fruit of that kingdom work over years to come. I remember a story I heard when I went on a mission trip to Honduras. Suzy the missionary spoke about how men had dug a ditch and laid concrete blocks to form a wall for the foundation of a building. After many months and people helping on different mission trips, that building was completed and became

a thriving school to help the children of a poor community flourish. When those men were digging in the hot sun many months before, it might have been hard for them to imagine the children playing and learning some years later. But it happened. And so it is with the kingdom—we may be doing work no one sees today that is vital for the benefit of others in decades to come. So what is that work for us today?

The kingdom of heaven also causes delight for those who find it. This type of delight is more than a passing fancy. In the two little stories that Jesus told about finding treasure and a pearl, the people sold all they had to get that one thing. We may turn our focus on the sacrifice involved and ignore the delight they must have found in order to make that deal. Jesus pointed to that type of passion as a marker of what the kingdom is like. If you have not found that type of delight yet in your life, keep looking—because God’s kingdom fulfills a longing in us when we are “all in” and give all that we have in exchange for being part of it.

Jesus also taught in that strange story about fishing a message similar to what we heard last week about the wheat and weeds. The kingdom of heaven is complicated. Much of what God is doing in bringing kingdom of heaven to earth involves work we do not notice or understand or appreciate. It may involve people different from us, people we don’t like, people that seem like “bad fish,” so to speak. But Jesus is clear that God is doing the fishing and the sorting in this story. Our part is to be faithful and do the work we are called to do-- the work of healing and forgiving; protecting and providing. And to do it with delight!

If that describes us and our work, then we will get sorted in those baskets with the other good fish. But if we get too concerned with who is in and who is out, who is good and who is bad—that is doing God’s job, not our work—then we are likely to start stinking like a bad fish.

So as John and Jesus said, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Let us repent—that is, change our mind and change our direction—so that we participate in what our God continues to do to bring his reign of healing and mercy to our hurting world. Amen.