

Homily – Seeing the Kingdom of God

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The readings this morning are telling us things have changed, no longer is the kingdom of God an ideal for the future, it’s here, and it’s all about seeing.

Today I want to talk about seeing, how the kingdom of God depends on it, and how seeing changes not only who we are in the world, but the world itself, from transactional to relational.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus sees the woman, and immediately sees SHE’S HURTING, SHE’S BEEN BENT OVER LIKE THIS FOR 18 YEARS, isolated from everybody else, pushed out onto the margins, told “you don’t belong.” now’s the time, he says, sabbath or not, for this woman to be restored to the condition God intended for her all along. Jesus wants us to truly believe that there’s no time BUT the present.

Isaiah and Luke both want us to see, as far as God’s kingdom is concerned, the present is everything. It’s right now, the opportunities those “if . . . you” moments present us are fleeting, if we miss it, or say “not now,” they’re gone. And none of us want to live our lives on hold.

And Jesus says don’t worry about what day it is, focus instead on what you see in the moment. Isaiah says just notice who’s broken, who’s hungry, who’s out there unattended to; and they both say it’s in seeing rightly that the world is restored to a community such that God might recognize it.

Someone wrote, “The kingdom of God is creation healed,” so when Isaiah begins his phrases with, “If . . . you . . .,” he’s saying you and I are pivotal for God’s kingdom to emerge, you can understand why this might have caused the authorities and the old order to be upset.

When Isaiah writes “if you . . .,” followed by “then you . . .” he’s talking about real life strategies for how to be in the world. Coming to the aid of your neighbor, offering your food, attending to someone who you see is distressed --- Isaiah describes these as God’s hope; and Luke says this is the only way the kingdom of God is going to come about.

And as it turns out, opening our eyes and seeing rightly doesn’t just align the moment with what God has in mind, but it makes us different too. Even though our readings never come out and say it, they’re giving us all we need to know about ourselves here in God’s kingdom

Virtually the entire Gospel of Luke is about nothing else. In a later chapter when Jesus says “the kingdom of God is within you,” he wasn’t just speaking metaphorically, he was saying something so obvious to him it’s no wonder he kind of loses it sometimes, like in this morning’s gospel, when what day it was. . . . was deemed more important than the human being there was.

It must have made him crazy the way “God’s kingdom,” the thing Jesus was single-mindedly focused on, was thought to be only a lovely image, an ideal as opposed to the whole reason we’re all here for in the first place.

But Jesus knew different, all he cared about was this kingdom. And he knew the kingdom is a present moment event, whether it was in the 1st or the 21st century. Jesus knew ‘later’ is unacceptable when any part of God’s creation is out of order.

2. If / Then

The author of Isaiah begins the passage using ‘if / then’ phrases, and the ‘if’ list contains things we’re all familiar with: looking out for your neighbor, feeding a hungry person, honoring the Lord’s day And the list of ‘then’ items is spelled out too: THEN our needs are satisfied, THEN we become like “a spring of water that never runs out;” and by delighting in the Lord THEN our heart’s desires are met.

These ‘then’ phrases are kind of interesting, you can see how they’re less about getting, there’s no sense of transacting anything, but a transformation -- of the moment to be sure, but of us too. Just by how we see. That term ‘transactional,’ it’s been used lately describing some of our politicians, but I’ll refrain from calling any of them out. If I do what you want, then what do I get in return? This is pretty much the way a lot of our world operates, we complete transactions every day: we go to work to get a paycheck; we vote in hopes our candidate wins the election;

When he was little, my son Nate was, by and large a very agreeable little boy, but he would often respond to some no doubt reasonable demand coming from me with, “okay, but what’s my rewarding?”

If / then in Isaiah could seem to be just this kind of transactional proposal, but is it?

This later part of Isaiah was written soon after the Babylonian captivity ended, somewhere around 539 BCE. The Persian king Cyrus granted to the Jews the very two things they held to be synonymous with salvation -- release from captivity and the restoration of their land.

And so the author of Isaiah is writing to people who, after a long and terrible ordeal, have been granted everything they’d been dreaming of. I think an analogy in our time would be whoever it was in Indiana who won the billion dollar lottery a couple

of weeks ago. “All my worries are over, what WILL I do with all the free time I’m going to have?” For the Jews, finally free from bondage and heading back home, holding tight to these outer notions of salvation, it would have been party time.

The If / then sayings in Isaiah flip the idea of transaction on its head, they’re not saying if you do this thing this is what you’re going to get; he’s telling his people and us that when you enter into relationship with God in God’s kingdom, . . . this is what you’re going to be.

To be sure, the rewardings of being the kingdom are spelled out, but they’re not in the “then” parts, those are glorious fruits being the kingdom confers. “Our parched places and our bones are restored to wholeness; we become known as the repairer of the breach and the restorer of streets to live in.”

I ask you, in your living memory, has there ever been a time when repairing and restoring were more urgently called for?

3. Gospel of Luke and the Kingdom

Luke’s Gospel was written 50 plus years after Jesus was gone, written to an expanding community of Jews and Gentiles. There were two problems contemporary to this gospel that had to be resolved; and the author turned to God’s kingdom to reconcile both.

The first is the author had to provide a new way to understand the kingdom of God within the real lived experience of the people in the late first century. The people had to navigate enormous turmoil in their lives. Much like the predicament we find ourselves in today, when turbulence is swirling around almost every facet of life. The people of the first century were asking the same thing we are today, “Where are we to find balance and truth?” Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed 15 years earlier, leaving the survivors dispersed and impoverished. The old premise that God’s blessings could be measured by wealth and stature were made completely meaningless.

The second point the author had to address was how to make sense of cracks in the expectation that Jesus was returning at any minute. First century followers of Jesus were absolutely convinced Jesus’ return was immanent, so what could be done as each passing year and each new cultural shock left them feeling unmoored. Much like in our time, as we try to navigate an environment where the bonds we shared across generations and cultures seem to be coming to pieces. To live with hope then or now can seem senseless in the face of such upheavals. As we know, it’s a normal default for people living through turbulent times to be transactional, to be reactive, to ask “what am I going to get?” To see rightly, to see ourselves as integral to God’s kingdom would have been counter-intuitive and counter-cultural then as now.

Luke turned to Jesus' Sermon on the Plain to address both, and in the process, re-defined what was meant by God's kingdom and what salvation looked like. No longer was it release from captivity, restoration of land, or having external trappings of wealth. Jesus said it doesn't matter anymore, forget about that. What does matter is what's going on right now, what does matter is that hope is for all, in particular those deemed other and therefore forgettable. The author emphasizes the message isn't so much a spiritual one as a social imperative. When Jesus says "...you who hunger now," and, "...you who weep now," it's the present moment he's focused on – where, right now, should you and I be focusing out attention?

I think it comes down to a disposition of the heart. Jesus sees the woman in today's gospel and he's personally affected -- he sees she's been pushed out of community, she's been told you're damaged, you don't belong. The first action Jesus takes upon noticing her, he speaks to her, calling her over. And then, and this is where we come in, he touches her. It says he "laid his hands on her," but I find it hard believe he didn't wrap his arms around her and say "welcome back, you've been missed."

The physical healing becomes a byproduct of the moment, just as the food we might give to a hungry person, or the cup of water we might give to a thirsty one are. The stuff in the encounter is essential to at least temporarily disrupt whatever it is that's not right, but it's when Jesus sees the woman; when you see the other, out there marginalized... possibly traumatized, that the kingdom of God starts to materialize.

See, I think it's in the seeing, when our attention is so on an other that, at least for that moment, we're seeing them as God does, too precious to miss, too valuable to overlook, and too lovable to leave out in the cold.

Are there moments where what's caught your eye, a situation, a stranger, or maybe something broader, gathers in your heart to break it open? What you see isn't what you get, but it's where God finds you and heals creation.

I do think God has a vision for our world, although it's safe to say it's a little blurred at the moment. But God's delight is for each of us to remember always, that we belong to each other. We're connected to one another, and each time we can remember this, our hearts are broken open; and the more often our hearts are broken open, the freer we become, and the more likely God will recognize the incident as the kingdom coming true.