

The Kingdom of God Has Come Near

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on July 3, 2016]

I

A newspaper editor from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania was present when Abraham Lincoln gave his Gettysburg Address.

The editor wrote in his newspaper the following day:

"We pass over the silly remarks of the President; for the credit of the nation, we are willing that the veil of oblivion shall be dropped over them and that they should no more be repeated or thought of."

Many great moments are overlooked by the people who participate in them.

Sometimes true greatness can only be seen in retrospect.

And one of the saddest things that can be said of any of us is that greatness passed us by, but we did not recognize it.

II

Today's gospel lesson tells of Jesus appointing seventy of his followers to go out, two by two, to every town and village where he intended to go.

Before they go, Jesus gives them specific instructions to emphasize their dependence on God.

They are to carry no purse,
no bag,
no extra pair of sandals.

They are to greet no one on the road—why?

Because haste is of the essence.

The custom of formal Jewish greetings would be time consuming.

When they enter a town and the people welcome them,
they are to eat whatever food is provided,
heal the sick,
and proclaim a simple message:

“The kingdom of God has come near to you.”

If they aren't welcomed by the people of a town,
they are to leave and wipe the dust off their feet in protest.

Remind them too, says Jesus, that the kingdom of God has come near.

Dallas Willard wrote about when he was a young boy and rural electrification was taking place across the United States.

Tall poles sprang up all across the countryside with electric cables strung from pole to pole.

But at the start not everyone trusted electricity;
some families chose (for a time) to continue to live “off the grid.”

They had heard how much easier life would be with electric washing machines replacing hand-cranked wringers and electric vacuum cleaners bringing an end to the old practice of hauling heavy carpets outside to have the dirt beaten out of them.

They heard the promises, but they did not believe them or trust them.

Dallas Willard writes that you could have said to those folks,
“My friends, electricity is at hand!”

But if they refused to tap into that power that was running right above their heads, then the nearness of the power would do them no good.

Jesus' message of the nearness of the kingdom was like that.

With Jesus in the world, the kingdom of God was near at hand.

No doubt some towns and villages welcomed the disciples with joy,
and were open to receiving the good news of the kingdom.

But not a few refused to extend a welcome and so were unable to receive the blessings of the kingdom.

All the goodness and glory and power of that kingdom was right there,
but if people kept it at arm's length,
it would do them no good.

Their lack of participation did not weaken the power of the kingdom.

But it did land them in an unhappy (and unnecessary) spiritual situation of staying in the dark when the Light of the world was right there.

III

What keeps us from seeing the kingdom?

What keeps us from tapping into the power source God has provided?

Several things come to mind:

First, **blindness and deafness keep us oblivious to the kingdom.**

Frantic busyness seems to be the natural order of life in our world.

The tasks and tediums that make up our days encourage us to...
keep our heads down,
our shoulders to the grindstone,
and our eyes and ears closed.

As a result, people become blind and deaf to the sights and sounds of the kingdom.

In 1836, in the little village of Rushville, New York, Marcus Whitman heard the call of the kingdom to go west—
a summons to go to the Native American tribes beyond the Mississippi River who had never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He packed his belongings and he and his new wife Narcissa set out as missionaries to the Oregon territory.

The Rushville pastor wrote in his annual report:

"Nothing of any importance ever happens here. We had one addition to the church this year, but he married one of our finest young women, and now they are both gone."

That pastor, devoted to maintaining the institution of the church, missed the movement of the kingdom in his own congregation.

For Marcus and Narcissa Whitman became two of the greatest figures in the history of the Pacific Northwest.

Instead of celebrating the kingdom's arrival in the lives of the Whitmans, the pastor could only complain that Marcus stole one of his parishioners.

Hear me well: the kingdom of God is near whenever people answer the call of God and attempt to do great things for God.

Do not let your eyes be blinded and your ears closed to the presence of the kingdom.

IV

Secondly, **ego keeps us from recognizing the presence of the kingdom.**

Ken Blanchard says EGO is an acronym for "Edging God Out."

Sometimes we let the kingdom pass us by because it threatens our sense of importance and raises our feelings of insecurity.

We enjoy being the "masters of our fate" and the "captains of our souls."

In the 1930s, the two greatest theoretical physicists of the modern era, Paul Dirac and Werner Heisenberg, were traveling around the world. In the course of their trip they showed up unannounced at the University of Hawaii.

The president of the university told what happened a few months later:

“A couple of guys turned up, said they were Heisenberg and Dirac and wanted to give a lecture; *but I saw through them and had them shown out.*”

Here was a chance for students and faculty to hear from two of the greatest minds in the history of physics,
to receive a glimpse into the vast complexities of the universe through the brilliance of these two Nobel laureates.

But the college bureaucrat,
whose ego was bigger than his sense,
could only announce,
"I saw through them."

When we insist loudly and proudly that we know best,
then greatness passes us by.

When Jesus sent out the Seventy, he told them that if they encountered a person who “shares in peace,”
they were to offer the blessings of peace to that person.

The phrase, “One who shares in peace” is a Semitic expression referring to one who is focused on righteousness, not wickedness.

The person who shares in peace will not let ego get in the way of receiving the Good News.

Jesus tells the Seventy to humbly partake of the hospitality of those homes where God’s peace resides.

But to the person who is not of a "peaceful" mind,
the Good News will not register.

The households of those whose minds are closed to the kingdom message will remain in spiritual darkness.

Hence the lesson: **Don’t let ego keep you from experiencing the blessings of peace that Jesus brings.**

V

Third, **rigidity** keeps us from experiencing the greatness of the kingdom.

The kingdom doesn't always play by the rules we recognize.

When Jesus sent forth the Seventy, he counseled them to be flexible...
 to forget about the letter of the law,
 to ignore the precise rules of etiquette,
 so that they might extend the Good News to as many as possible.

One way to react to a new idea or a new way of doing things is to say,
“Hey! What a great idea! Let’s give it a try!”

The more typical reaction is:

"It will never work;"

"This will make things worse, not better;"

and those famous Seven Last Words of the Church:

“We've always done it this way before.”

In the "Peanuts" comic strip, Lucy and her brother Linus have just finished a chicken dinner, and Lucy explains to Linus how to make a wish on the wishbone:

"This is a wishbone, Linus," she says. "We both make our wishes and then pull it apart. Whoever breaks off the biggest part gets his wish."

Lucy begins the wishing:

"Let's see now. I wish for a new doll, a new bicycle, four new sweaters, some new saddle shoes, a wristwatch and about one hundred dollars."

Then Linus gets his turn:

"I wish for long life for all my friends. I wish for peace in the world. I wish for great advancements in the fields of science and medicine, and "

But Lucy cuts him off,
 throws away the unbroken wishbone in disgust,
 and, grumbling, says:
"You seem to have a knack for spoiling everything."

Are we like Lucy?

Are we so rigid that we resent those who see things differently?

Do the rule-benders,
 the short-cut-takers,
 and the out-of-the-box thinkers
 make us nervous?

When Christ offered people the chance to participate in the kingdom,
 he didn't come in the way many expected—
 with military might and political power.

He came in weakness and humility.

He came not to be served...
 but to serve...
 and to give his life as a ransom for many.

He taught that true greatness is not found in those who lord it over others
 with political, economic, or military power.

We see the greatness of the kingdom whenever the hungry are feed,
 the homeless are housed,
 the sick are healed,
 the grieving are comforted,
 and the lonely are befriended.

Someone once asked Albert Schweitzer to name the greatest person alive in
 the world at that moment.

How many people are afraid to plant seeds of encouragement and hope in the lives of people around them?

How many times do we know what God is calling us to do...
and we may even know how God is calling us to do it...
yet we remain frozen in fear?

Fear keeps us paralyzed because it nurtures doubt and undermines hope.

Someone once wrote, *“Fear is the wrong use of imagination. It is anticipating the worst, not the best that can happen.”*

Was it fear that kept some of the villages from welcoming the Seventy whom Jesus sent out?

Was it fear that prevented them from embracing the reality of the kingdom?

Fear is a by-product of a lack of trust in God.

Fear keeps us from remembering that God is our heavenly Father who delights to do us good.

Fear keeps us from claiming our inheritance as children of God.

And yet God promises that when we face our fears...
when we open our hearts...
when we place our complete trust in Christ...
the kingdom of God is near.

VII

Fred Craddock told a story of a time when the kingdom of God came near in the life of a young boy.

Fred and his wife Nettie were on vacation in the Great Smokey Mountains. They were having dinner at a restaurant when an elderly gentleman approached their table and said, “Good evening.”

Fred responded: “Good evening.”

He said, “Are you on vacation?”

Fred said, “Yes,” but under his breath he was saying, *It’s really none of your business.*

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“We’re from Oklahoma.”

“What do you do in Oklahoma?”

Under his breath Fred was saying, *Leave us alone. We’re on vacation, and we don’t know who you are.* But he politely answered, “I am a Christian minister.”

“What church?”

Fred answered, “Christian Church.”

The man paused a moment and said, “I owe a great deal to a minister of the Christian church,” and he pulled up a chair and sat down.

Fred said, “Yes, have a seat,” trying to make it sound like he sincerely meant it, which he didn’t. “Who is this person?” he wondered.

Then the man told his story:

“I grew up in these mountains. My mother was not married, and the whole community knew it. I was what was called an illegitimate child. In those days that was a shame, and I was ashamed. The reproach that fell on her, of course, fell also on me. When I went into town with her, I could see people staring at me, making guesses as to who was my father. At school the children said ugly things to me, and so I stayed to myself during recess, and I ate my lunch alone.

“In my early teens I began to attend a little church back in the mountains called Laurel Springs Christian Church. It had a minister who was both attractive and frightening. He had a chiseled face and a heavy beard and a deep voice. I went to hear him preach. I don’t know exactly why, but it did something for me. However, I was afraid

that I was not welcome since I was, as they put it, a bastard. So I would go just in time for the sermon, and when it was over I would move out because I was afraid that someone would say, 'What's a boy like you doing in a church?'

"One Sunday some people [were lined up] in the aisle before I could get out, and I was stopped. Before I could make my way through the group, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a heavy hand. It was that minister. I cut my eyes around and caught a glimpse of his beard and his chin, and I knew who it was. I trembled in fear. He turned his face around so he could see mine and seemed to be staring for a little while.

*I knew what he was doing. He was going to make a guess as to who my father was. A moment later he said, 'Well, boy, you're a child of...' and he paused there. And I knew it was coming. I knew I would have my feelings hurt. I knew I would not go back again. He said, '**Boy, you're a child of God. I see a striking resemblance, boy.**' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, '**Now, you go claim your inheritance.**' I left the building a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life."*

Fred Craddock was moved by the story, and he asked the man,
"What is your name?"

He said, "Ben Hooper."

And Fred Craddock vaguely recalled his father telling him how the people of Tennessee had twice elected as governor a bastard child named Ben Hooper.

VIII

My friend, you are a child of God.

I see a striking resemblance.

Go, claim your inheritance!

Amen.

Sources:

Marcus and Narcissa Whitman illustration is from Eugene M. Austin, The Harvest of Spirit (New York: Abingdon, 1943), 87

Fred Craddock, Craddock Stories, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (Chalice Press, 2001), 156-157.

Dallas Willard illustration is from Scott Hoezee, retrieved from <https://www.sermons.com/home/illustrations/2016-07-03>.

Leonard Sweet, "The Kingdom of God Has Come Close," retrieved from <http://www.sermons.com/theResultsPage.asp>