

Building the Kingdom

1st Sunday in Lent – February 29, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Matthew 9:35-38

³⁵ Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Matthew 13:44-46

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Matthew 25:34-36,40

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. . . . ⁴⁰ Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

This week, we begin a new series: Building the Kingdom. Today, we seek a better understanding of what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God and what it means for us. In each of these passages from Matthew, Jesus teaches his disciples about this kingdom.

Who will work the harvest?

Our first passage from Matthew is a transition paragraph. Until this point in the story, Jesus has been the sole missionary, the only one going out and doing the real work of God’s kingdom. But now, it is time for others to get involved. The people are like sheep without a shepherd, helpless in a harsh world. Taking compassion on them all, Jesus turns to his disciples, telling them that the time has come for them to get to work. It is their time to turn away from their inward focus on their relationship with Jesus, to the needs of Jesus’ flock. His disciples are to work the harvest too; they cannot simply leave it all up to Jesus. God saves none of us merely for own sake, but also for the sake of others. Jesus’ disciples, then and now, are to do the work of building God’s kingdom . . . this is the harvest to which we are called.

The Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God is a matter of geography. It is the place where God is king. The Jews of Jesus’ day waited for the coming of this kingdom. When God reigned, there would be no war, no hunger, no hatred, no sick, no crippled, no blind . . . And the Jews had waited for a long time.

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus’ very first words are a blazing proclamation:
‘The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent! And believe in the Good News!’

Wow. Jesus brings the news that the wait is over, that God is doing great things, that God’s kingdom is at hand, that the Day of the Lord has come . . . that all of this is breaking in upon Israel through the ministry of Jesus himself. God’s glory had shone on them all and the world would never be the same.

Of course, this seems an odd claim to make. Evil was then and is still a present reality. There is simply too much pain and suffering in the world to suggest otherwise. So again, how could Jesus proclaim the coming of God’s kingdom? How could Paul speak of Jesus’ victory on the cross (Colossians 2:15)? What do we mean when we speak of God’s kingdom as present-but-coming or already/not yet?

Richard Hays answers such questions this way, “Why do the powers of wickedness continue to operate effectively in this world? Because the story is not over. The climactic victory has been won on the Cross, but there is still much residual resistance. So we live in a tension-filled interval where skirmishes are still under way.”

Sometimes God's work in the world is just so hard to see. It almost seems as if God has hidden it from us. In the two brief parables from our second passage, the treasure and the pearl point us to the immeasurable worth of God's kingdom. Like buried treasure, God's work is sometimes hidden

and must be discovered, dug up as it were. We must look for the one great pearl among a chest full of mediocre pearls. Still, Jesus isn't emphasizing the finding; he wants us to appreciate the worth of what we seek. In both parables, the finders sell all that they have in order to possess the treasure and the pearl. Of course, we can't possess the treasure that is God's kingdom as if it could be ours and no one else's! Rather, the parables teach us that our response to God's kingdom must be total. We can hold nothing back. Building the kingdom is all about wholehearted commitment.

The king speaks!

Our final passage for today is taken from Matthew 25:31-46. This a climactic passage focused on the day when God's kingdom will come in all its fullness, when the war with evil is finally over, and Christ comes to judge. In this scene, Jesus separates *all* people 'one from another,' the sheep from the goats.² The sheep go to Jesus' right hand and enter the kingdom of God. The goats are herded to the left toward oblivion. There is only one kingdom in this picture, the kingdom of God.

What has to be most striking and surprising about this scene is that there is no mention of grace, forgiveness, or even faith in Jesus! The sheep, those who are headed to God's kingdom, are simply those who extend love and mercy to the needy, the sick, the naked, and the hungry. The goats are those who ignored all those in need.

Just as remarkably, both groups, the sheep and goats, are surprised to learn that all those in need are brothers and sisters of Christ. Whether they knew it or not, the righteous sheep enjoyed a relationship with Jesus. As they fed the hungry, they were feeding Jesus. As they clothed the naked, they were dressing Jesus. This is the concrete expression of "love your neighbor."

Many of Jesus' teachings are difficult to understand. Though we probably need to be modest in the interpretation of this passage, it is clear that once again, Jesus points us outwardly, toward others, as he points us toward God's kingdom. We will not find, nor build, God's kingdom by focusing all our energies on ourselves, but only by ministering to others.

Building the Kingdom
(ending the resistance!)

Alright . . . the kingdom of God is present-but-still-coming. It is already, but not yet. I don't know that we can fully grasp this, but we can sure ask what it means for us! If as Professor Hays puts it, the skirmishes are still underway, then what is our part in all this? Do we really have a role to play in the full realization of the kingdom of God? If so, what is it?

In the beginning, God created everything and pronounced it good. But because the humans made a very bad choice, all of creation became distorted and damaged. I suppose that God could have waved some sort of magic wand and fixed it all . . . but God loves us too much for that. God wants to be loved by us, and that love must be freely given. God will not coerce us into loving him. After all, what sort of 'love' would that be?

Instead, God's plan to transform, renew, and restore all of creation is to be worked out through us. Jesus asked his disciples how they could possibly be the light to the world if they kept the light hidden from others. He told them to go out and make disciples across the entire planet. As selfish, prideful, and weak as we humans tend to be, God, in his wisdom, sends us out to do his work. And he has sent his Holy Spirit to guide us and strengthen us, so that we will not insist upon turning inward to our own needs, but will turn outward, serving the needs of others. When we help someone to find the "pearl of great price" (Matt 13:46), we are building the kingdom. When we do "for the least of these" (Matt 25:40), we are building the kingdom. It is in such things that we are the light to the world.

¹ When Matthew refers to the "kingdom of heaven," it is a synonym for the "kingdom of God." Matthew is just being sensitive to some Jewish concerns about even saying the word, "God." God's name, YHWH, was so holy for the Jews that it could only be said by the High Priest, in the temple, on the Day of Atonement.

² Though sheep and goats would graze together during the day, at night the shepherds would separate them. Goats needed to be kept warm; while sheep prefer to sleep in the open air.

Daily Bible Readings

(some of Jesus' kingdom parables)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Mark 4:1-30 The parable of the sower</p>	<p>Day 2 Mark 4:21-30 A lamp and some seeds</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43 The parables of the weeds among the wheat</p>	<p>Day 4 Matthew 13:44-50 Two parables we've read (the treasure and the pearl) and the parable of the net</p>
<p>Day 5 Matthew 25:31-46 The full scene of the sheep and goats</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

March Book Recommendation:

Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer & The Christian Life

by William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas

This is a very readable book on the Lord's Prayer. Willimon and Hauerwas (both are at Duke Seminary) help us to understand the prayer phrase-by-phrase and apply it to our whole Christian experience. They help us to see the prayer as Jesus intended – as a prayer for the community of disciples. The book is a journey through the basics of the Christian faith, not as a set of abstract beliefs, but as a prayer we are to learn to pray.

Available in the St. Andrew Bookstore

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The kingdom of God is not just about the future but it is also about the present. It is still coming, but it is present now! In his recent book, *Rumors*, Philip Yancey urges us to see this as much like two “parallel universes” that, even now, do overlap from time to time and place to place. When you look at St. Andrew right now, what do you see? Do you at all see God's kingdom present here? In what ways? When? What are some concrete examples? See if you can come up with a list of ten. For example, when our youth go on mission trips, are they not stepping into God's kingdom, even if just for awhile? What are some other examples? When have you felt like you've stepped into God's kingdom?
2. The story of the Church (the body of Christ; the Christian community) is the story of God acting by his own Holy Spirit within the world to bring it towards its completion – *acting through us!* It can be very tempting for us to try to leave it all up to God, resigning ourselves to a world marred by suffering and injustice until God does something it. We imagine that we might be able to retreat within the walls of our church, while we wait for God to “do his thing.” But this is not, emphatically not, the Christian way. We are not called by God to retreat from the world and wait for Jesus' return. Rather, empowered by God's Spirit, we are called to plunge into the world, meeting the needs of others. Love of neighbor is not a sentiment; our love is to be grounded in Christ and expressed in action.

Spend some time discussing the parable of the sheep and the goats. Is there anything here that surprised you? What does this parable say to you about your own discipleship?