

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### Luke 13:1-35 "Thy Kingdom Come"

How we behave, especially in troubled times, reflects our characters; and our characters are influenced by how we see ourselves - our identities - which in turn are very often shaped by the groups that we see ourselves belonging to. "I'm a Texan. I'm a Brit. I'm a Republican. I'm an engineer."

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, knowing that "his time has come," he is training his disciples to endure the troubles ahead - teaching them about fidelity and readiness and security - but now he increasingly focuses on *what they are a part of: the kingdom of God*. He wants them to understand their identity, not just as his followers, but as part of the new "people of God," "the family of God," and other metaphors he uses. So he teaches them about the nature of the kingdom: who is in it and who is not, what count as virtues in it and what do not. And he mostly does this with parables, with metaphors, so that people's sense of who they are will become deeply internalized. It's the old (but often rediscovered) approach of telling people stories - which is how you shape identity and character, not by teaching facts or lists of rules.

#### 1) Sin and Suffering

But first, Jesus confronts one "left-over issue" on the subject of troubles. Do people who suffer deserve it? Were the Galileans killed by Pilate's soldiers, or the Jerusalemites

crushed by a falling tower, "more sinful" than others who escaped trouble? It's one form of the perennial "problem of evil." Why do some people suffer and not others?

Jesus' response about the connection of sin and suffering is always that nobody suffers because they "deserve it." When he heals the blind man (*John 9*) and is asked "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus replies "*neither*." As for the people who died, "*no, they were not worse sinners*." The easy equation that "bad people receive bad things, good people receive good things," although based on God's Old Testament words about Israel and his covenant with them, had turned into an unthinking discrimination against anyone who was poor, sick, crippled, in trouble; they were "sinners," and they should be excluded from the "people of God," or at least from the synagogue.

The whole Old Testament book of *Job* was of course meant to refute these ideas, but it did not register with most people most of the time. So for Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, priests, and all those doing well enough under the Romans, there was validation that they were "the good people," and the poor and the prostitutes and the beggars and the cripples were dismissed to the fringes of Jewish society; whereas Jesus, by contrast, tells such people that they are welcome into the kingdom of God if they will follow and

trust him, which of course they do in large and grateful numbers!

But what about “the problem of evil”? Didn’t Jesus just make it *worse*? Now he’s admitting that innocent people suffer! Where is the justice of God in that? As you know, the Bible *nowhere* “explains why” God does what he does, allows what he allows. It is not interested in theories or *theodicies*. It simply describes *what God has been doing* about evil since it first appeared. He set out to redeem, to restore, to remake, a broken humanity and a broken creation.

He did that by calling “a people for himself” to demonstrate to the world how restoration would look. From Abraham and his family, through Israel as a nation, down to the “Suffering Servant” who represented all Israel, God was dealing with evil – though faced with the problem that none of his instruments were free from flaws themselves! Until Jesus came from the heights of heaven to take all the evil into himself, die under it, and then rise again as victor over it. So now his new “people of God” would confront evil wherever they found it, but preach and practice their response to evil: *forgiveness*. Jesus from the cross called on God his Father to “forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” God forgives the sins of all who turn to him through Jesus.

Now his new people could escape the “blame game,” stop despising hurting people as evil, and accept the grace of God as the only answer to “the problem of evil.”

## 2) *What’s the Kingdom Like?*

So what is the kingdom of God like? It’s a community of grace and forgiveness. It’s a

community where crippled people are healed, and excluded older women are welcomed into the community. It’s a community where people “bound by Satan” are released. It’s a community where concern for hurting people takes precedence over Sabbath rules. It’s a community where small beginnings can lead to great things, like a seed that becomes a tree, like yeast that permeates dough.

It’s a community where the lives of the people and the community are “fruitful,” in all the ways you can interpret that. People are like trees that are fertile, mature, productive, flourishing, reproducing; people who show the virtues of the kingdom in their lives, in their characters, in their communities of faith and love and hope.

It’s a community that people enter willingly and eagerly when the opportunity presents itself. It’s a community where “the first and the last” by the world’s reckoning are often reversed by God’s reckoning. It’s a community where people are sheltered by the power of God like “chicks under the wings” of Jesus their Lord.

It’s a community that grows, like a sprouting tree or a spreading yeast. In time it can provide shelter for the “birds of the air” – people of all nations and tribes and peoples and languages. It’s a community that can turn flour into enough bread to feed a multitude.

What is the kingdom *not like*? People who condemn, who condescend, who criticize. People who are exclusive and want to be among “the first.” People who in relation to Jesus are casual or unwilling. People who are judgmental, nit-picking, uncaring. People who think their status, or their “association” with Jesus and his kingdom, should be enough to warrant their admission to the new “people of God” – “*we ate with you... you*

*preached in our streets..." "I never knew you," he says.*

We cannot avoid the words of judgment here: people are out unless they repent – which is much more than “sorrow for sin,” but rather turning about and following Jesus. Those in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel who persist in blind nationalism, those who think themselves secure as “descendants of Abraham,” those in Jerusalem who do not welcome their Lord, those who think themselves “first” – will “perish,” their tree will be “cut down,” their city will be “left desolate.” Jesus is now warning his critics of the disaster coming on Israel in the near future, as well as strengthening his followers for the troubles ahead.

Who is in the new kingdom? Those who in the 1<sup>st</sup> century followed and entrusted themselves to Jesus, and those from “*every nation and tribe and people and language*” who have done so ever since. “*Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free;*” rich and poor, wise and foolish, sick and well, *anyone* – even people who settle on the far shores of the world, in the Americas – can be part of the new “*people of God, the kingdom of God.*”

### 3) *Who Are We?*

So who are we? What forms our identity? If our first answer is our birthplace, our nationality, where we live, what political party we belong to, what status our profession or our education give us in our society; whether we are strong, fit and good-looking – then we may be in serious trouble any time these things are undermined by time and chance and age and economics and war and history.

What would you have left if you were brought up as a proud citizen of “the British Empire”? Today that and \$1.50 might get you a cup of tea! What if we had worked for

Lehman Brothers? What if we were a member of a political party that lost its way and its message for a generation? What if our health broke down early, or suddenly? What if we had to retire and lost our status in the community? Who are we then? And how would these “identities” help us when times are really hard?

*Be a Christian!* Find your identity as a member of the “people of God,” the “family of God,” the “kingdom of God,” the church of Jesus Christ. If we anchor ourselves anywhere else, we are likely to be swept away in the tsunamis of a fallen world. If we do not welcome being shaped by the values, the love, the vision, the community of believing Christian people, we shall be shaped by something else. Which are we going to choose for the years that God has granted us here?

In the kingdom of God we find grace, forgiveness, gratitude, freedom, fruitfulness, growth, commitment, security. Which of these do we *not* want? Or is that we don’t like submitting ourselves to anyone, not even to God? Is the call of Jesus to follow him an inconvenience, a distraction from the life we want to continue “enjoying” here? Then his warning is “Beware, trouble ahead! When you reach it, don’t be surprised if you find it difficult to get through on your own.”

But if the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ and the prompting of the Spirit have touched us, and we have gladly and gratefully surrendered ourselves to become part of “the people of God” – always a communal as well as a deeply personal commitment – then we will find that we are never alone in the storms. “*Thy kingdom come, O Lord.*”

Let us pray...