

June 30, 2019  
Trinity Church Bend  
Proper 8 (13)  
Luke 9: 51-62

As for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God. No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

Scholars aren't sure this particular saying goes back to Jesus. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man, or the Son of Adam, has nowhere to lay his head." That to them sounds more like Jesus. A little more cryptic. Puzzling. Not an answer to a question. But rather a comment that provokes us to ask, "What does he mean by this?"

And then the pithy, inscrutable saying: "Let the dead bury their own dead." That also sounds like Jesus to the scholarly ear. It has an inscrutable bite to it. A challenge. It unsettles. And let us not forget, the fifth commandment insists we honor our father and our mother. That includes a proper burial. For Jesus to say let the dead bury their own dead – that would not only have puzzled his hearers but made them squirm. After all, the world of Jesus was dominated by Law and tradition. What could he possibly mean by this??

I like that Luke attributes these words "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" to Jesus. Because it references a familiar theme to Luke's hearers. The peril of looking back. The dire consequences of looking back. Of going back. Of being lured to an old way of being that has run its course, its own fate, and is gone. A case in point. Consider Lot's wife. Luke's hearers no doubt would have.

Lot's wife was told to flee her city where financial and judicial transactions were corrupt and inhospitable. The city was being destroyed. She was told to move on. Now. But Lot's wife identified too much with the city, with what was familiar, even if corrupt. She could not leave it. She could not move forward. And the consequence? She was turned into a pillar of salt is the way the story tells it. And suffered her own destruction.

I want to explore a couple of things. Offer my own take or interpretation. We know all interpretations are limited. So my imaging is also to stimulate yours.

I want to explore what we think the kingdom of God is. The difference between world and Reality. And the implications of looking back – personally and collectively. At least start that conversation.

The kingdom of God. What do we think it is? It was arguably the heart of Jesus' message.

I for one do not think it is a place. The kingdom of God is not a place. I suggest it reflects a way of seeing, of perceiving. The kingdom of God is at hand are the opening

No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. For me the implications of this are not only personal, like the hesitancy to move into a new stage of life when to stay in the past in to be buried with the dead, but political as well. The imperative to muster the courage and imagination to believe that something new can come into being even when that “something” is not yet fully here. The consequences in either realm for not daring to move forward is tantamount to death.

I am going to play with the notion of the kingdom of God. By that I mean offer an interpretation. All interpretations are inadequate. That is something we can all agree on. But I am going to offer some thoughts on the kingdom of God and hope they provoke you to have yours. That’s one of the wonderful things about part of a community like this. We get to ask, “Well, what you do you make of that? What do you think?” And we get to tell. And maybe change our minds along the way.

So what is meant by the kingdom of God?

I don’t think the kingdom of God is a place. It is not a place. I suggest it is a way of seeing. A way of perceiving.

A way of perceiving the world. Even more, a way of perceiving Reality. Really Real Reality. The heart of what is possible. Really possible. The kingdom of God describes a way of seeing Reality. And here I will make a distinction between Reality and World. For the sake of this conversation. I am no philosopher. But this passage today has me wondering, maybe beyond what I know.....that just might be the point of the story.

World. We are all born into a world that is already “constructed”, culturally defined, to a large extent. We live in a world of givens and assumptions, traditions and norms. And we have pretty much made them up. But we assume they are the stuff of Reality. But I suggest that Reality, with a capital R, is more than thought. There are possibilities that haven’t crossed our minds yet!

“**There** are **more** things in heaven and earth, Horatio, **Than** are dreamt of in **your philosophy**.” Says Shakespeare’s Hamlet as he ponders life and how little even the most educated people can explain.

There are worlds. The world is what it is to us and we are what we are because we keep telling ourselves it is so. And then there is Reality. Which is anything but static, fixed and determinable. So for those who are attached to “this world” as Lot’s wife was, looking back might seem the way to go. (But do remember her fate.) But for those seeking abundant life, I would say, welcome Reality. Which is more than we have yet dreamed and more than we can. But it is not a total unknown. There is something about those songs that say “love can make us whole again” that we know

is true. Only when we lack it we wonder if it is really true at all. The kingdom of God is about possibilities. And love. Even in the midst of death. Even when there is suffering and desolation. The kingdom of God is about what is Real. And what is Real is not static, fixed, or determined. That is the good news. And that is the real news. Surely, what is Real is more than has crossed our minds.

Jesus saw more than what has crossed most minds. He saw in us something that he saw as God. Not that we are little gods. Don't trivialize the thought. But something in us that is the serendipitous, creative, neither static nor fixed nor determined. Something akin to the "unseen God." That is reality. He saw possibilities. Possibilities that had yet to be fully realized. But possibilities alive in the present nonetheless.

I am inclined to say that God is Reality. More than that God is love. Even though I believe that too. The reason I shy from that is that it risks skirting the issue of evil and terror and suffering. And that old problem of how can a loving God do nothing when Auschwitz happens or when children are abused and neglected at our own borders. Where is the God of love then? Well, with us.

So what is the kingdom of God? It is a vision of our world. Without an appeal to something beyond. Without an appeal to something beyond. But to a way of being and living and possibilities here and now. And possibility and its "creative serendipity" as one theologian puts it, is one with humankind. God, then is one with humankind. I think that's what the incarnation is about. God is one with humankind. God with us. God is not separate. To borrow a phrase from Thomas Sheehan, God has "disappeared into humankind and cannot be found anywhere else."

It is not that God has not returned to us after a long absence. This is not the fall of the divine into humanity. God has always been with us. There is no separation between God and us. God and the kingdom of God and the incarnation of God are indistinguishable. God is immediate.

If God is one with humankind, and I believe that is Jesus' message and perception, then the kingdom of God is about every man and woman as it is about Jesus. The kingdom of God is seen in how we treat one another. If God is identified with us. The people. Then the work of the "unseen God" is seen in us.

Now this might all sound too abstract to address the concerns and longing of the human heart. But what I am wrestling with and wondering about is what I just called the immediacy of God which can be known and lived in us and is more than we dreamt possible and as at hand as our living it out.

If God is identified with human beings and if God is at hand, no longer above, then the future does not lie ahead, it is right here and now. God is with the people. If God is identified with human beings, then God is only in and as one's neighbor. (Let me not deny or neglect the wonders of God in all creation but I am emphasizing human

relations for the conversation today.) So then, the call to do justice and love kindness and embody compassion and structure our world to reflect the reality of God. The reality of God as distinctly expressed through us. As human beings. Our work is the distinct work of the unseen God. And in that, we are responsible for our own destiny and the destiny of the world.

What does it mean to be human? What is truly possible in the world to which we can devote ourselves? Where do we dwell? With God. In God. In the realm of possibility. We cannot wait to reconfigure the world? We must give ourselves to it through love and compassion right now. The world is what it is to us and we are what we are because we keep telling ourselves it is so.

And here, the kingdom of God.

When I say neighbor I am not talking about zip codes. I am talking about the whole of humanity. All of them. All of us. The radical piece of Jesus' teaching is not just loving our neighbor but loving our enemy. That is radical. And it speaks to the profound sense that God is incarnate. Not just in some. But in all. Not just in those who believe as we do but anyone else who "believes" or doesn't. If God is incarnate then the question is called: how are we treating the poor, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the neglected, the sick, the outcast, the other. And what do we think we are doing in the way we treat are treating migrants and refugees at our border. If God is incarnate then what are we doing? Even more, who are we?? Then who or what is God?

You cannot distinguish the worldly from the divine. (I know, we can argue this. Please do.) The kingdom of God recovers our place in the mystery of things. Here. Now. Without an appeal to the beyond.

Jesus made present the reality of God with us. Even though discussion of the kingdom of God must resonate with the human heart and not be abstract. But here is a thought in light of God's immediacy with us. The destiny of the human race resides with us. We are responsible for our own destiny and the destiny of the world.

If we do not act toward our neighbor with love and compassion now, then the world will continue to look very much the same.

Jesus suggests that everything is already in God's grace.

"Grace is and always has been everywhere. The task is to make it so." Thomas Sheehan. We don't have time to look back.

As for you, proclaim the kingdom of God.

