

***The Kingdom of God? What It Is and Why It Matters to Jesus***

Do you know the phrase, *the kingdom of God*? It is, I think, one of those phrases you might read in scripture or hear in the church and have no real idea what it means. The kingdom of God? Is it the same as the kingdom of heaven, another phrase that gets used a lot by Jesus, or is it different? Is it about something on earth, here and now, or is it about heaven and the afterlife?

This little phrase, the kingdom of God, is a big teaching of Jesus, and today I want to pick up our message series on Jesus' teachings and look at this key idea.

Let's start with prayer.

In the beginning of all four gospels—the books in the Bible that tell the story of Jesus—Jesus talks about the kingdom of God.

Luke 4:43

But he said to them, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose."

Mark 1:14-15

But after John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee, preaching the good news of God. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near: Repent and believe in the good news."

Matthew 4:17

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

John 3:3

Jesus answered him, "very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

"The phrase the 'kingdom of God' is perhaps the best shorthand summary of the message and passion of Jesus. As a New Testament scholar has written, 'Ask any hundred New Testament scholars around the world, Protestant, Catholic or non-Christian, what the central message of Jesus of Nazareth was, the vast majority of them, perhaps every single expert—would agree that this message centered in the kingdom of God. (Marcus Borg, quoting John Reumann, from *Jesus in the Church's Gospel*.)

So this is a central focus and concern of Jesus. He talks about it a lot. In fact, I found there to be 114 references to the “kingdom” in the gospels. I want to you to see that this is central to understanding Jesus and following him. So, we have to ask: What does he mean when he speaks of this? Before we get there, there are a couple things to learn...

You will hear me say both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven when we explore this today. You should know that these phrases mean the same thing. The Gospel of Matthew uses the kingdom of heaven instead of God, as it was tradition to minimize the use of the name of God by Jewish writers, and we assume the writer of Matthew’s Gospel to be Jewish.

Also, while it may be a bit difficult to get into this teaching, as it seems a bit outside our 21<sup>st</sup> century way of thinking—as it talks about kingdoms—I invite you really to apply yourself this morning, because I believe this teaching brings about a radical shift in our way of being people of faith.

Here is what we know:

Jesus lived in a different culture than our own. His time knew firsthand what a kingdom looked like. I am not saying there aren’t kingdoms today, there are, but we certainly have no experience of that.

Well...that isn’t totally true. We think of kingdoms in wonderful, magical ways, like the kingdom of Disney, where everyone is happy and well fed. In fact, one of Disney’s Web sites is [www.kingdom-travel.com](http://www.kingdom-travel.com)

The kingdom in Jesus’ day was nothing like Disney’s kingdom. Jesus lived in a time when an ancient power system was ruled by controlling and wealthy people who set the day’s agenda. It was a time of subjugation, struggle, and poverty for the Jews. It was into this messy world that Jesus asks, what would the world be like if God were king?

That is a thought-provoking question, isn’t it? What would the world be like if we were all under God’s kingdom, God’s realm, God’s way? What would that look like for how we interact, what jobs would no longer get done, what the prison system would look like? What do you think would change in the world?

Let’s do something radical. Turn to your neighbor and take a minute to brainstorm about how you think the world would be different if God were the only ruler and we all obeyed?

(1-2 minutes)

OK, what did you come up with?

While I think we all have ideas and hopes about what it would look like, it is difficult to pin down what it might be. That is true as we wrestle with this concept, and it was also true during Jesus’ day.

So, maybe one way we can talk about what Jesus was teaching when he spoke of the kingdom of God is to contrast it with its opposite, spiritually speaking.

At the start of our scriptures, we read the story of Adam and Eve. We hear how they ate from a tree from which they were not to eat. This is a story that talks about the feeling we have that somehow, someplace, something had to happen that separated us from God.

Humankind's problems are many, but one way of talking about them is by saying that we are alienated from God, that is, we decided we could run things better than God does, and so we sought to control our lives ourselves. No longer did we depend on God; no longer did we feel we even needed God. After all, we could figure it out ourselves—we didn't really need God's ways or rules.

This—of course—led to all kinds of problems and messes. Many we see in the world's systems—whether it be our overuse of the world's resources, animals or people—and others we know all too personally. When we talk about this, we sometimes use the shorthand term, “the fall.” (paraphrased from Georgia Harkness)

When Jesus came, he said, “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news!” (Mark 15). This began a new time with new possibilities.

The way it had been, with us separated from God, held in bondage to our brokenness, trying this new thing and that new thing, criticizing this person and that, thinking we could figure it out—all this brokenness didn't have to be anymore. Instead, now in this new time—and we should especially hear this in the context of Jesus' resurrection on Easter—the kingdom of God has come among us, and ‘the fall’ and our broken relationship with God are now a thing of the past.

The kingdom of God is then this new way of living by being in close relationship with God. It means we no longer control our own life, but surrender it to God's control. Yes, the kingdom of God is about Jesus' work on earth.

That may surprise you if you think that the kingdom of God only refers to the afterlife. It doesn't. As Jesus understood the kingdom, he saw it as here and now, while not yet fully realized. This is something to keep in mind as we talk about it: God's kingdom was begun in Jesus, but there is still more that will be revealed to us. In other words, this kingdom is about a journey.

Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was what God's rule among us would look like. And as we can experience, there are times when it seems God's way is here among us. Maybe you have experienced that, where somehow you felt God's presence acting with justice or in merciful ways—maybe through a church or family—and it seemed as if God's way of doing life was made incredibly real. But then there are other times when it seems as if God's way is so far from where we are and the communities in which we find ourselves.

One thing that is very important when we talk about the kingdom of God is that Jesus didn't set out a clear, concise understanding of what this would look like. Instead, Jesus told stories and he spoke prayers. He may have done this because it is only through imagination and story that we could entertain a kingdom unlike any other. These stories—or parables—try to explain what the kingdom of God was or would be like.

The word *parable* may be new to you, or you may not be certain what it means. Let me read this:

“Like the rabbis of his time, Jesus used simple word-pictures, called parables, to help people understand who God is and what his kingdom or reign is like. Jesus used images and characters taken from everyday life to create a miniature play or drama to illustrate his message. This was Jesus' most common way of teaching. His stories appealed to the young and old, poor and rich, and to the learned and unlearned as well.

“Over a third of the Gospels by Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain parables told by Jesus. Jesus loved to use illustrations to reach the heart of his listeners through their imagination. These word-pictures challenged the mind to discover anew what God is like and moved the heart to make a response to God's love and truth. Like a skillful artist, Jesus painted evocative pictures with short and simple words.

“A good picture can speak more loudly and clearly than many words. Jesus used the ordinary everyday to point to another order of reality—hidden, yet visible to those who had ‘eyes to see’ and ‘ears to hear’. Jesus communicated with pictures and stories, vivid illustrations which captured the imaginations of his audience more powerfully than an abstract presentation could. His parables are like buried treasure waiting to be discovered...” (from [www.rc.net/wcc/parables1.htm](http://www.rc.net/wcc/parables1.htm))

Matthew, chapter 13 is a good source for stories about the kingdom of God. Here we find a group of parables about the kingdom. Listen to these stories that Jesus told for clues of what God's way among us would look like.

Matthew 13:31-35 (NRSV)

**31** He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; **32** it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." **33** He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." **34** Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. **35** This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: <sup>F9</sup> "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."

Jesus tells these parables as he is speaking to a crowd who has come to hear his teachings. These stories seek almost to tease the mind into seeing God's ways differently than we'd assume.

For instance, our assumption of God's rule is often that it will be BIG—mega-churches and cathedrals, H2s and Cadillac Escalades, mansions and bling-bling.

Instead, these first two parables show us that God's rule among us is much more about small things that have great potential, like mustard seeds that grow big, and leavening that raises bread. I don't know about you, but I expected something grander for God's rule.

But we follow a God who was born among us in a stable to a peasant woman and her husband; a man who cared about the ill, the disenfranchised, and the child. We follow a man who reveals a God not of grand things—at least not like we usually think—but a God who makes God's ways known in the everyday, almost inconsequential things.

For what is more ordinary than sowing seeds and breaking bread? What is more common than ordinary people and pastors gathering on Sunday? What is more universal than sharing bread and wine together around a table after telling a story?

Both the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Leaven contrast the smallness and everydayness of the kingdom with the greatness of its effects. And if we look around, we see that these parables have—in some real ways—been lived out.

Yes, the Roman Empire, the Third Reich, Communism, and many other governments have sought to quell the work of Jesus' kingdom, yet they are gone and Jesus' in-breaking is still among us.

Let's look at two more parables about the kingdom: Matthew 13:44-46 (NRSV)

**44** "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. **45** "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; **46** on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

These parables aren't addressed to the crowd like the first two. Instead, they are spoken to Jesus' disciples, those who are a bit closer to Jesus and have made choices about following him. These parables show us that there is a real discovery and joy in finding God's way among us. They lift up that God's way isn't one of many from which we choose on any given day, but one to which we wholeheartedly commit, even when it causes us to look into our lives and see what doesn't belong.

Obedience is a big part of living in God's kingdom, for the temptation is always to turn back to doing things our own way. Our own ways are often at odds with God's way, whether that is in how we treat one another, how we care for the poor, how we comfort those who grieve, how we use our money or our time, or how we build our

community of faith. Listening for God's kingdom and going in that direction can be hard, as it often calls us to love, serve and sacrifice when it calls us to offer patience and grace.

So let's say that you are thinking, *OK, Jesus brings us this new way, God's rule/God's kingdom among us. What must we do in order to see it, experience it, be part of it?* Let's look at one more text. This is Luke 18:15-17 (NRSV).

**15** People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. **16** But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. **17** Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

There is, in the middle of this teaching, a great sense of the humility of it all. There is a great sense of being dependent and full of trust, like a child.

We are called to take the kingdom of God not by storm, but as those who, with great humility, come face to face with their own brokenness, inadequacies, mistakes, and sins and realize that we cannot do it on our own anymore, that there is a call on us, a higher call to live out of God's kingdom. How might this kingdom look?

What stands might we take on behalf of the poor who have too much debt, no health care, not enough food, and not the hope needed to see their children through?

What might we do about the global AIDS epidemic?

What might we do for the environment if God ruled our world? What might we drive? How might we use our resources?

Maybe the place to start today is with those little things—the planting of a pot of flowers or the recycling of the bottle it is easier to throw out; maybe it is with a word of encouragement for one about to give up, a meal for someone who is hungry, or an ear to listen to a heart that struggles.

One of my favorite quotations is: *In this life, we cannot do great things, we can only do small things with great love.* (Mother Teresa) As we seek to live in the Kingdom of God, may it be so.