

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church
Keller, Texas
Sermon for September 27, 2020 ~ Proper 21A
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In this Church and others that follow essentially the same series of Sunday readings, autumn is the time of year during which the theme of the gospel lessons is that of the inbreaking Kingdom of God. In these passages, Jesus provides us with insights into the nature of that state of being we call “the Kingdom of God.” Through metaphor and parable, we are able to catch a glimpse of what life in that state of being is, to gain a perspective on what kinds of people are there, and to examine our own hearts and minds with regard to our own citizenship in that realm.

The parable of the two sons is presented as a question in which the hearers condemn themselves. The parable appears in Matthew in the context of a confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders of Jerusalem – the house of peace where peace is forever so fragile, the place where things always come to a head, the perennial crux of the Jesus’ mission. It concerns the Kingdom of God and the makeup of the Kingdom’s population. This parable raises at least three questions: Why was the Kingdom so important? What was Jesus saying to those leaders? What does this have to do with us?

Why was the Kingdom so important? To get at this question, it helps to have an overview of sacred history. As the Bible tells the story, in the act of creation, God made our first ancestor in God’s own image. And, like God and the angels, the human creature was androgynous. We call that creature “Adam,” which really isn’t a name but a description of a unique kind of being – one that is capable of having complete communion with God and one that has resources beyond what any other creature, at least on this mortal coil, possesses.

Then, as the Bible tells it, God divided the creature into two, male and female. While they were separate, they still lived in communion, in harmony with one another. There was a spiritual union. But then, things take a turn for the worse when their desire to become gods overcomes our first parents. Their actions strike a crucial blow to the unity of the human family. Ever since, we have felt disconnected, dysfunctional, diseased, dissatisfied, and disempowered. We have known a lack of completeness. We have a sense that something is missing and, though usually it is a vague sense, sometimes it becomes a full-blown awareness that there is a gaping, empty hole at the core of our being and we struggle to fill it up with something that will make us feel whole. We try all kinds of things: power, lust, money, theft, philosophy, politics, psychology, and knowledge, just to name a few. But all fall short of our unconscious goal of unity within and reconciliation with our human brothers and sisters.

Finally, one like us was sent to become the New Adam. He was given a name, “Jesus,” a derivative of Joshua, and meaning one who leads people to salvation. He was the first person since the beginning of time who gets it all back together. And, the way the Bible tells the story, we know that it was painful for him, just as separation was painful for our first ancestors. Yet there is salvation and a sublime joy in the case of Jesus. He called that experience of having it back together “the Kingdom of God.”

But what was Jesus saying to those religious leaders? He found it scandalous that they were the least impressed by what was happening. The signs of the Kingdom of God were all around them and they just couldn’t seem to recognize them. They of all people should be sensitive and receptive to the signs

of God's activity, to the evidence of God's breaking into the world, but they were not. So, he told them a story about two sons: one refused to do what he was asked to do, but ended up doing it anyway. The other son, said he would do what he was asked to do, but plopped down on the sofa in front of the TV. Jesus wanted the religious leaders to know that, in his opinion, they were the ones who were dropping the ball, bringing up the rear, clueless, and that the people they most despised – tax gatherers and prostitutes – were going to catch on and get it together before they did.

We observe how God keeps coming to the aid of the broken, unscrubbed, vulnerable, marginalized, etc. But then, we wake up and realize that is the only kind of people there are! Jesus wanted the washed and scrubbed to know that and acknowledge it. Such self-awareness and humility are the prelude to big changes in the heart and the mind that are the very gateway to the experience of back-togetherness he called "the Kingdom of God." So what he was saying to those leaders was, "You are bringing up the rear! Promises are not enough. You've got to ultimately be faithful to the One who created you and wants you to be made whole and letting God help you get it together means leaning into God's yearning for that to happen."

We resemble the people in this parable! David H.C. Read, who was for many years the pastor of the Madison Avenue Pres. Church in NYC, said: "There is a shrine in the heart of each of us where our first loyalty is centered and our allegiance given. If our God is not there it will surely be filled by some other lord. And then we become the slaves of the powers of the age or the corruptions of our selfish desires. There is only One who has the right to be there in that central shrine. There is only One to whom we utterly belong, for he belongs to God."

The stewardship of all that has been entrusted to us is a spiritual discipline that helps us focus on giving our allegiance to the Living God who reigns in our lives.

The self-emptying of Christ for us in the incarnation was not his victory over the human temptation to be like God – as it was in the case of our first parents. Rather, his victory was the free renunciation of divine prerogatives in order to fully share in the human condition, which of its very nature is a service to God. By his humiliation and exaltation, Jesus has conquered, as a human, all the cosmic powers hostile to God and to humanity. He is the firstborn – the New Adam. And, as St. Paul put it, "As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive." Adam and the offspring of Adam were disobedient and fragmented the human family. Jesus and the followers of Jesus are faithful and obedient and thereby become complete, whole, and the human family is restored – to fellowship, to communion – with the God who created us and to one another. All creation is straining on tiptoe just to see the sons and daughters of God come into their full inheritance. And to bring it home right here to this community, everybody is waiting to see what God can do with us.

Remember that both of the boys in the parable were the Farmer's sons. We, too, whichever one we resemble most, are the children of God. God's invitation to us today is to allow ourselves to move in the direction of getting it together in Jesus Christ and live as Kingdom People – an experience of completeness unfound anywhere else in all creation. Will that completeness come to us in this life? Who can say? But One who has conquered has said, "Follow me." And "God so loved the world..." We who are some of the religious folk around here and those of us who don't think of ourselves as so religious – all of us, ought to consider taking God up on that invitation and moving in that direction. Maybe something incredibly wonderful will happen along the way to becoming Kingdom People.