

Different Together: A Different Kind of Kingdom

1 Peter 2:4-9 & Ephesians 2:11-22

Sunday, July 21, 2019 - St. Andrew's, Stirling

If you were keenly attentive to the readings this morning, you would have heard language of citizenship, and of nationhood, and you may have guessed, that this morning we're taking a look at the Kingdom of God - also known as the Kingdom of Heaven, sometimes referred to as just "the Kingdom."

The Kingdom of God is not St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Stirling. But St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Stirling, is part of the Kingdom of God. When we talk about the Kingdom, we are talking about a few different things at once.

We are talking about the "great cloud of witnesses" - that is, all believers, in all places, since the church began.

Sometimes we might call it the Church Universal, or the Worldwide Church. But it's bigger than even that, because it's not just the church around our world in this day, it's the church around the world that has existed in all generations since Jesus was born.

That historic sense of the church - the roots from which we come.

And perhaps to add a little confusion to the concept - we're also talking about the church that will be - the church of the future. The church that will exist long after we have departed this world.

So the Kingdom of God is the church as a whole. But it is more than even that.

Because the Kingdom of God encompasses the spiritual realm as well.

I'm not sure I have a great handle on this, so I'm not going to say too much about it, other than to say I'd be comfortable saying that Angels are part of the Kingdom of God.

So there is that sense of a non-human aspect to the Kingdom of God.

We often use the Kingdom of God as a synonym for Heaven.

Often it is referred to as the Kingdom of Heaven - even in Jesus' own preaching.

So on the surface, that's fitting - if it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me.

But when I was younger, I thought of the Kingdom as the-place-you-go-to-after-you-die.

That was my understanding of Heaven.

And I remember sitting at my desk in the office at St. Luke's Presbyterian Church in Oshawa, where I began my ordained ministry, listening to sermons on podcasts by some of my favourite preachers.

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And they taught me that the Kingdom of God is not some far off place in the clouds, it's not just a place we get to go to when we die, that it is in fact here and now.

They taught me that the Kingdom was ushered into this world two thousand and some years ago, when a baby was born in Bethlehem and the Angels sang of his glory.

They taught me that when John the Baptist said "The Kingdom of God is near," he was talking about Jesus he was preparing the way for Jesus, which was always meant to be John's role.

They taught me that becoming a citizen in the Kingdom of God isn't something that happens to us after we die - it's something that happens to us the moment we believe.

That when we proclaim Jesus as saviour and Lord, we are saying we are citizens of the Kingdom. We belong to that Kingdom - here and now.

We belong to Heaven.

But Heaven isn't something way off and unattainable.

Heaven exists wherever Jesus is honoured.

That means - Heaven is here, this morning.

When we sing "I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back" we are standing in that Kingdom.

We are calling Heaven into being right here and right now - This is why church should never be boring.

Because I don't think Heaven is boring! People tell me I smile a lot at church - that I look happy when I lead worship.

Of course I do! I'm in heaven!

Our Psalm this morning said, "How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!"

Of COURSE it is!

When we come together in unity, when we get along, when we treat each other with love and respect, with kindness and generosity - we are honouring Jesus and proclaiming our citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

There's this thing that happens - somehow eternity touches our mortal coil, when we are doing the things that Jesus would have us do.

How good and pleasant it is, indeed!

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In our First Lesson, we read these words:

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”

⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,”⁸ and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Friends, we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation -we are citizens of Heaven. Right here, right now.

And in order for us to understand how to be good citizens of Heaven, we have to understand how this kingdom is different.

Because in our world, a Kingdom or a Country or a Political System is many things, and most of them are not holy.

Sadly, most of what happens in governing the “kingdoms” of this world, would break God’s heart. At least, that’s what I think.

So let’s lay this out for a moment.

In the Kingdoms of this world, there is always someone vying for that top position. In Canada we have a Prime Minister, who is not given all the power of a King, but it’s still understood to be the top position in our country, a position of power, of leadership, of influence, and - at least sometimes - of great respect.

And someone is always gunning for that position. That’s the thing about being on top, there’s always someone coming up from below, looking to unseat you.

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They say that in America, the President only has two years to affect any real change, after that, most of his energy goes towards the next election - winning a second term.

(I am not, by any stretch of the imagination, well-versed in politics, so I've picked that up from political tv series, which I fully admit are not the best source of information, so forgive me if I've messed that up completely!)

However, I do think I know enough to say that there's always someone vying for the top position. That's how power structures in our world work.

But in the Kingdom of Heaven - Jesus IS the power, and it's not something he was elected, and it's not something he can lose.

Jesus' power doesn't have to do with what he's been able to take or what has been awarded to him, it is just the fact of who Jesus IS.

Because he is the Word through whom all things were made, the power of creation.

He is the lamb who was slain, bringing about peace between God and humankind, if we would just trust him.

He is the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot put it out.

He is eternal, unshakable, unconquerable, and unblemished.

No one vies for his position, because no one could replace him.

In the Kingdoms of this world, the lost, forgotten and marginalized are unwelcome. When was the last time you saw a homeless person at a State Dinner?

It doesn't happen.

I'm not saying that there is nothing for them, but I am saying that there is a dichotomy between those who are powerful, and those who are not.

There may be programs and strategies for addressing the problem of the lost/forgotten/marginalized, but first and foremost they are a problem.

In the Kingdom of Heaven - Jesus eats with prostitutes and tax collectors.

He touches lepers in order to heal them. He speaks with the Samaritans.

These were the lost, forgotten and marginalized in Jesus' day, and he always has time for them.

They matter, they have a place, and they are treated with dignity, respect, generosity and love.

In the Kingdoms of this world, your worth generally comes from what you are able to do for the Kingdom. If you are an upright, contributing citizen,

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then you have a certain amount of security. You have worth. If you disappear or are brutalized it will be noticed, and there will at least be an attempt to see justice served on your behalf.

If you are homeless, or an addict, or a sex trade worker, if you are old, or if you are in some other way seen to not be a contributing citizen, well...then it's a different story. That's why we have stories of mass murderers who got away with it for a long, long time because after all, the victims were only prostitutes. Nobody really noticed or cared, because they weren't worth much in the Kingdoms of this world.

But in the Kingdom of Heaven, everybody matters.

Jesus says “**29** Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. **30** And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. **31** So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (Matthew 10:29)

Everyone matters, and their worth doesn't come from what they are able to contribute, it comes from the generous heart of God himself who loves each of us as if we were the only child He had.

The Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God, is a different kind of Kingdom.

Our second lesson says,¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Friends, we are citizens of Heaven, members of God's household, kindred with Jesus.

And it is a different kind of Kingdom. It is a place where we can be different, together. A place where everyone matters.

And it is here, and it is now, And we are it's citizens and ambassadors.

Let us pray.