

Kingdom Conversations: Either/Or? Or Both/And?
February 19, 2012 – Transfiguration of the Lord
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn

Scripture: Matthew 6:7-13 & Matthew 6:28-33

Our adult Sunday school is a few weeks into a study of the Lord's Prayer. The class is reading a book by theologian John Dominic Crossan, who can always be counted on to provoke. That's a good thing, because it makes us think. In his prologue to the book, Crossan writes that the Lord's Prayer is both a "revolutionary manifesto" and a "hymn of hope" in how it lifts up the idea of God's household as one where everyone has enough.

"Do not, by the way, let anyone tell you that is Liberalism, Socialism, or Communism," Crossan adds quickly adds to that statement. "It is – if you need an –ism – Godism, Householdism or, best of all, Enoughism."

This idea of the household of God lies at the heart of the Lord's prayer. It's expressed as the Kingdom of God. And we don't step lightly around what we ask when we pray: "Thy kingdom come." That is a bold and dangerous prayer, even on those Sundays when we may just say the words without thinking much about them. So, today and throughout the remainder of this our centennial year, I'd like to start a series of conversations about the kingdom of God.

Kingdom language is certainly familiar to us. And, on the surface, it may seem like a fairly straightforward idea. Far from it. Honest and intentional use of "kingdom language" begs a host of questions:

Where is the kingdom of God? Here on earth? In heaven? Neither? Both?

When is the kingdom of God? Now? In the future? Neither? Both?

What is the kingdom of God? Is it real in the sense that we can see and touch and experience the kingdom? Or is it an intellectual or theological concept that we mostly like to talk about as a metaphor or an aspiration?

And, how do we fit in? Are we in charge of building the kingdom? Or is that the job of our sovereign and infinitely powerful God? Is it up to us? Or God? Or both?

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Before going further, it may help to understand the tradition of the Kingdom – its origins in ancient Judaism and its relevance to Jesus Christ.

It's odd to think that in all of the Old Testament writings, the phrase the "kingdom of God" never actually appears. Not once. That doesn't mean, though, that the children of God didn't know about kingdom. Kingdom language springs from the Hebrew word for "reign" used throughout the Old Testament, as in God's reign and realm.

In our day, some countries still have monarchies – that is, rule by a king or queen. But, for the most part, those monarchies have taken a back seat to other forms of government. Not so, however, in the days of ancient Israel, powerful kings and dominant kingdoms were the norm. God's people knew kings and kingdoms, both good and bad, kind and cruel, wise and wicked. So it's natural they expressed their faith and hope in God as a king and God's realm as a kingdom.

For some of the Old Testament writers, the kingdom was a future time, an era of peace and blessings to come, when, as the prophet Isaiah described, people would turn swords into plows and spears into pruning hooks. In other readings, though, God was expected to exercise royal judgment, when the people turned away from God's will. But in the majority of kingdom references in the Old Testament, its entrance would come through the messiah.

That brings us to the New Testament and Jesus' many references to the kingdom. Jesus spoke of it as the place where all have the purity of children, where outcasts and sinners would sit at tables of abundance, a place of heavenly mansions with many rooms.

The kingdom of God made up the very core of Jesus' preaching and teaching. We find that most vividly in the verses from the Gospel of Matthew we heard earlier. In Christ's Sermon on the Mount, he says, the poor will inherit the kingdom of heaven, those who mourn will be comforted, the meek will inherit everything and those who thirst for righteousness will be filled.

Because of the promise of this kingdom to come, Jesus tells us not to worry about having enough to eat and drink and wear on our backs. All these things will be given to you, Jesus reassures his followers in Matthew.

We should note, in this, Black History Month, how the kingdom of God has always been a powerful image for African-Americans. The promise of the kingdom has inspired hope and endurance amid the long struggle of African-Americans and their victory in the

midst of it. In spirituals, hymns and gospel music, the kingdom has always been the destination, sometimes called the kingdom, sometimes the promised land, sometimes a mountain and sometimes a city. Almost always, it is expressed as a place of shelter, as in the words of one old spiritual:

I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow,
I'm tossed in this wide world alone.
No hope have I for tomorrow.
I've started to make heav'n my home.

Sometimes I am tossed and driven, Lord,
Sometimes I don't know where to roam,
I've heard of a city called heaven,
I've started to make it my home.¹

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And that, friends, brings us back to those questions we raised earlier. What and where is the kingdom of heaven? And, where do we fit in? As with most important and rich ideas in Christianity, there are many ways to think about it.

Do you remember the TV game *Let's Make A Deal*? Many of us grew up watching Monty Hall and a bunch of over-eager contestants in goofy outfits. Contestants would win something. Then Monty offered to trade it for a mystery prize that was always behind some curtain or inside some giant box. Sometimes it was a car. Sometimes it was booby prize, such as a live llama.

Well, for the next few minutes, I invite you to play a version of that game. Well, sort of. No cars, vacations or llamas will be involved. But, for your consideration, I'll offer a few versions of how we might think about the kingdom of God.² Don't worry. I won't call anyone up "on stage." You can play along in your head and in your hearts. But I'll warn you. There are a few catches along the way.

So, behind door number one is the first way to think about the kingdom. This explains it as an ideal to be realized. Jesus brought the kingdom into the world, a kingdom of justice, love, freedom and true humanity. In this way of thinking and living, to be Christian is to get to work to make this ideal into a reality. We do that by gradually overcoming the forces of evil.

¹ City Called Heaven, traditional. Hymn 135 in Songs of Zion

² This comparisons of kingdom understandings is beholden to Shirley Guthrie's [Christian Doctrine](#).

I know that's a fairly short description. But how does it sound? Is that the way you understand the kingdom and our part in it? Or ... are there some problems with that view? Problems such as how it risks changing the kingdom of God into the kingdom of Christians and the kingdom of the church, where we are the true ruler ... instead of God in Christ?

Ok, so who wants to go for door number 2?

A second view is that the kingdom of God is a hope in the future, as we find in the Old Testament. The kingdom has not yet replaced the kingdom of this world, but it will ... at the end of the age, which we also hear about in the New Testament. Unlike the first view, this won't happen gradually. It comes in a sudden catastrophe or judgment, as some who misunderstand the Mayan calendar have predicted for this very year. In this view, Easter is not the proclamation of the present age, but is the hope of the future.

So, any takers on this one? Wait, before you make up your mind. Like the first one, this understanding of the kingdom has its own flaws. If we take this view, for instance, well, we're off the hook. We can tell the oppressed, the poor, the outcast, the victims of injustice just to wait. God will be back to fix things. We're just not sure when. You can see what kind of apathy this leads to, can't you? And we can see why the socialist revolutionary Karl Marx called this view of the kingdom of God an "opiate" for the powerful and the privilege to maintain the status quo.

All right, so we tried out the idealistic notion that we good people can build the kingdom with our own hands if we just have enough time. And we've tested the futuristic notion that God will, on some unknown day of God's choosing, tear this broken kingdom down and replace it with one that perfectly reflects God's will.

Who wants to try door number 3?

Behind this door, some theologians offer a view of the kingdom that is a present reality. It's here and now, among us. But it comes with a catch. It is a present reality "for all who have eyes to see it and ears to hear it." In other words, if you are in the club, you somehow can experience it and be confident of its current reality. It's not far off. It's not coming with the end of the world. It's around you, if you have the eyes of faith to recognize its signs.

Now, to be sure, we have all said that we have seen glimpses of the kingdom – moments when we are certain God in the Holy Spirit is at work and in our midst. But

those are *glimpses*. This idea of the realized kingdom holds that the kingdom is all around us all the time ... even amid all that is wrong in the world.

Like the first two, this one has its flaws as well. It narrows the realm of God almighty to a matter of individual ethics and religious observances. It says, "If I go to church and live a reasonably decent life, if I don't harm others and otherwise mind my own business, well, then, it's all good. God is at work. Yes there is suffering but God is on the case. God's got the ball. What can I possibly do to add to anything *God* can do?"

Hmmmm. That one doesn't seem quite right either, some of you may be thinking. Yes, God is sovereign. Yes, it sounds right that the kingdom has arrived in Christ. But it doesn't make much of a case for the kind of vigorous witness and confident discipleship that Jesus called for.

Well, guess what (and I am summoning my best inner-Monty Hall here), there is one more option. That's right. You can still choose what is behind the curtain where Carol Merrill is standing. But I'll give you a heads up. This option is one of those that doesn't come all nicely packaged and easily understood.

This view of the kingdom takes the world's sin and suffering, injustice and even death very seriously. It calls us to confront evil and to work for justice, especially for those who have no voice or power or influence.

Yet at the same time, it claims victory ... victory in Christ ... Christ's life and death and resurrection. It takes evil seriously. But it takes God more seriously. This understanding of the kingdom asserts that the kingdom is "already but not yet." Evil is present, but in Christ it is already defeated. The world is broken, yet it is already healed in Christ. The kingdom is here, but it is not yet complete.

I told you, this way of believing isn't easy. In a world of unprecedented complexity, we are surrounded by those who seek to find comfort in simplistic, one-sided answers. But this belief doesn't settle for the kind of easy either/or approach to the world. It doesn't hide in shallow dogma and inflexible ideology. It doesn't correspond to comfortable and undemanding living.

No, this view of the kingdom of God has the courage to believe in both/and, which is the courage that we can find in true faith.

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Friends, this is the day in our liturgical calendar known as Transfiguration Sunday. It's the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday, which ushers in the season of Lent. Today, churches recall the moment when God declared to the world that Jesus is the hope of the world. Christ ascended into the heavens but for a moment, where he shone with blinding white light. He then returned to earth, where he began his journey to Jerusalem and set his face toward the cross, where he defeated death and claimed victory for all.

On this, Transfiguration Sunday, we are all invited and enabled by Christ to dwell in the both/and and the already and not yet of the Kingdom of God. Not just to dwell but to work vigorously, as the hands and feet of the body of Christ. And not just to work as disciples, but to labor as victors with the confidence that comes from knowing, without a shadow of doubt, that the kingdom is here now and to be completed through the grace of God.

Go back into the world today with that confidence in your hearts and these lines from a hymn as your prayer:

Lord, transfigure our perception, with the purest light that shines,
And recast our life's intentions, to the shape of Your designs,
Till we seek no other glory than what lies past Calvary's Hill
And our living and our dying and our rising by Your will.³

Amen

³ Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory, George Henry Day, 1940; The Presbyterian Hymnal