

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

3rd Sunday of Lent
Year C

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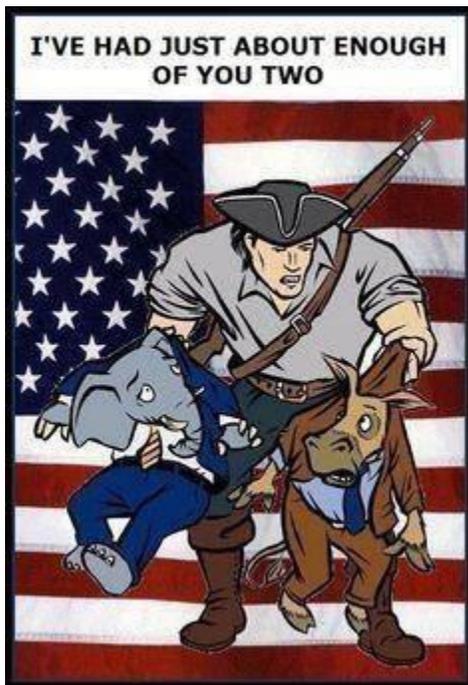
February 28, 2016

Text: Mark 1:14-15

Title: “The Way: Following the Footsteps of Jesus: Proclaiming the Kingdom of God”

I know some people don't like it when the preacher mentions anything having to do with politics from the pulpit, but I have to say that watching some of the presidential debates has sometimes left me wondering about what it means to live in a republic in which potential leaders treat each other and their opponents in the kind of disrespectful ways in which the current candidates have been doing. What does it say about them and maybe more importantly what does it say about us as a people with the freedom to vote?

As I was thinking about all of this and the theme of the worship service today having to do with God's kingdom, someone posted this cartoon on Facebook and I couldn't help but share the post:



Based on some of the responses I received just by sharing the post without making any comment at all, I think it might express what a lot of people are feeling, and the election is still nine months away!

Of course, we aren't here to talk about or listen to a sermon on current politics, and I am not here to deliver one. This isn't a political rally or a caucus or a primary, and I'm not here to direct you to my favorite candidate. And yet, as a people we are asking who is it that we will trust with leadership? It is a question we ask every election cycle when it comes to government leaders, but here in the church it's a deeper question. It's a much deeper question: To whom are you and I going to give our primary allegiance? Not who am I going to vote for to lead our government but to whom do I give my life? Who will I follow and why?

In the very first chapter in Mark's Gospel, Jesus launches his ministry after a series of events took place. First, he was baptized by John. In that baptism, Jesus hears God's affirming voice: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It's an affirmation rehearsed every time a baptism takes place in this sanctuary as we remind the one being baptized and/or the baptized one's parents that baptism is a sign of God's favor, God's positive regard for those who come offering themselves or their children to the ways of God. So Jesus received that affirmation prior to beginning his ministry.

Second, The Gospel According to Mark also describes Jesus being driven into the wilderness dealing with the temptations put before him by Satan. There, Jesus' was forced to deal with the internal struggles of self-care, self-promotion, and self-aggrandizement. He struggled with the kinds of temptations we all face in one form or another, but he didn't succumb. He remained true to who he was: the Beloved, God's Son. He refused to be swayed by the wiles of the satanic voice attempting to lure him away from his dependence upon God alone.

Third, John the Baptist was arrested by those in power. Herod, the political ruler of the day, did not appreciate John's criticism of him because Herod married his own brother's wife. It was after John's arrest that Jesus launched his ministry. He begins by preaching in Galilee, and his message is very simple: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." It was a message that echoed the Baptist's except for one addition: Jesus called people to repent as did John. Repent simply means to turn around. Stop living life in ways that interfere with entering the kingdom of God. However, Jesus added "believe in the good news." It is good news that God's kingdom has come near. It's good news that the time has finally come. But so what? What is this kingdom of God anyway? What is it about?

One thing for certain: Jesus is not running for office. This isn't an election speech. This isn't Jesus ushering in a new political reality when he talks about God's kingdom. God's kingdom isn't a monarchy or a republic. It's not about who has authority over a territory or a people. We don't get to vote on this. We don't get to decide. It has already been decided: God is ruler in God's kingdom.

Yet, this is a kingdom for which Jesus does not provide a clear definition. It's not a place to which a person can go. There aren't any walls determining its boundaries. Instead, Jesus uses parables to describe it.

“The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.” (Mark 4:25-27)

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (Mark 4:30-32).

In Jesus’ preaching in the Gospel According to Mark, the kingdom of God is present and yet the nature of the kingdom has to do with mystery and wonder. It can be seen but not completely understood. And it certainly cannot be controlled by human beings like us. The **kingdom** is God’s realm not ours.

So the mystery of God’s presence is involved. It’s beyond our control and yet Jesus preaches that it has to do with children. You remember when the people were bringing children to him for a blessing and the disciples were rude to them and their parents? Jesus was quick to correct the disciples publicly:

“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them (Mark 10:14-16).

Maybe what Jesus meant by this receiving the kingdom of God as a little child is found in one of the beatitudes which he preached in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel According to Matthew:

“**Blessed are** the pure in heart, for they will see God” (**Matthew 5:8**).

Is there something about innocence or dependence or recognizing that we cannot survive without help that leads to entering the kingdom? Is there something about coming to God recognizing we still have growing up to do, that we are always growing--and always will be--that leads to entering the kingdom?

On the flip side, Jesus also preached that entering the kingdom can be difficult for some.

¹⁷ As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰ He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money^[e] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. ²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is^[d] to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Mark 10:17-25).

On the one hand, it belongs to children and a person can't enter it unless we become like children. On the other hand, those with wealth—which is a very relative term—have a hard time entering it. I wonder if Jesus means that all the insurance policies, pensions and other such sources of security keep us from fully relying on God, and in order to enter God's kingdom now it means letting go of our dependence on those safety nets which we think we need in order to live meaningful lives. Apparently, entering God's kingdom has nothing to do with how much money we have. In fact, money may be a deterrent if it keeps us from seeking God's kingdom first so that all these other things will be ours as well.

So the kingdom of God has nothing to do with money and yet maybe everything to do with it depending on how we approach money and possessions. But there is one thing about which Jesus is abundantly clear in the Gospel According to Mark when it comes to God's kingdom. It comes in the story of one of the scribes—a religious leader—who comes to Jesus and asks him of all the religious laws—of all the commandments we are to obey—which is the greatest, the most important above all?

²⁹ Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³² Then

the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; ³³ and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mark 12:28-34).

God’s kingdom is not a place, but then again maybe it is. Jesus is elusive when it comes to describing the kingdom. Maybe the kingdom of God is present in whatever place loving God and neighbor is realized. Maybe the kingdom of God is present when a community rallies around a family who loses a 7 year-old daughter to a terrible traffic accident with immediate prayer and then fundraisers to support them. Maybe the kingdom of God is present when people with compassionate care start growing a garden or organize a food pantry and food giveaways in order to love neighbors by feeding them in the name of Jesus. Maybe the kingdom of God is present in secretive ways like yeast raising bread dough when people from across the country send bottled water to a city filled with children suffering from lead poisoning. Maybe the kingdom of God is present in the growth like a tiny mustard into a strong bush when a few people listening to the voice of the Spirit take a risk in downtown Saginaw to make a difference on one street in one week’s time and it turns into a passionate, joyful expression of God’s love for a forgotten and forsaken city. Maybe what Jesus meant when he told the scribe he wasn’t far from the kingdom of God is that talk can be cheap. The scribe had the words alright, but God’s kingdom is an active force in the world, visible but hidden, in the present but also not yet.

The good news for us is that God’s kingdom IS at hand. Turn around and believe the good news! Turn away from the prognostications of the voices that having nothing but bad news to proclaim. Listen rather to the voice of Jesus who really does have good news to tell. As the old hymn goes:

**This is my Father’s world. O let me ne’er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father’s world: the battle is not done:
Jesus Who died shall be satisfied,
And earth and Heav’n be one.**

So love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul and strength and your neighbor, too. Enter God’s kingdom every chance you get by doing so actively. Celebrate God’s rule whenever you witness the goodness of God growing in some mysterious, unexplained way. Because we in the church--when we are at our best, have profound confidence in the power of God. When we are at our best, we know the power of God’s love to transform the world—and us. When we are at our best, we live out the greatest commandment Jesus proclaimed over and over again—and that draws us together in a way only faith understands. And that is a gift for which to give thanks and praise!