

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Kin(g)dom Living

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; change your life and place your trust in this good news.’ – *Mark 1:9-15*

In June as part of the process of exploring whether I would be your next minister, your search committee asked me to write a brief statement of faith. The statement I wrote for them was based on the summary statement of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God in the gospel according to Mark (Mark 1:9), and this morning, as we celebrate Reign of Christ Sunday, I thought I would offer you during this sermon some of the thoughts about the Kingdom of God that I shared with the Search Committee.

But before I get to that, I want to tell you a story. It is one of those stories of doubtful authenticity that sometimes attach themselves to famous people, but it is a good story, and worth sharing. Mahatma Gandhi was approached by a mother who had marched her son two hours to ask the great Hindu saint to convince her son to abstain from sugar. She had marshaled many health arguments against sugar in the effort to convince her son, but without success. He loved his sugar, and would not give it up. But her son was a great admirer of Gandhi, and she was hopeful that Gandhi would succeed where she had been unable. After hearing this mother out, Gandhi said, simply, “Come back in two weeks.”

So the mother and her son trudged the two hours back to her home, and two weeks later, they trudged two hours back to visit Gandhi again. Gandhi received them graciously, offered them a glass of iced tea (unsweetened, of course), and then said to the son, “I think you should give up sugar.”

The mother and son looked at each other, and waited for some further arguments, some pearl of wisdom, some sign of greatness. At last the mother could bear it no longer: “Is that all you are going to say? You could have said that two weeks ago! Why did you make us walk all the way home and then all the way back again?”

Gandhi replied, “Well it is really quite simple. Two weeks ago, I had not myself given up sugar! Now I have.”

That story illustrates what made Gandhi a great leader. He led with authority because he led with authenticity. If he had tried to tell that young boy to give up sugar without himself acting on his convictions, he would have been unable to speak with authenticity or authority. Because he acted first, and then spoke, his words carried authority.

I think it is my task as a preacher to echo Jesus’ call to embrace that kingdom. But I feel singularly unqualified to do that, because although Jesus said that God’s kingdom was near, or at hand, that kingdom remains as challenging to embrace as sobriety for an alcoholic. And as a recovering citizen of a different kingdom, I can only point beyond my own example as an

aspiration, much as an addict might encourage fellow addicts to embrace sobriety while still struggling with it himself.

Scholars agree that the kingdom of God was the very core of Jesus' teaching. His parables, proverbs and wisdom are about that kingdom, his healing ministry was an enactment of that ministry, his renunciation of violence, his practice of prayer, were all in some way about living in the kingdom of God. And in particular, his collection of a group of disciples, his instructions to them, and the commission he left them, is about how the kingdom of God was to carry on after his departure.

So when we gather each week, we do so in response to that good news that "the kingdom of God has come near" or "is at hand." In inviting people to change their lives and place their trust in that good news, Jesus was inviting the first disciples (and us) to enter a new kind of community, which he called the kingdom of God. Jesus was inviting his disciples (and us) to make a personal commitment that needed to be lived out in an alternative community.

The "kingdom of God" is partly defined by what it is not. It is not the kingdom of Pilate or the kingdom of Caesar, not the kingdom of Trump the First or Trudeau the Second, or any other imperial system or empire. Empires are defined by hierarchies. They can be hierarchies of practically anything: status, wealth, power, race, ethnic identity, sexual identity or even faith, but what makes them hierarchies is that some are on top and others on the bottom, and the esteem of those on top is built on the dis-grace of those on the bottom.

So the kingdom of God is not an empire. In fact, it isn't really a kingdom in the normal way people of that time would have understood a kingdom at all. For that reason, even the phrase, "the kingdom of God" is problematic, as this new community is less like a monarchy than a healthy family, more like a group tied together by bonds of kin-ship than anything else. So many in our time have begun using the phrase "kin-dom of God," to express the radical alternative that this new kind of community offers. That is why in the title for this sermon, I have put the G in kin(g)dom in brackets.

So if God's kin(g)dom is not the usual kind of hierarchical kingdom, then what is it? The kin(g)dom of God is defined positively by the character of God. If Caesar is not king, and God is, then much depends on the character of God. The way we think of God shapes the way we live in community. Now lots of people in our time struggle intellectually with the question of the existence of God, but disciples of Jesus have a different struggle. Our struggle is to discern the character of God, not so much whether God is, but who God is, because God's character determines the shape of the community we call the kin(g)dom of God.

God is revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus to be a God of grace and justice, and so Christian community must be a community of grace and justice. Grace and justice are closely related. Grace is generosity and mercy, the forgiveness of wrongs, and resistance to allowing ourselves or anyone else to be defined by hierarchies of dis-grace. God's kingdom is therefore a community of radical equality, radical grace. It is a community in which the greatest are the least, the last are the first, and the one who incarnated it most fully suffered and died for it. In this community, when some suffer, all suffer together, and when some rejoice, all rejoice together. That's what it means to be a community of grace.

Justice is the effort to shape a community life which breaks through pervasive dis-grace, and discover a new way of living based on grace. Justice is the effort to constantly challenge hierarchies of wealth, power and status by establishing new relationships of solidarity, compassion, mercy and care. One of the things I have admired about this congregation is how, it has tried to recover from a history in which people have been disgraced for being First Nations or LGBTQ or poor or refugees, and reshape its own life so that this at least can be a community of justice and hospitality.

There are two rituals that embody in a special way, the kingdom of God: the Lord's Supper and Baptism. Both these sacraments are expressions of God's grace and justice. The Lord's Supper is the table of grace to which all are invited, and the table of justice around which none need go hungry. Baptism is the sacrament of grace in which all of worldly dis-grace is washed away and it is the sacrament of justice in which none are privileged and all are equal. Communities shaped by God's grace and justice are ones in which God's kin(g)dom is near/at hand.

The availability of God's kin(g)dom is good news because it is better for everyone to live in a community of grace and justice than a community of disgrace and injustice. It is good news, but it is also a demanding challenge. Because all of us are so profoundly shaped by communities of disgrace and injustice, living in this new kind of community requires us to unlearn a lot. Living in God's kingdom is at least as difficult as an addict trying to get sober. To live in that kingdom, we have to unlearn our addiction to imperial ways of thinking. We call that repentance. It is a demanding challenge to embrace the distinctiveness of this new kind of community and live it as fully as we can. We are able to do that only provisionally, and often fall short of the invitation Jesus extends to us, but even to try to live it is a significant departure from other kinds of communities.

The decision to live in God's kingdom is always an intensely personal one, as each of us needs to embrace for ourselves this good news, just as an addict has to choose to pursue sobriety. It is always personal, but it is never private. God's kingdom is a new kind of community, and living in this new kind of community requires us to join with others in trying to shape a community that is modeled after God's grace and justice. Communities seeking to embody that grace and justice must constantly be drawing on all their faculties (imagination, intellect, experience, learning and others) to ask themselves how they are living up to the radical challenge of God's kin(g)dom, and how they are failing to live up to it. Individuals in such communities will also often need to examine themselves in the same way. Our beliefs, attitudes, social practices, relationships and habits all need to be continually re-examined in the light of the good news of God's kin(g)dom.

On Thursday evening I went to a supper celebrating the work of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. One of the speakers there was Bud Sargent, who is a Protestant chaplain at the medium security prison in Bowden. Four years ago, this chaplain, whose name is Bud Sargent, was leading a Bible Study and telling the inmates there about how they were each called to be a part of God's mission to the world. The inmates weren't sure about that. "How can we, shut up here in this prison, shut up behind the razor wire fence, and shut up in our own problems, be a part of God's mission to the world?" The chaplain urged them to pray about it.

A few weeks later one of those inmates came to the chaplain and said he had been praying about it, and he had an idea. Bowden has an exercise yard. If you walk around the outside edge, you can do a circuit of about half a kilometer. Maybe, this inmate suggested, the inmates could hold a walk-a-thon, doing circuits around the yard, and raise some money for a worthwhile project in

the outside world. At first the chaplain was skeptical. He was skeptical that the inmates would do the walk-a-thon. He was skeptical that they could get sponsors, and he was skeptical that the prison authorities would agree to it. But the inmate was persistent, and put together a small group of inmates who started lining up sponsors. So the chaplain, who was still pretty skeptical, set up a meeting with the warden.

Now a prison warden spends most of his time listening to complaints. Inmates tend, as a group, to be pretty self-centred: their problems are always someone else's fault, they are in prison because of something that happened to them, and the only way that they can improve their lives is to convince someone else to do something for them. So for a group of inmates to approach the warden with the request that they be allowed to raise money for someone else, was a little surprising. It was more than surprising – it was exciting. Anything that would get inmates thinking about something beyond themselves would be great! “Chaplain,” the warden said. “Make this happen!”

So they started working on the walk-a-thon. They invited other inmates to join them. Inmates wrote letters to their family and friends, asking for sponsors. A few weeks later, twenty-seven inmates walked around the exercise yard a dozen or so times each. They raised a couple of thousand dollars, which was given to a group in the Philippines to drill community water wells. But the inmates felt so good about what they had done, that they wanted to do it again. They started planning for another walk-a-thon, the following year, and that one involved more inmates and raised more money. A couple of months ago, in September, they held their fourth walk-a-thon. There were speeches; a band played music; ice cream was served; and of the 700 prisoners at Bowden, 297 participated. They walked around the exercise yard a total of 3,694 times. The money they raised, with matching funds from the Foodgrains Bank and Canadian government totaled over \$104,000 and is going to help with drought relief in Ethiopia. But the biggest beneficiaries of the walk-a-thon are the prisoners themselves, who have learned that the real joy in life is to be found from doing something for others. Something is happening at Bowden, the chaplain said. The next great eruption of God's kin(g)dom is starting inside prisons.

Quite by coincidence, one of the volunteers with the church group that was serving supper at the Foodgrains Bank event that night, came up and tapped this chaplain on the shoulder. This volunteer was a former inmate at Bowden, the very man who had come up with the original idea to hold a walk-a-thon. Ray is on the outside now. Learning that he could contribute to God's mission to the world has changed his life.

The prisoners at Bowden are the disgraced bottom tier of a society, who are more than likely to also be disgraced by poverty, systemic racism, family violence and abuse. It is enormous good news for them that the Kin(g)dom of God is a community of grace and justice, in which they can be accepted and loved and find ways to contribute to God's mission to the world. It is also good news for us. I invite you this morning, each in your own way, to embrace that kin(g)dom of justice and of grace. It is good news for you and for us all. Amen.