

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Choosing God's Kingdom

In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Matthew 3:1-2, 13-17

At Jesus' baptism, the story goes, he saw the heavens open and the Spirit of God descend like a dove, and he heard a voice, saying "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," or in another translation, "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life." Whenever we baptize a person, whether a baby or a full grown adult, that is the message behind the action: "this is my child, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life." Baptism is first of all, a proclamation of the loving embrace of God for each person, of whatever age or stage or status. Baptism proclaims God's grace.

John the Baptist offered baptism as a sign that the kingdom of heaven was imminent, at hand, just around the corner. Jesus received baptism with the same understanding. The kingdom of God – or God's New Creation – I use the terms interchangeably – the kingdom of God, in brief, is what life on earth would be like if God's will were done on earth like in heaven, if other rulers governed the way the loving God wants.

The message of John and Jesus is that God's New Creation is so close that we can reach out and pluck it like a piece of fruit off a tree. But its fulfillment remains a future hope. It is both here and not here, both already and not yet, both God's gift to be received, and a possibility to be claimed by our response. To be baptized is to respond to God's free gift of love, by actively choosing to live in God's kingdom, to claim the possibility that it promises, and to transform your life to claim that possibility, to become that new Creation.

This morning I want to offer each of you the opportunity to make that choice. But before we get there, I want to talk about what it means to make this commitment, because many understand this choice in ways that I think are misleading and destructive, mainly because they understand the commitment too narrowly.

The key issue in this commitment is one of our ultimate allegiance. In the time of John and Jesus and the early Christians, Caesar demanded ultimate allegiance from

everyone. The first Christians were prepared to give the Emperor limited allegiance, to obey just laws, to pay taxes, to give to Caesar what was due to Caesar, but not to give to Caesar what was due to God.

It was that refusal to give ultimate allegiance to Caesar that led the early Christians into conflict with the Roman Empire. That is why they were persecuted, arrested and eventually thrown into the coliseums and made to fight lions, because they rejected the ultimate authority of the Roman Emperor. To choose the kingdom of God was to say that God, not Caesar, was the ultimate authority.

Talking about this in the abstract may be less helpful than if I give you a few examples. Recently I was talking with a friend. Somehow, we got on the topic of climate change. It was a polite conversation, but it quickly became clear that we had different points of view. And right away, he cut off the conversation, saying, “Ross, I am an oil and gas guy. That’s where my bread is buttered, so there’s no point in us having this conversation.” I was stunned. I know people who work in oil and gas who have broad and profound loyalties and who are able to speak intelligently and thoughtfully about the challenges faced by that industry, who are able to see that the environment is bigger than the industry. Unfortunately, my friend was not one of them. It was really clear to me that his ultimate allegiance was to his employer, his industry and his pay cheque. In contrast, to choose the kingdom of God is to have a different allegiance, an allegiance to the highest good rather than a more limited one.

We all live with many relationships: aside from our jobs we are embedded in families, friendships, neighborhoods, congregations, communities, businesses, nations. We owe each of those relationships a limited loyalty, a limited allegiance. But the limited loyalties we owe those relationships can become corrupt when they are not set within a larger loyalty to the highest good. Otherwise, your narrow allegiance what the Bible calls an idol, and the second of the Ten Commandments forbids us worshipping such narrow allegiances. I think that is what happened with my friend. He owes his employer and his industry a limited allegiance, but they are too narrow for his ultimate allegiance. Only God deserves our ultimate allegiance.

Think of our loyalties to our families. Most of the time, in a healthy family, our loyalty to family doesn’t come into conflict with our loyalty to the highest good. But think of the Mafia. In the Mafia, loyalty to your family is set above your loyalty to the law, to justice, or to anyone else’s family, and people are prepared to do horrible things in service to their families. Or think of an abusive family, in

which people protect the abuser to avoid causing trouble to the family. There are many ways in which loyalty to family can become distorted.

There are horrible families like there are horrible relationships of all kinds. Horrible relationships include terrible workplaces, dysfunctional congregations, corrupt governments and unsustainable societies. There are also relatively good governments, healthy congregations, vibrant workplaces, sustainable communities and healthy families. But while there are good relationships, there are no perfect relationships, and so the kingdom of God stands in judgment over them all; choosing God's kingdom means to constantly be evaluating other relationships in light of our best understanding of the highest good. It also means to be constantly evaluating our own best understanding as our worldview evolves.

I really admire people who are whistleblowers in government and industry. It takes enormous courage to risk your job in service to a higher loyalty. Think of the anonymous whistleblower working in the White House who got this whole impeachment process started by revealing the content of the infamous phone call between President Trump and the Ukrainian president. Rather than a narrow allegiance to the President agenda, that whistleblower had a deeper allegiance to the constitution, to justice, to the greater good. Even though whistleblowers are protected by legislation, Mr. Trump immediately accused the whistleblower of treason and suggested that he deserved the death penalty. No doubt some of Trump's more rabid supporters would be happy to carry out the execution if they could figure out who that person is. You can see why being a whistleblower takes such courage. It takes enormous courage to expose incompetence and corruption when there is a lot at stake. But people who put their profound commitment to truth and justice ahead of their more limited loyalty to their employer and their own safety and comfort demonstrate just how profound their loyalties are.

I think we need to choose the widest and broadest and highest and deepest of loyalties for our ultimate allegiance. Such a choice helps us to put everything else into perspective, to be able to decide in a wise and ethical and responsible way when our employer deserves our loyalty and when not, when our family deserves our allegiance and when not, when our nation deserves our allegiance and when not.

A great and profound devotion can include other, narrower devotions, but it doesn't work the other way. In my conversation with my friend, I could consider his point of view and evaluate it, but he could not consider mine, because his perspective was too narrow. A whistleblower can consider the viewpoint of an

employer, evaluate it and look beyond it, but an employer with a narrow allegiance won't be able to see the bigger picture.

When we choose God's kingdom, not in a narrow way but in a broad and profound way, then we will find our devotion to God's kingdom will inevitably come into conflict with those whose devotions are small, narrow and shallow.

I am not thinking primarily here of the other great faiths of the world, of Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and the others, for great and profound devotions like these have much in common. When I speak of small and shallow devotions, I am thinking of those who are so devoted to wealth that they will lie, cheat, sacrifice their families and their health to achieve it; I am thinking of those who are so devoted to their own ethnic or religious group that they will commit unbelievable cruelty against those who are different; I am thinking of those who are so devoted to their children that they attack rivals for the cheerleading squad (true story); I am thinking of all those whose shallow and small devotions are not encompassed by a profound and great devotion.

A great and true devotion will not be without challenges, difficulties, confusions and conflicts. But that is no reason not to make it, for a great and true devotion can offer satisfaction and joy even in the middle of that torment, for there is no joy greater than knowing that your life is spent on a great cause.

In the end, we spend our lives. Like any twenty dollar bill, we have to decide what we will spend it on. What will you do with yours? I invite you to choose a great and profound devotion. I invite you to follow John and Jesus on the difficult, but joyful and fulfilling path of a complete and total dedication of yourself in service to God and your neighbour.

At the beginning of this new year and new decade, I invite you to commit yourselves to this difficult but joyful path. For some of you this is a choice you have made many times before. For some it may be something quite new. But whether you are making this commitment for the first time or renewing a commitment you made long ago, it is a commitment that we must keep making, keep making as we realize again what it means in the concrete practical details of our lives, keep making as we are confronted again by the gift and challenge of being his disciples. If you are willing to make this commitment, I cannot promise that your life will be easy. It will not. But I can promise that it will be worth living.