

The Kingdom of God in Three Acts
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
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Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Come with me, if you would, into the Kingdom of God in three acts.

Act One:

In Jesus Christ, God came to usher the Kingdom of God into the world, to be seen and heard and realized through Christ himself. In everything he did – his teaching, preaching, healing and challenging the powers of the world – Jesus proclaimed the entrance of the Kingdom.

The gospel of Mark introduces Jesus and His mission with these words: “And after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, *and the kingdom of God is at hand*; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:13-14).

Matthew echoes Mark, saying: “And Jesus was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and *proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom*, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people” (Matt. 4:23).

As does Luke with this comment: “But He [Jesus] said to them, “*I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose*” (Luke 4:43).

These accounts, known as the synoptic gospels, are of one accord: the Kingdom was at the heart of Jesus’ purpose on earth. And, ever since Jesus, this truth has been one of the few things religious leaders and scholars have agreed upon.

Most also agree that the kingdom is both present and future, it is still becoming, summoned forth by Christ, called into reality, fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament. Yet it is incomplete. All we have to do is look around our broken world to see that this is not the way God would have things, not what Jesus described in his parables and proclamations, not what he called forth in the hearts of his followers. As you have heard me say before, we live in the in-between – the “already and the not-yet” of the kingdom.

What is a “good Christian” to do in this in-between time? On that question, there is less agreement. Some contend that God is working God’s purposes out, that the Kingdom is of God’s making and, through Christ, it will be completed ... one day. Some with this

perspective even believe there is not much we mere mortals can do to advance the Kingdom but watch and wait. Others take a more “activist” view, which brings us to Act Two.

Act Two:

We should begin Act Two with a clear and resounding recognition that everything, everything in the world and beyond is in God’s hands. The Reformed tradition calls the “sovereignty of God,” that God reigns over all things, in heaven and earth. How that universe-wide reach advances on earth is the question.

So let us jump from Jesus’ ushering in the kingdom and proclaiming its arrival to a time 1900 years later. It is a time in America of scientific and technological advances that transform the country. Immigrants stream into America, seeking a better life but many finding only menial work at the bottom of the economy. Meanwhile, capitalism surges ahead with record measurements as untold fortunes are amassed.

Yet, America’s prosperity is limited to a small few. Power and influence gather at the extreme top of society. The gap between the haves and the have-nots grows unchecked. Poverty. Crime and corruption spread. Social unrest bursts out.

These are the years, the events and the social trends of the late 1800s in America. Although, I am sure the parallels to America in 2014 aren’t lost on us today.

In these days at the dawn of the 20th century, a Baptist preacher and seminary professor named Walter Rauschenbusch observed what was happening in America through the lens of his faith. He pastored the tiny Second German Baptist Church in New York City, on the edge of the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood, a troubled and crime-infested area. For Christians in America, it was a time of a kind of personal piety. Christianity thrived, but with very personal, individualistic bent that rarely spread to look at the sins of society as a whole.

With all of this as context, Walter Rauschenbusch took a second, hard look at the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. He focused on what he called “the present crisis” and became the father of what is known as the Social Gospel movement, which argued that religious belief is not just a matter of personal piety. It must be activated and elevated to influence society as a whole.

In specific, Rauschenbusch focused on the idea of the Kingdom of God and its advancement on earth. His writing gave unique shape to the idea of the Kingdom on earth. His thinking stood on three pillars:

First, Rauschenbusch believed that the kingdom and the business of the kingdom is here and now rather than some mysterious, other-worldly ideal to be realized in an unknowable future. It came with Christ Jesus, who, as both divine and human, inaugurated a new kind of humanity that exists to serve the will and purpose of God and God alone. In Christ, the kingdom was and ever is becoming, as opposed to an apocalyptic view of when the kingdom will arrive.

Second, and in turn, the advance of Christianity as the way of Jesus would require not just the effort of the church but the transformation of society's institutions – government, commerce, social service agencies and others ... if the kingdom ideals of justice, generosity and love are to reign fully.

Third – and this is vitally important – all of this would occur by divine providence. While the hands and feet, wills and ways of believers and others would be needed, they are not the deciding factor. God's divine hand is and will be at work as the institutions that shape modern society are reformed to serve God's purposes and advance the kingdom.

"We cannot cease to believe that Christianity is gaining inch by inch," he wrote, a hope rooted in what he called the "redemptive forces of Christ."¹

Now let us move on again.

Act Three:

We gather today in a world far more advanced but in many ways quite similar to the world Walter Rauschenbusch preached to a century ago. Our Supreme Court has ruled that corporations have the rights of people, are the equivalent somehow of children of our divine creator. Thus, power and influence in America have become commodities available to the highest bidder. No surprise, then, that the rich are the powerful today, whether we are talking about individuals or corporations. And their power is vastly disproportionate in society at large and in society's institutions.

Just Thursday, the Wall Street Journal carried a story about one glaring signal of that. It began this way:

"The gap between the richest and poorest Americans widened even as the U.S. economic recovery gained traction in the years after the recession, the Federal Reserve said.

¹Rauschenbusch, "Out Attitude Toward Millinarianism," 90-91

Average, or mean, pretax income for the wealthiest 10% of U.S. families rose 10% in 2013 from 2010, but families in the bottom 40% saw their average inflation-adjusted income decline

The top 3% of families saw their share of total income rise to 30.5% in 2013 from 27.7% in 2010, while the bottom 90% saw their share fall Wealth inequality has deepened over time. The top 3% held 54.4% of all wealth in 2013, up from 44.8% in 1989. The bottom 90% held 24.7% of wealth last year, down from 33.2% in 1989.

Wealth concentration in the U.S. is at an almost-100-year high. Fed Chairwoman Janet Yellin called income inequality “a very deep problem,”² which in Fed-speak is practically the same as screaming fire in a crowded theater. Maybe that’s a little overstated – maybe.

As for the poor, those whom Jesus also talked so much about :

In America, hunger agencies report, 1 out of every 2 children will be on some food-related public assistance at some point in their lives. In North Carolina, more than 1 in 4 of our children is poor – 41 percent of our children of color.

In Charlotte, almost one in five live below the poverty line. What’s more, we have somehow made it more difficult to climb out of poverty than 96 other top cities in America. Yes, Charlotte ranks 97th of 100 cities recently measured for what is called “upward mobility,” the ability and likelihood of children in the bottom 20% of Charlotte socio-economically to ever reach the top 20%.³

In our city, the face of this kind of intractable poverty looks like that of Rebecca Royce, mentioned in an Observer story last week.

“A college-educated woman in her early 60s, she works several part-time jobs, from cleaning homes and offices at night to giving piano lessons and teaching classes at Johnson C. Smith University.”

² All quotes and data from Wall Street Journal article by Ben Leubsdorf, Sept. 4

³ <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2014/01/23/4635519/new-study-charlottes-poor-struggle.html#storylink=cpy> ... research by Harvard University, University of California, Berkeley and the Treasury Department.

Her husband cannot work due to illness but doesn't qualify for disability benefits. He gets low-cost care at [Charlotte Community Health Clinic](#). She just avoids going to the doctor. When there are emergency bills, she says, they've sold musical instruments to raise cash.

“We are hard-working people, law-abiding people. We pay our taxes and vote,” Royce said. “And yet there is no place for us in the health care system the way it is today.”

Mrs. Royce is among the half-million North Carolinians who do not receive supplemental federal assistance for medical bills because she makes too much to qualify but hardly enough to live on. And North Carolina isn't making it any easier on the poor.

As of now, our General Assembly has chosen to send \$10 billion in state taxpayer funds to other states rather than participate in some parts of the Affordable Care Act.⁴ Good for those states. Hard to understand for ours.

This, friends, is not the kind of solidarity with the poor that Christ called us to practice. There is nothing inherently wrong in being wealthy or relatively wealthy. Jesus never meant that, though he did say wealth brings great responsibility. Nor are the poor somehow more moral because they are poor. It is, rather, a matter of empathy, a matter of authentically

For us at Caldwell, so many of you serve Christ by helping neighbors in poverty or close to it. You build affordable housing, honor and encourage the men at McCreesh Place, tutor the children at Merry Oaks, are soon to mentor at-risk youth through Buddy/Mentor, donate to Loaves and Fishes, walk in the Crop Walk, grow vegetables and give them to the needy, travel to work with the poor in Guatemala and advocate for just public policies. What a witness you provide. Thanks be to God.

Now, we are working even harder to see through the walls of race and class and to work past those barriers in the name of Christ. In specific to poverty, many of you have registered to participate in a poverty simulation next Saturday, led by Crisis Assistance Ministry. This simulation – for which there are still available slots - will allow us, however briefly, to walk in the shoes of the poor, to face their often impossible choices. It is an

⁴ <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2014/09/02/5145802/north-carolinas-10-billion-medicaid.html#.VANlBPldVqU>

opportunity to build solidarity with those experiencing poverty and to draw closer to God in Christ.

For some in our midst, poverty is no simulation. For those, you know – or have known – poverty’s demands and difficult tradeoffs. Others of you work for agencies that alleviate poverty every day. And for those who cannot come next Saturday, please do not feel you will be perceived as being unsympathetic. This is, after all, just another step on our shared journey, to be followed by other steps and learning opportunities to come.

That journey, after all, that invites us to participate in the advancement of the kingdom on earth ... and to see the face of God. For, as Mother Teresa said:

“The poor anywhere in the world are Christ who suffers. In them, the Son of God lives and dies. Through them, God shows his face.”⁵

Amen and amen.

⁵ In My Own Words, 1996