

Sermon by Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 26, 2001

What Is the Kingdom of God Like?
Luke 13:10-21; Jeremiah 1:4-10

Helen and Jerry were married at the church,
much to the dismay of many of the church members.

Helen, in her 30's, had walked with crutches since she was a child.
She had also learned early in life how to have her way.
The congregation explained Helen's demanding and complaining personality
by saying that her parents must have spoiled her as a child
to compensate for her disability.
It was true that Helen had a tendency to whine about most everything.

Jerry, also in his 30's, functioned with the mental and social abilities
of a young elementary aged child.
Most of the time when Jerry came to church, he sulked and mumbled,
and when he did speak up clearly it was to complain loudly
about something someone, usually Helen,
had done to him, or failed to do for him.

Helen and Jerry were very regular in their church attendance,
and always took their place on the inside aisle
about 5 rows from the front.
And every Sunday, just as the sermon began,
Jerry would get up and amble out of the sanctuary,
looking down at his feet, and mumbling.
Then about half-way through the sermon,
back into the sanctuary came Jerry, shuffling back up to his seat
on the fifth row.
Helen would always have something to say to him in an audible whisper.

People complained about the annoying distraction;
to each other, to the minister, sometimes even to Helen and Jerry.
People wondered what to do about this weekly disruption of the service,
right in the middle of the sermon.

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I suppose every church has these dilemmas from time to time.
When I served as a pastor in Virginia, I met Margaret, a shut-in.
By the time I arrived as the pastor, she was no longer attending church.
The church folks said it was a relief when she finally stopped attending.
In her last few years of attending worship

she had begun to talk back to the minister during the sermon.
Whether in affirmation or in disagreement,
she had something to say on a regular basis.
This being a pretty typical Presbyterian church,
people were not accustomed to anyone other than the preacher
speaking during the sermon.
The people complained, and worried, and expressed their dismay to each other.
But nothing was ever done until eventually Margaret grew too feeble to attend,
and began to stay home on Sundays.

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A similar thing happened to Jesus one day in the Gospel of Luke.
He is seated in the synagogue, in the middle of teaching the people.
He is asking,
What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it?...

...When suddenly a woman enters into the synagogue.
She is crippled, hunched over, unable to stand up straight.
She shuffles loudly into the midst of the worshipping congregation
right in the middle of the sermon!
You can almost hear the congregation muttering their dismay.
What does she think she's doing?
This is not appropriate!
This is a disruption of the service.

Not only does her entrance interrupt Jesus. More than that, she is a woman.
Women, in first century Judaism, were considered ritually unclean.
Women were not expected to follow all of the Jewish purity laws,
and they were forbidden to enter the synagogue during worship.
Only the men were pure and permitted.
And certainly if a woman did enter the synagogue during worship,
no man was supposed to touch her, for if he did, he would become defiled.

But when this crippled woman shuffles into the synagogue,
Jesus stops speaking and invites her over to where he is sitting.
He says to her,
"Woman you are set free from your ailment."
Then he does the unimaginable,
he places his hand on her rounded back...
...and, as everyone watches,
this crippled woman stands up straight,
for the first time in 18 long years,
and begins praising God right there in the synagogue.

What is the kingdom of God like?
It's where the interruption of the sermon becomes the sermon,
where people live out the mercy of God, instead of just talking about it.

It's where a crippled woman, impure, improper, and out of place,
can open her lips and give praise God
because she has experienced the miraculous gift of healing.

Of course, the leader of the synagogue,
the one responsible for maintaining things decently and in order,
reacts with self-righteous indignation
over all these things happening that are out of place.
Instead of blaming Jesus, who has broken the Jewish law by
touching this woman
and healing on the Sabbath,
he blames the people who have come for healing on the Sabbath day:
There are more appropriate times to be set free from your debilitating illness.
Please, just don't disrupt our religion in the process.

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I wonder how often we who are properly religious
are actually crippled in spirit, bent over, and unable to praise God
Often it happens when good religious people try too hard,
take themselves too seriously,
and don't take God seriously enough.
We wear ourselves out and close ourselves off from the Spirit
who gives life and make people whole.
We spend more time judging others as unworthy or unfaithful,
and our faith becomes brittle and easily shattered.

Our condition is not surprising since we live in
a world that is obsessed with naming the negative,
a world whose reality is defined by the bad headlines on
the nightly news.
We have been taught to be more attuned to what is wrong
than to the movements of God's grace,
or the quiet in-breaking of God's kingdom.
We can recognize and describe in detail the failures of those around us,
but we have forgotten how to see the goodness that God has placed
in each human life, and in our life together.

I have to admit that I cringe a little when I hear Jesus' response
to this pious religious leader: "You hypocrites!
I wonder how many times I may have been so trapped
in dead religion and worn-out ways,
that I have missed the moment of grace,
missed the kingdom of God,
when it appeared before my eyes.

But hear the good news!
Even to us, the properly religious,

Jesus calls and invites us over to himself.
He reaches out his hand and touches our crippled spirit and says,
“You are set free from your ailment.
Open your eyes, behold the kingdom of God,
and your heart can be filled up with the praise of God.”

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So how do we begin? How do we begin to see the kingdom?

After the interruption, Jesus goes on with his sermon.
*He says, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it?
It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden;
it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”*

*“...It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour
until all of it was leavened.”*

The kingdom of God begins with small and almost hidden things.
Things which don't look like much, unless you know what you're looking for.

To see the kingdom,
we need not always look for the dramatic moment
or for a large gathering of people.

The kingdom will likely be found
“in the simplest instance of one life brushing up against another,
in the small and intimate moment when people are drawn together
in joy or in need.”¹

The kingdom will likely be found in the quiet act of prayer,
or in the awkward visit in a cramped hospital room;
in a simple hand-written note sent as an encouragement,
or in brief conversation that becomes a means of grace.

Sometimes the kingdom appears
in the most mundane moments of life together,
in an act of quiet service, behind the scenes,
in lending a hand to do a simple task,
even, possibly, in a Presbyterian committee meeting
(for with God all things are possible!).

In simple moments together
brothers and sisters in Christ discover their giftedness
and see that God is using them to bear the fruit of the kingdom,
the fruit of compassion, or deepened faith,
or a strengthening of the bonds of fellowship.

And more often than not,

the appearance of the kingdom will move us,
sometimes gently, sometimes painfully,
out of our comfortable ways, out of our familiar patterns,
and into a new way of living, a new way of seeing.

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Helen and Jerry never really changed their habits much.
But somehow the congregation learned to tolerate them, despite the irritation.
And in their reluctant acceptance of two of God's needful children,
the kingdom began to grow
until that congregation became a place of refuge and a home
for Helen and Jerry
in a world that had no need for them.

And in her years as a shut-in, Margaret enjoyed the care of her church.
The members of the congregation, mostly the women,
visited her,
drove her to doctor's appointments,
delivered meals on occasion,
and attended her funeral in support of her family.
Those simple acts of compassion were like yeast mixed in with flour,
leavening the life of the congregation,
enabling the smallest glimpse of the kingdom of God.

There is grace in these images of the kingdom that Jesus gives us.
They are gracious in their smallness,
gracious because they show us that the kingdom of God
does not begin with the grandiose or the impressive,
but in simple moments
that are available to all of us.

So keep your eyes open.
And let the question of our Master be on your lips and in your thoughts:
"What is the kingdom of God like?"
And then don't be surprised to find the answer
in an unexpected place,
or an unexpected person,
who may be standing, or sitting,
or hunched over
very close by.

ⁱ *Discovering Community*, Stephen V. Doughty, p. 40.