



“Glimpses of God’s Kingdom”
Scripture – Matthew 11:1-30, 13:31-33, 44-50
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, July 26, 2020

Catherine was dashing up the steps of the public library when she heard someone call her name. When she turned, she saw a group of men dressed in clothes that had seen better days. One of the men ascended the steps toward her. Initially she was puzzled; did she know him? But as he drew closer she recognized him. It was Donald, a man she had met months earlier at the homeless shelter where she volunteers. She had engaged him in conversation several times, and he had taught her to play his favorite card game.

Standing on the steps of the library, they chatted about his life the past couple of months. When the conversation ended, they went their separate ways, but Catherine realized that the encounter had opened a door within her. For the first time she realized he was not simply a vague figure lost among the shadows of downtown. Instead, he is that gentle and funny guy who has two grown sons, and when he talks about them he beams with pride, the same way she does when she talks about her children.

That encounter on the library steps was transformative. It helped her see Donald not simply as a homeless person, but as a person like herself – someone with ideas and feelings and hopes. He is not a nameless character who has no history or passions. He is as much a child of God as she is. And now that she sees Donald in that light, she sees everyone through a different lens.

In one way the encounter was nothing extraordinary – it lasted fewer than five minutes. But in another way, it was a lightning bolt. It cemented her awareness that each person is a unique man or woman with ambitions and opinions and dreams.

On several occasions, when Jesus taught his followers, he told them about the kingdom of God; or as Matthew likes to call it, the kingdom of heaven. Kingdom language refers to life as God intends for it to be. It is not simply the afterlife, but a realm that emerges on earth when we experience kindness and compassion; justice and joy. It surfaces when the things that normally divide us, are outweighed by what unites us.

However, God’s kingdom is a slippery term that’s hard to get a bead on. Jesus never provides a concise definition. He constantly draws pictures of it by comparing the kingdom to ordinary things. That is what we find in today’s passage as Jesus tells five pithy parables in rapid-fire succession.

He said God’s kingdom is in some ways like these things that are familiar to you. Like a tiny mustard seed, a simple act of kindness may seem small, but never underestimate the size of the impact it can make. Like yeast that a woman mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it rises, some words that are spoken and some actions that are taken are barely noticed. Yet they can be transformative. Like a hidden treasure someone discovers

that shoots him over the moon, the values of the kingdom bring life's greatest joys – love, courage, generosity, hospitality, a passion for fair treatment for all. Like a merchant who sells everything he has to purchase a prized pearl, the occasions of God's kingdom are rare, but they are more likely to be experienced by those willing to pay a price. Like fishermen who select the good and toss out the bad, God's kingdom blossoms when we choose what is right and true and good.

Where have you caught a glimpse of God's kingdom recently? Despite the pandemic, despite the civil unrest, despite the deep political divide, where have you spotted life as God intends for it to be?

Interviewed a few days ago on NPR's *Weekend Edition*, Mary Daniel shares her story. She "used to visit her husband, Steve, every day in the assisted living facility in Jacksonville. He has Alzheimer's. When the pandemic hit this spring, the facility shut its doors to outsiders and Mary could no longer see her husband in person."

"Steve was diagnosed seven years ago at the age of 59. During his career he was a sales representative who sold orange juice. He was friendly and energetic and loved being with people."

"Before the pandemic, Mary visited Steve every night after work. She would crawl into his bed next to him and they would hold hands and watch television until he drifted off to sleep. Each day ended on a peaceful note. That was the daily routine until March 10th. On March 11th she received a call from the facility. They said, 'You can't come back.'"

"Steve could not understand what happened. All he knew was that his wife quit coming. She tried two window visits, but they were incredibly painful. Steve sobbed both times, so Mary decided not to do that again. It was far too hard on him."

"Mary asked the management if there was anything she could do. Could she volunteer? Could she get a job there? They said, 'Let's just see how this is going to work.' At that time in March, they were thinking that in a month or so everything will be back to normal."

"But as time went on, everyone began to realize this was not ending anytime soon. So Mary became more vocal. She tried contacting the governor's office. She contacted the local news and the corporate headquarters of this facility heard about it. One day, completely out of the blue, she received a call from the headquarters and the person said, 'I understand you might be interested in employment at our facility.'"

"As a matter of fact I am."

"Well, we have a part-time job available if you'd like it. It's a dishwasher."

"I'll take it."

"Now, every Thursday and Friday evening, Mary washes the dinner dishes, mops the floor, cleans the grill, takes the garbage out, and then she goes to Steve's room and spends a couple of hours with him. She lies next to him in bed and holds his hand, and Steve's anxiety level has dropped because he knows not only that Mary is with him in the moment, but that she is coming back."

Mary said, "The problem is that we have isolated people like Steve to save them, but the isolation will kill them. They need hugs; they need interaction. Without that, their brains will wither and die. And these days, not only die; but die alone."

“When they received Steve’s diagnosis, Mary promised him that he would not have to walk this road alone. She told him that she would be there holding his hand.”¹

When we witness a beautiful act of sacrificial love, we catch a glimpse of God’s kingdom. We also see the kingdom get a foothold in this world when people treat others not according to manufactured divisions, but as if they are genuinely brothers and sisters.

On Saturday night, June 6, in downtown Louisville, the peaceful Black Lives Matter protestors were joined by some unwelcome guests – rioters and looters. Police officer Galen Hinshaw heard a call over his radio. One of his fellow officers was in trouble. An angry crowd had surrounded his police cruiser and some were banging on the car’s hood and windshield.

Seeking to help his fellow officer, Hinshaw drove to a spot nearby and began to walk toward the scene. However, shortly after exiting his cruiser, he was surrounded by people yelling profanities and clenching their fists. He made his way through the crowd for a short distance, but the numbers grew. He detoured to the front of a pizzeria where he could keep his back to the wall. He needed a place to stop and reassess the situation and to make sure no one could jump him from behind.

A police helicopter hovered overhead and sirens pierced the air. The noise of the crowd intensified. Hinshaw was alone. His nearest help was blocks away.

The crowd moved closer to him, and the yelling intensified. Protesters hurled questions at him. “Are you one of the good ones?” and “How do you think we feel?”

Officer Hinshaw tried to respond but was drowned out by the sirens, the yelling and the helicopter. He said, “We do care, man, we do care.” He tried to reason with the crowd. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry you feel this way.” The 32-year-old cop was scared. It would only take one person to make a move on him and everyone would jump in. He hoped he would survive.

At that moment a man emerged from the crowd in a red University of Louisville mask covering the lower half of his face. He put himself between the closest protester and Hinshaw. Darrin Lee Jr. saw what was happening and he stepped forward and linked his arms with the stranger in the red mask.

Interviewed later, Lee said, “Once I saw the guy with the red mask step up, I said to myself, ‘I gotta step up.’” It was a quick reaction on the spot. He thought to himself, “Protect him. It isn’t his fault.” Lee had no idea what might happen next. He looked back at the officer and reassured him that they were going to protect him.

Suddenly, protesters turned on Lee. One shouted in his face: “How can you protect him!” Lee got nervous and the anger intensified.

That’s when Julian De La Cruz saw the men locking arms and joined them. Then, Ricky McClellan stepped up and locked arms, creating a wall in front of the officer. In all, five total strangers linked arms to block the crowd. Three were black, one white, one Dominican — all linking arms to protect Hinshaw.

Shortly, a squad of police arrived and Lee escorted Hinshaw over to the other officers, and the incident was over. Afterwards one of the five said, “A human was in trouble, and right is right.”

Officer Hinshaw continues to contemplate what happened that night. He says, “I’ve cried over that incident...It was a moment where strangers came together to help another stranger, and that stranger was me.”²

In a situation fraught with danger, five people mustered the courage to do what was right when things could have gone terribly wrong. And we catch a glimpse of God's kingdom.

These are moments to hold on to. These are moments for us to replicate in our own way. God looks to us to expand the territory of God's kingdom right here on earth.

NOTES

1. Scott Simon interviewing Mary Daniel, on *NPR's Weekend Edition* – Saturday, July 18, 2020.
2. Michael Clevenger, 'They saved me': How protesters protected a lone cop, *Louisville Courier Journal*, June 6, 2020.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Great and God of Small,

You set before us a vision of your reign:

it is like a tiny seed that burgeons into a majestic tree,
with branches that offer shelter and shade;
it is like yeast hidden within a bushel of flour
that transforms the dough in due time.

God, the Commonwealth of Heaven confounds us. It surprises us. It fills us with wonder.
For it promises grace that transforms and joy that uplifts.
It speaks of the world that is emerging in our midst, if only we have eyes to see.

As we strain our eyes for glimpses of your reign, we long for the harvest you envision.
We long for justice to take deep root and for peace to permeate our communities.
We long for love to grow, wild and free, and for joy to leaven our lives.
We long for creation to reflect your dream of wellbeing for *all*.

As we wait and work for this world, we pray that you would make yourself known to the people who need your comfort:

Those who are grieving the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the loss of stability, the loss of hope.

Those who are weary and worn, who struggle to persevere as this pandemic rages on.

Those who do not have food to eat or a safe place to shelter, who have neither adequate healthcare nor access to services they need.

Those who suffer from others' apathy or indifference, whose hardships are invisible to many passing by, deaf to cries for help.

Those whose bodies are aching, or whose minds are tormented,
Those whose hearts are heavy or whose spirits are broken.

Those we hold in our hearts, and those known only to you, who crave your comfort and peace ...

Spirit of God — Ground our lives more deeply in you, and stretch our imaginations,
so that *your* vision may be *our* vision and *your* ways, *our* ways.
Plant your love within us. Let it take root in our hearts and grow and grow ...

until it becomes a sight to behold, like that mighty mustard tree.
And may our hands be like its branches — reaching out in blessing,
offering help to those in need.

This we pray in the name of Jesus the Christ, the one who gave us words to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.