

THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM

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I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of the Lord is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations (Revelation 21:22-26).

Last week we heard Mark's short summary of Jesus' message: "The kingdom of heaven has come near; repent, and believe the good news."

People tend to make opposite mistakes when they think about heaven. One is to assume that it's just a place where we go when we die, and the whole point of Christianity is to get people there, without caring much about this life. The other mistake is to think that heaven isn't really a place at all, but just a state of mind; or, if it is a place, there's not much point in thinking about it here and now – we should focus on one life at a time.

But Jesus talked about the kingdom of heaven more than any other subject, and he talked about it in both senses. He said heaven is a location where he goes to prepare a place for us, and he also said the kingdom is within us, or it can be within us, right now. Unless we know more about heaven than Jesus knows, we should probably take him at his word and see why the kingdom of heaven is the heart of his message.

The kingdom of heaven is where God is loved and God's will is done. It is both a place where the saints go for eternal life and a quality in the lives of God's people here and now. That makes sense, doesn't it? What could eternal life mean if it wasn't connected somehow with the best of this life? If we as individuals hope to live forever, surely there must be some continuity between who we are now and who we will be in the life to come.

If heaven is real and we hope to get there someday, we ought to look as though we belong to that kingdom. We should look more and more like people who love and serve God with all their heart and mind and soul and strength – not like worldly people who dabble in religion, fitting it in somewhere among their other, often higher, priorities.

Whenever Jesus talks about heaven as a place, and who gets in, he talks as though there will be surprises. Some people, who assume they're in because they consider themselves good by their own standards, will find themselves stuck outside, Jesus says. And other people, who have the right hearts and do the right things but don't presume that God would want them, turn out to have front row seats in the kingdom. If you want to know the kinds of criteria Jesus has in mind, read Matthew 25 again, especially the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. The criteria there are not whether we paid lip service to Jesus and showed up in church. They have to do with what we did or failed to do for the hungry, the sick, the stranger, and the prisoner – the poorest and neediest of God's children.

People are always on the lookout for a cheaper gospel, a message that's long on comfort and short on responsibility. Our culture offers a supermarket of feel-good, do-it-yourself guides to self-fulfillment, not to mention enough entertainment to occupy every waking moment. In the overstocked market of contemporary comforts, it's easy to live just for ourselves and the people closest to us, and find someone to say that's all right.

But what if Jesus is right? What if this life is a prelude to eternal life, and eternal life is either the kingdom of heaven where God's will is done, or else it is a place where people live mostly for themselves and that turns out to be a kind of hell? If we think Jesus might be right, shouldn't we pay attention to what the Bible says about the kingdom of heaven, and make it our life's goal to let God transform us into people fit for that kingdom?

The Christian life is not so much about getting into heaven when we die, as about getting heaven into us while we live. What would it look like, then, to live as though we belonged to the kingdom of heaven?

For starters, we would care about different things. We would care less about piling up prosperity, pleasure, and prestige for ourselves and care more about whether all God's people can live with dignity. We would work hard to provide for ourselves and our families, but if our efforts yielded more than we really need (and we would define our needs rather modestly), then our next priority would be to see that others who work hard have what they need too.

If loving our neighbors as ourselves really was our priority – and Jesus says that's second only to loving God in the priorities of kingdom people – then we would not settle for rationalizations about why we can't do any more, and we'd look for ways to get involved. We would say it's unacceptable that a billion people in this world live on less than a dollar a day, without adequate food or education or health care, and that even in our own country some people lack these things.

We would read John's letter in the New Testament, where he asks, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and refuses to help?" The answer would be obvious, and we would measure our love not by our words but by our actions, because that's how God measures love. We would hear Jesus' warning, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven," and we would ask ourselves whether we really are doing God's will, and so really do belong to the kingdom of heaven.

If we really belonged to the kingdom of heaven, not only would we take our neighbors' needs seriously, but our definition of neighbors would expand dramatically. It would stretch throughout the South Hills, to the city of Pittsburgh, across America, and all around the world.

There's no question that Jesus' definition of the neighborhood is very broad. When a lawyer asks him "Who is my neighbor?" looking for loopholes, Jesus replies with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The point is precisely that the neighbor includes the "other," the one we think is not like us, and not our responsibility. If that isn't clear enough, read Isaiah in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New. In each case, the vision of heaven sees all the nations of the world streaming into the kingdom, the heavenly city of God.

God's mercy and justice are for the whole world, for all who will receive them in every time and place, and so our mission of caring is for the whole world. People often ask, "Why should we care for *those* people?" meaning whoever they think is beyond the pale. There's a prejudice in human nature to focus on ourselves and the people closest to us, but where is the *Christian* basis for such a narrow view? Jesus says "Go and make disciples of all nations," but the tunnel vision of human nature blinds us to the vast horizon of heaven's kingdom.

Which points to yet another characteristic of kingdom people: instead of piling on prejudices and looking for ways to divide human beings, they see all people as the focus of God's love, and so they "seek peace and pursue it," as the psalmist says. They know that Christ is breaking down dividing walls of hostility, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and that the servants of Christ share in this ministry of reconciliation.

When we were in India last month, we asked our hosts how people of different faiths get along: Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others. In general, they said, people get along fine. Of course they have different beliefs and different customs, and they disagree about some things, including things that matter. But generally speaking, people get along fine day to day. The Protestant bishop told us that he gets together from time to time with Muslims and Hindus and others to talk about matters of faith and common concerns in the community. Several people told us that it's mostly politicians and a handful of radicals that stir up trouble. Politicians run for office by conjuring up the politics of identity, pitting one group against another, stirring up grievances, so they can claim to be champions of some angry faction.

That should sound vaguely familiar. It isn't just in India that people make a name for themselves, and build a following, and make lots of money by cultivating divisions, and caricaturing opponents, and portraying others as worthy of contempt. It's a booming business in America and in many other countries.

But that's not the way of the kingdom of heaven. Of course people have differences, and they disagree about things that matter. But even when we differ, we are called to love, not to hate. Paul says, in that marvelous thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, "... if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." Even when what we believe is right, we become wrong when we fail to love.

People tend to be proud of their heritage, their culture, and their nation. All people feel that way, and that's all right. But the world and its history are full of conflict and bloodshed over competing claims of superiority. Contrast the earthly clamoring for power and prestige with the heavenly vision of Isaiah, where "'They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,' says the Lord," and Revelation, where people bring the glory of all the nations into the heavenly city, and lay it before the throne of God.

Kingdom people may be proud of their culture and their country, but they know that at a deeper level their citizenship is in heaven, as Paul says. That means, in the end, that if God lets us into heaven, we will share it with people from other nations and other cultures. There will be no place for arrogance in the kingdom, and whatever differences we had in race or nationality will become occasions for praising God's diversity in creation, not for fighting one another. If that's our future in heaven, shouldn't we live today as though people who are different from us might be our sisters and brothers, and care for them now as a foretaste of the peaceable kingdom of God?

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is both a place where we may end up and a reality in the souls of God's people. Before we die to get into heaven, we must let heaven live in our hearts. Then if we really do belong to the kingdom of heaven, won't it be obvious by the way we live?