

Sermon: "THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN"

Rev. Anderson
October 15, 2017

Will you pray with me?

Lord, we thank you for the invitation to enter Your kingdom, even when we are not that sure where or what that means. We thank you for the words of your Son as he tried to clarify Your offer and we ask you be patient with humanity and with us as we try to work it out. Let it be sufficient that we know that it is where Your love is charged and imbedded in all who are there. Open our ears and minds and charge our critical thinking this morning as this family of your people work it out. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Early this week I was happy to know that there were no hurricanes or mass shootings to draw our attention but I looked too soon. The damages from the fires in California are pretty overwhelming. I have to think back to Dresden during World War II to find such an image of destruction and devastation. My sister-in-law in Sonoma County had to spend one night sleeping in her car and several nights in a hotel. Please keep those who suffered loss in your prayers.

I finally realized how such loss fits into my theme this morning. More on that later.

We, as a congregation, are very close to having an Interim Minister returning me to being a happily retired old engineer/mathematician with a passion for God's Word. This may be one of my last sermons for a while and I want to talk about something biblical. The Gospel lesson this morning offered a perfect opportunity except it is a parable that grinds my teeth and gets me all contrary. This happens often in our regular Bible Study Group and they have tolerated it rather well. Thank you group.

What does a mustard seed, yeast, treasure, a pearl merchant, a fish net, a king with a grudge, a landlord, bridesmaids, and a king have in common? What ties them together? My daughter, Shelly, immediately responded that all were used by Jesus in parables. All were used to help us understand **The Kingdom of Heaven**. However, after I looked closely at all of these, I don't know if it is a place, a group, or a way of living and seeing the world.

The topic under discussion is the **Kingdom of Heaven**. The topic comes up often in the Gospel of Matthew with 31 of the 43 references to the Kingdom of Heaven. Daniel is second with seven and the other books are pretty silent.

Matthew tells us that Jesus began his ministry by warning his followers “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” some translations say “the kingdom is at hand.” It is right here. Matthew’s summary of Jesus’ teaching makes it clear that many of the lessons compared familiar people or things in ordinary life to this kingdom that was very near.

I think the most important lesson to me was that all it took for me to be a part of that kingdom was a belief that entry was possible for me and a desire to enter. The faith, the desire, and the kingdom itself, are all gifts from God. There was no test to qualify, no landing card like you need when you fly into the USA, neither tax nor background vetting. Welcome! You are part of the kingdom heaven!

Let’s get back to today’s lesson. Does it seem more like an Old Testament story to you, rather than a story Jesus would use? It sounds good when the king, the God surrogate, invites all these people to a banquet and even better when those who actually come are the poor and homeless. After all, we know that God has a special love for the poor and hungry.

The King, however, sounds like some of today’s national leaders. They only invite the hoi poi. The people whom they invite are too important and too far above the great unwashed, at least in their own minds, to consider hospitality important. Some respond with violence.

The king responds to violence with violence. This sounds like a story General Patton would tell, but not Jesus.

Finally, we get to the poor guy who was dragged off the street into the party and accused of not wearing an appropriate wedding robe. The king has him bound, beaten, and cast out into the outer darkness.

My understanding is that Matthew never really understood the way Jesus used this story. It is clear that he did use it from its presence in Luke and the gospel of Thomas. Jesus, responding to Sadducees, Pharisees, and temple priests shows how they would handle the situation of being dissed by their peers.

This is the negative example used to teach us how not to behave. Sadly, there are other things in the Gospel of Matthew that bring his knowledge into question.

The Bible is a wonderful source of direction and inspiration that is subject to misunderstanding when we look at little bits. It is easy to support the idea of keeping slaves using the Bible. People who are judgmental about others have used it for 20 centuries to divide humanity despite specific injunctions to judge not.

We all need to read it more often and think about what we read. In our fast moving, busy, busy world, it is easy to think we don't have time. Just look around you at society and ask yourself, "How's that working out for you?" Friends, the Kingdom of Heaven is where love prevails, where little good deeds multiply into movements, where sharing the blessings of God makes enough for everyone, where turning the other cheek puts armies out of work. Getting back to the California wildfires, one important thing about being part of the kingdom is not that you will never suffer loss. It is that you will never suffer alone. Our Triune God will always be with you along with the all the others who have chosen to enter. Remember, it is easy to enter, just decide to be part of it and see the changes that happen around you.

Let's pray: Help us, Lord, to know and live your Word. Keep our focus on your teachings in Word and World, going beneath and beyond the pages and listening as you still speak to us. I pray in the name above all names, Jesus Christ. Amen