

Proper 12, Year A

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What if the Kingdom Came?

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OK Summer Pop quiz -- I'm going to give you a line from a familiar prayer and you tell me the line that comes next:

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name:

Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven....

Stop right there. That's good enough. We can say it in our sleep. We probably do. If not always fervent, that prayer is constant. Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done. ...

So my question for us today is: What if the Kingdom came? What if God answered our prayer with: coming right up!

For the last several weeks we've been listening to Jesus expound upon the Kingdom of Heaven – also called the Kingdom of God or the Reign of God. And all throughout this 13th chapter of Matthew he has been describing something desirable that is right within reach, as well as something absolutely impossible to control, that will change life as we know it.

And we have the audacity to pray: Thy Kingdom come ... how soon did you say?

This idea of the Kingdom or the Reign of God refers to a time when nothing gets in the way of God's steadfast love for humanity and humanity's loving response. And that idea isn't really unique to Jesus. It is God's great longing, and we see it throughout the Scriptures. "I will be your God and you will be my people"; I will hold you in the palm of my hand. I will never forget you.

But when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, there is urgency and imminence. It is at hand. Elsewhere he points out that to find it, you've got to turn around a look behind you – that's what repent means, turn around, go the other way. The Kingdom of God is hand, he liked to say, repent and believe in the good news. Instead of in business as usual.

Unless of course changing business as usual is not good news for you.

Let's consider the mustard seed.

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

Ah. Lovely. How many of you are tending a garden this summer? And how many have begun to experience the endless zucchini and prodigious tomatoes?

That's not the kind of plant Jesus is talking about. John Dominic Crossan, the scholar of the historical Jesus, discusses this parable in his book, *Jesus, a Revolutionary Biography*. In the Mediterranean region of Jesus' time, the mustard seed was indeed useful for flavoring or medicine. It grew wild and could be

cultivated. But woe to the agriculturalist who plants it in his field. It germinates quickly, soon becomes a bush of more than three feet, and takes over the field. It is not a plant that can be easily controlled. And those birds of the air? That's the last thing you want hanging out above your garden. For the farmer they are unwanted, uninvited nuisances that threaten the grain and the seed. And they have a habit of sewing other seed that is also not wanted or welcome.

So Jesus is suggesting that Kingdom of God is something that starts out small and then takes over the whole landscape. It provides a home for those that are unwanted and undesirable in your run-of-the-mill Kingdom or neighborhood.

Look closely at these parables more closely— it's like a seed that's planted, like yeast that's kneaded, like a net that's thrown, like a pearl that's discovered, like treasure that's brought out and admired. All of these metaphors for the kingdom insist upon the work and involvement of people. The Kingdom does not come from elsewhere like an invading army. It is intentionally planted and placed from within.

That's why it's at hand. And that's why it has always been possible to live in it, even as other kingdoms, reigns and selfish systems exist alongside.

The gospel passages we had from Matthew this month acknowledge this side-by-side situation of good growing up alongside evil. And they promise a sorting, a reckoning, and that gnashing of teeth that can make us a little hesitant to pray for the Kingdom to come.

Side story -- when my son was in Sunday school pre-school years ago, the lesson was on the parable of the drag net that we just heard, where the fish get sorted into piles of good and bad fish. The Sunday school teacher asked -- now don't we all want to be good fish? And my son Jesse replied, "No I want to be a bad fish. I want to be thrown back. I don't want to get eaten up."

And that just might summarize pretty well our discomfort with that part of the story. But I think the Gospels make it clear that that sorting, and judging and condemning is not our work. Making it easier for the Kingdom to come into people's lives by loving as God loves -- that's our work.

In short, when we live in the Kingdom of God that's at hand, the kingdom expands.

Those early Kings, David and Solomon, they lived in the larger Kingdom of God. In our lesson from First Kings, Solomon refers to the people he will govern as God's people. The gift he wants is the ability to discern between good and evil. Another way to say it is: "thy will be done."

Paul lived in the Kingdom of God, indeed was utterly convinced that everything was going to wrap up in his lifetime. Listen to how he describes it to the Church in Rome: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? ...' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

And Paul was speaking from direct experience of hardship and distress and persecution and death.

But the Kingdom that he lived in, and that was continuing to materialize around him, took all the sting and power out of those things.

But we're modern people. We live in a Democracy. We don't do Kingdoms. No one reigns.

If we look closely and honestly, though, we can see that much of what is filling our feeds with the worst news is about domination. That's why we have an inequality to the access to goods and rights and wellbeing. And that's absolutely opposed to the Kingdom of God that Jesus said was at hand. We grew up, were planted in fact, right in the middle of those systems. Often we benefit from them. We are involved.

So for those of us who seek to live in that Kingdom of God today – what does that even look like?

A few years ago, authors Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone wrote a book called **Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy**. In it they describe something that sounds very much like the Kingdom of God, especially the part where you have to turn in order to find it.

They borrow David Korten's phrase "The Great Turning." It's a perspective that says that instead of the world tipping to doom and extinction, it's at a turning point to recovery and sustainability.

They describe three ways that people are already participating in The Great Turning.

- First people engage in "holding actions" in which they hold back or slow down the damage caused by "business as usual." That may mean removing our support for products or practices that we know hurt people or the earth; joining campaigns, taking direct action.
- Second, people also develop their own "life sustaining systems and practices." They might join food co-ops, support micro-loans, employ alternative energy systems that in turn challenge the typical way we do things.
- Finally, people work to shift their consciousness – change the way they think about the world and their relationship to it. And so they begin to change the systems they are in, not just their own tiny piece of it, but the connections that we are in. So we advocate, we form movements, we speak collectively, we do things as masses of people.

If that doesn't sound like the God's Will Being Done, I don't know what does. As Christians we should recognize this. This kind of behavior has been known to flow out of our churches, out of our Gospels, our tradition. At our best, it's how we roll. At our most hopeful, it's what we most hope for.

So when in answer to our fervent prayer, the Kingdom of God comes knocking after drastically altering our landscape, leavening our daily bread, after enticing us to give up life as we know it, it will bring with it God's fervent prayer for us: Whose Garden will you tend? To whose kingdom will you to come?

Amen.