

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 4, 2010

“The Kingdom of God has come near to you.”

St. Luke 10:1-11; 16-20

“The Kingdom of God has come near to you.” St. Luke 10:9

On this Independence Day we may be thinking about kingdoms and how the 13 colonies of England declared their independence from King George III - how on this day we separated ourselves from the tyranny of a king.

The Gospel story tells us of Jesus sending out the 70 disciples. Their mission: ‘Proclaim the Kingdom of God has come near to you.’

Our history as a country, our local and personal history, and our history as a church all influence how we hear and come to terms with the stories of Scripture. Because of such a context and because of our social location - the term ‘kingdom’ is heard differently than Christ originally meant it.

The Biblical notion of ‘the Kingdom of God’ is not a nation, or a place. When Christ refers to the ‘Kingdom of God’ he is not referring to heaven or the afterlife. No! Jesus is lifting up the ancient Jewish tradition of God’s loving reign in the hearts and lives of people and the creation.

The voices of the prophets are a constant call to participate in the reign of God. Jeremiah speaks of that reign of compassion written into the hearts and lives of the people:

*“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: ‘I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least to them to the greatest,’ says the Lord; ‘for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.’”
Jeremiah 31:33-34*

The mission of the 70 is to direct attention to the nearness of God’s Kingdom. Within this story of the commissioning of the 70 – 35 pairs of disciples are sent out. The laborers are few and the risks are great.

Christ sends them out with no provisions for the journey. They are to focus on the mission and depend on the hospitality of strangers. They are to declare peace to any house that they enter. If they are received ‘peace’ will remain. They are to eat what is set before them, cure the sick, and proclaim the nearness of God’s Kingdom.

When the message is rejected they are to move on shaking the dust off their feet in a prophetic protest to the town's spurning.

One has to wonder if any bishop would approve of this mission strategy. It does not sound like Jesus is out to establish a church, or an ecclesiastical hierarchy. Christ is not sending the disciples out to build buildings where people will gather to worship and adore him.

Quaker pastor and writer, Philip Gulley, makes this point in his latest book: If the Church Were Christian: Rediscovering the Values of Jesus:

"But what if Jesus didn't want people to believe certain tenets about him, so much as take seriously the kingdom ethos he promoted?...I believe God's priorities were Jesus' priorities, and those priorities were to care for the poor and marginalized."
[Pages 18-19]

This summer theme is: 'Jesus's Journey and Ours.' So, how does this Gospel apply to our journey? The mission of Jesus remains: 'The Kingdom of God has come near to you.'

What does that mean for those of us sitting here on July 4, 2010?

'The Kingdom of God has come near you.'

By our words and our deeds do we promote the tenets and spirit of the Kingdom of God? Is our focus and attention on the nearness of God's Kingdom: traveling light, peace, healing, speaking boldly?

Traveling light:

What about 'stuff'? Are our lives cluttered with too much stuff? Are we carrying too much baggage? I mean that both literally and figuratively. We all know how our stuff can get in the way of focusing on what is important in life. When we choose taking care of our stuff – as more important than relating to people – we've diverted from the nearness of the Kingdom.

What about the baggage we carry from the past? Rejections – people that have hurt us long ago? Does that ever get in the way of tending to the nearness of the Kingdom – the forgiveness and compassion found in Christ? Focusing on the Kingdom means traveling light.

Peace – the focus of the Kingdom is on 'peace':

Not just some private peace between God and me! Not some personal corner where I can remain undisturbed. It is indeed a peace that surpasses understanding. God's peace does come

deep into our hearts, but it does not stay there – it extends to neighbor.

How do you and I contribute to the unveiling of God's peace for all? How do you and I participate in God's ongoing healing?

I've recently tried an experiment of intentionally smiling more – even at strangers – even in the elevator. I've noticed that 90% of people respond with a smile and even a brief conversation.

Now that sounds like a small thing for world peace – but peace and healing begins here in our hearts where God has set up God's Kingdom. Where God is written large in our hearts – there is the Kingdom.

In addition to that we are called by God to speak boldly. We have two wars that have been ongoing for nearly a decade. God's people proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom by questioning the ongoing use of military force as the primary means to national security. The ethos of the Kingdom does not allow us to remain silent. The peace of the Kingdom is not some other worldly peace that allows us to neglect peace now.

Nor are we to remain silent when the poor and marginalized are neglected. Our offering of letters this morning gives each of us the chance to use the gift of our citizenship to continue to extend tax credits to those most vulnerable to the current deep recession.

The nearness of God's Kingdom is happening all around us – are we attentive to it? Are we open to affirming it beyond the walls of a church building?

A teenager in Detroit is planting seeds to save a city. Along with a team of volunteers, a young student, Ivory Price, is helping to restore the Motor City. Detroit has suffered most severely in the Great Recession with businesses shut-down and home abandoned.

'Build On' is an urban renewal project led by local volunteers. They are reclaiming parts of the city by planting and growing gardens and then giving the food away to the neighbors.

Due to the gangs and prostitution, Ivory has been told to give up. Her answer: "You don't know until you try." It takes time and persistence, but neighbors have responded and stood up to the crime and have begun to bring wholeness back to their neighborhood.

The nearness of the Kingdom is around us – it depends on what you look for:

This past week, Senator Robert Byrd died. Here is a man who served in Congress and the Senate for more than half a century. He once was a member of the KKK, but ended up championing civil rights. We see a person who evolved and changed and grew – there is the nearness of the Kingdom.

Notice and be attentive to the nearness of the Kingdom. Talk about how you see and participate in God's compassion with your family and friends. Compare notes.

We gather each Sunday to be attentive to the nearness of God's Kingdom. In bread and wine we celebrate the compassion and forgiveness given us freely in Christ.

You cannot go to the local pharmacy and pick up a prescription for forgiveness. Wal-Mart does not sell compassion. No! Here in this community of faith gathered by God's Spirit we are graced with the gifts of forgiveness and compassion.

We gather here to celebrate the nearness of God. We gather here to be equipped to proclaim that nearness throughout the week ahead.

Let us pray: O God – grace us with your peace and healing. Rid us of the baggage of sin and discouragement that often weighs us down. Put Christ deep within us and open our mouths to speak of the nearness of your Kingdom and our lives to live it.

Amen