

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 17

"Duty Or Faith?"

As Jesus nears Jerusalem - his triumphant entry on Palm Sunday is only one chapter away - his disputes with the Pharisees gradually give way to instructions to his followers and the crowds. But the central issues remain the same: the nature of the kingdom of God, where and when it is to be found, and who is in it, or going to be in it!

1) *Sin and Duty*

First, in what sounds still like a rebuke to the Pharisees, Jesus warns not to lead other people into sin. To be sure, sin will always be with us in this life, and people will find new ways of sinning. But to *lead* other people into it is a dangerous thing, especially the "little ones" - in this context, the poor, the outcasts, the "nobodies" of the 1st C. - and anyone who does that will be held accountable. Jesus has earlier accused the Pharisees of loading ordinary people with commands that no-one can keep, and not lifting a finger to help them. "*Woe to them,*" says Jesus.

But there is another side to sinning, of course: how to deal with people who *sin against you*? Jesus' answer is to confront and then forgive. Confront does not mean retaliate - Jesus has already ruled that out for his followers! But the difficult thing after non-retaliation is *repeated forgiveness*! Here forgiveness is made conditional on repentance, but overall it's clear that Jesus expects his followers to imitate him in

forgiving even people who are not penitent - people who at some level do not even know that they are sinning. "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,*" he said from the Cross.

Then comes the contrast between faith and duty. Jesus' message is that those who "serve" God cannot put him in their debt! No amount of labor, pious or otherwise, can make God owe anyone anything. The Pharisees seemed to believe that they had done more than enough to deserve God's favor and reward. But no, says Jesus, you are only God's servants, and even if you have behaved perfectly, you have only done your *duty*.

Faith, on the other hand, even when it is small, can do great things: a seed of faith can move a tree! And to illustrate that, Luke includes here a story of a healing that probably occurred earlier in the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. A group of ten lepers was healed by Jesus' words, but only one of them "*seeing that he was healed, came back to Jesus, praising God in a loud voice, fell at Jesus' feet and thanked him.*" It's a powerful image, and Jesus tells the man that his faith has healed him. Here is another outsider, unclean, poor, estranged from family and village and work and synagogue, who grasps what a great and gracious thing Jesus has done for him, and his gratitude demonstrates his faith. He has earned no

reward, he has not “served with distinction,” but he is now a part of the “kingdom of God” while the ever-dutiful Pharisees are not.

2) *The Now And Future Kingdom*

So arises the Pharisees’ question to Jesus: where and how and when is the “kingdom of God” to appear? “*Not as you imagine,*” says Jesus! Can they not see that the kingdom is here already? That these grateful, repentant, poor people are already part of the kingdom, part of the community Jesus is gathering. Do you not see, says Jesus, that my presence among you marks the arrival of the kingdom of God?

But the Pharisees are still confused about what the kingdom is. They know it is *where God rules and reigns*, and for centuries they have supposed it would appear when God once again made Israel “his own nation,” free from foreign and pagan rule. The Pharisees would of course hold prominent positions in it! But Jesus knows that where God rules and reigns is not a political kingdom or a geographic area; it is *a community of faithful people* who know that admission is by grace through faith, and that Jesus is creating it before their eyes through faith in him.

So Jesus says that the kingdom is already present - using words that carry an interesting ambiguity: the kingdom is “*within you*” or the kingdom is “*among you.*” We will talk more about what difference that makes in a moment. But Jesus has more to say. The kingdom is here; healing and deliverance are signs of it, and faith must be exercised to enter it. But at this stage the kingdom appears small and weak, composed mostly of the poor, the sick, the lame, the tax-collectors and sinners who now follow Jesus in repentance and faith. The kingdom is, you

could say, present in only embryonic form, or perhaps like a seed.

But a day is coming when it will be powerful, and large, like a tree, and nobody will have to ask “where is it?” or “what is it?” Or the kingdom will arrive like a lightning storm that lights the sky from end to end, and come abruptly! “The Day of the Son of Man” will come as a surprise to some people, just as the flood did in Noah’s time and the destruction of Sodom did in Lot’s time. Few people will be prepared for it - the few who have recognized the small, insignificant present kingdom, populated by insignificant people. But for those who are going about their daily lives, eating, drinking, working, marrying, selling, planting, building, sleeping, grinding grain, “*the kingdom will come*” in a flash and some people will be gathered into its glory while others alongside them will not.

The kingdom of God is therefore a “*once and future kingdom,*” the now and future reign of God, the community of faith and obedience that is *already* present but *not yet* fulfilled. And the issue that should occupy the minds of the Pharisees, the disciples, the crowds, is not “where?” or “when?” or “how?” but *who is in the kingdom* now and later?

3) *Already In The Kingdom of God*

So here we all are - living between the arrival and the consummation of the kingdom of God. Can we see it already? Are you and I a part of it already? Remind me again, how do you get into it?

First, do not be a Pharisee. Do not stand outside it criticizing those who are in it. Do not put yourself in the role of the “Older brother” who disapproves of the return of the “Prodigal” younger brother, criticizes the Father for welcoming him, complains that you are owed more than he is, and refuses to

go into his banquet. Do not be a Pharisee who thinks that God owes you rewards for your good performance. A recent author wrote: *"I'd like to think that God loves me because of my sterling character and pleasant demeanor, but when I suggest this possibility, my wife's uncontrollable laughter quickly deflates such delusions!"* In reality, even if you have been perfect, you have only done your duty! And if you have not been perfect, then you too depend on the grace of the Father to welcome you in.

So do not mislead others about the nature of the kingdom, and how you or they *deserve* to be in it! Do not lead people astray by turning the Gospel into moralism. Do not make the community of Jesus' followers into a club for "good people." Do not make the Church of Jesus Christ a group of moralistic, unforgiving critics of the "sinners" outside. Do not think the Church is a club for saints, when it is in fact a hospital for sinners. Do not be a 21st C. Pharisee, or you will drive your children and grandchildren away from the Christian faith for a generation!

Remember that the kingdom is entered by "believing and receiving" the grace and forgiveness that Jesus brought and still brings. Remember that one of the best signs of true faith is *gratitude*. If we are constant complainers, constant critics, constantly declaring what we are against in the behavior of "sinners," we only show that we are not grateful to God for his mercies to us. *Faith and gratitude* go together.

Finally, "where" is the kingdom today? Jesus says it is already "within you" or "among you." It is surprising what a difference it has made to churches who have read that little ambiguous Greek preposition in either of these two ways. It can mean both in ordinary language. But there is little doubt that in the modern era, the Christian communities that have favored "*the kingdom is within you*" have

been the ones most influenced by a psychological, therapeutic, individualistic vision of Christian life – which means mostly Protestants, many Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and "conservative" Christians.

And although we Evangelical Protestants insist on the authority of the Bible, and have a strong desire to preserve "traditional values" in our society, we have often been accused of having a very diminished sense of the value of Christian *community*, and of the common good of society. As it is sometimes put, Protestants have a "*low view of the Church*;" we are all about "Jesus and me" and "the Bible and me."

Those who sense the validity of these criticisms, who have what might be called "a higher view of the church," who believe that when we are called by Jesus, we are always called into *community*, are much more likely to interpret Jesus' saying as "*the kingdom is among you*." (The NIV translators have now changed "within" to "among".) In the 1st C. there seems little doubt that when Jesus talked about the kingdom of God that he had already inaugurated, he was talking about the community he was gathering round him. *Among them* God was now ruling and reigning in a new way.

Was God also at work "within" each one? Yes, of course. Faith is still *an individual's response* to God's call in Jesus. But I believe it must always result in gratitude to God and entry into his community of faith, the Church. Christianity is unavoidably communal – and it is in the community of the church that we grow in faith, in knowledge, in prayer, in service, in praise, in joy; where we discover love, support; where we discern our callings; where we learn what it means to forgive and be forgiven.

You're making a lot, you may say, of one preposition! But it has been rightly said that

only in an individualistic culture like ours in America today could the belief arise that “the kingdom of God is *within* you”. But when the New Testament says “you” it is almost always plural - “y’all.” Jesus said when people gather in his name, he is there among them.

I am sure that God is at work *within us and among us*, but if there is an area we have too long neglected, it has been the reality of “God among us.” Embrace that reality, and the Church and our relationship to it take on a whole new meaning.

Let us pray...