

SERMON – THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE...

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We had a great Holy Week and Easter celebration, didn't we?
We had record attendance at our Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services...
Many of you made a huge effort to be involved and to participate...many more of you invited people to come and we had new people here who were really excited about what was happening at WVPC.

Many said they felt and experienced the Holy Spirit at work in their lives in a host of different ways.

So many expressed appreciation – I think more than ever before since I have been here.
And I just want you to be encouraged and I want to say thank you to each and every one of you for making the Easter/Holy Week time so special.

And now here we are after Easter – **the Sunday after Easter is commonly known as a “low” Sunday.** But today I want you to be on a high...not a low...

One of the things I kept hearing from people and I said it myself a lot was,
“Once we get through Easter....then we can focus on such and such...”.

I started thinking after awhile that “once we get through Easter” was perhaps not the best way to put it because we are never “through Easter”.
Easter is NOW. Easter means that God is alive for us today in this moment.

And as Jesus began his earthly ministry, this is what he taught. God is available for you NOW.

Not after you offer your sacrifices
Not after you decide to get more spiritual and follow the letter of the law
Not after you read the book, go to the conference, decide to attend church more regularly.

That is why he performed miracles, calmed storms, taught as no other religious leader had ever taught

He wanted people to understand that his presence was Good News.

It was the very presence of God with them NOW.

And it was a whole new way of understanding what a relationship with God was all about

The choosing of the 12 disciples mirrored the 12 tribes of Israel

And Jesus was saying, “Now we are going to do this relationship with God thing differently. These 12 will be my witnesses that God is alive and present NOW for all people in a whole new way that you never imagined before.”

But you can imagine Jesus' challenge with trying to explain this new relationship with God – this relationship of grace and forgiveness - to people who were steeped in the tradition and practices of their ancestors, steeped in the law, steeped in sacrifices – very focused on the external acts to get them close to God.

Sure that they alone were the chosen people

Sure that the Messiah was coming to overthrow the Roman government
Sure that the possession of their land meant God's favor

Jesus' kingdom was not of this world; not of the people and their expectations
So he really had his work cut out for him in trying to explain to the people of this world what he was talking about when he spoke about the other world that was his kingdom.

So in trying to explain this new era and what he had come to do – which was to reconcile us to God by his death – and unconditionally buy them back and give them the free gift of salvation - Jesus used parables to teach people what they did not understand very well yet.

Parables are stories and people love stories.

Rabbis were known to tell stories because it was one of the most effective ways to communicate

It still is

When I am up here talking I usually have most of your attention – and I can tell if you are engaged or not.

But as soon as I start to tell a story all of you look up at me and listen.

Oh! She's telling a story! Finally, she got to the good part...I wonder what is going to happen. I better listen so I can find out...

Children love stories...how many of you remember having a favorite childhood story?
I loved Peter Pan. Tim loved the little red tugboat. Chris, my oldest son was enamored by the story of Dumbo the elephant, Julie with Ariel the mermaid, and Jonathan with Curious George stories.

That love of story that we have as children doesn't leave us in adulthood.
All of us love a good story,

I am 50% Italian and dinner time was a long, long process on Sunday afternoons because after we ate we would sit around and tell stories; and we'd repeat them...tell them again and again.

One of the ones I heard over and over from my grandfather was about how...he was a pastor in Chicago, and actually preached to Al Capone and his guys, and evidently converted one guy in Al Capone's gang to Christianity. This guy later, as the story goes, saved my grandfather's life by sticking up for him when he got annoying and some of the peisanos wanted to do him in..."Don't touch him" he told Al Capone. Glad he said that cause I wouldn't be here otherwise...

Good story, huh? Fun to listen to...

Stories are powerful, and Jesus' stories, as all good stories do, had multiple levels of meaning.

But you can hear him in the gospels trying so hard to get across to people what God was like...he blurts out more than once **"TO what shall I compare the Kingdom of God?"** Like he is trying to come up with the words and so he comes up with a simile and says..."It is Like this...or it is like that"

It was almost like trying to teach someone who is blind the meaning of color.

Have you ever tried to do that before? It is so hard because a person who has been blind from birth doesn't have the concept of color – just like we don't have the concept of God's kingdom

Watch this video a minute as a man blind from birth asks people to describe color to him...

VIDEO

How did they do it? They compared color to something the man could know using his other senses. I loved the description of gray..."the smell of asphalt after it rains." The blind man could get smell...and in a way grasp hold of what color might be...through what he already could experience

So Jesus...

told stories, or parables, and he would start out by saying...

"The kingdom of heaven is like...."

Trying to relate something that is unknown to us by comparing it to something that is known...

The kingdom of God is like...was the only way Jesus could try to make it clear to us...

Eben Alexander who had a near death experience says in his book PROOF OF HEAVEN THAT trying to put heaven into words is like trying to write about something with half the alphabet...there isn't words to describe the wonder and beauty and majesty of the kingdom of God.

So instead Jesus tells us that powerful thing called a story and the story is about *what we know already, that points to something that is beyond us* that we are supposed to get –

However, when Jesus says "The kingdom of heaven is like"...we can get confused right away with the antiquated word "kingdom" because kingdom isn't a word we use today too much

So here is a definition of kingdom that I like that I think explains the word in a way we can understand it today: **"The kingdom is the rule of God, and all of his blessing that comes to us because he rules."**

So

Here are some examples of Jesus teaching us what the KOH is like...

...Matthew 13:3 (IMAGE OF SOWER)

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field;

You could be content with the surface story of a guy throwing seeds around, or you could go deeper...

Interpretation: A SOWER SCATTERING SEED...it required fruitful soil for effective growth. In other words you have to accept and receive the good news...

MATTHEW 13:31-32

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field...

You could be content with just the surface story, or you go deeper and realize that The presence of the kingdom in Jesus’ mission is not a world shaking event but a small, insignificant movement of a Jewish teacher and a handful of followers – as insignificant as a grain of mustard seed.

Yet in the end, it will be like a great tree where the birds make nests in its branches.

MATTHEW 13:33

Another parable He spoke to them: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”

Some just got the surface story – but you can go deeper

At present, in our world, and in Jesus’ day the KOH is like a bit of leaven in a great bowl of dough, but one day the dough will fill the bowl, for the leaven will have leavened it throughout...

The small unexpected form of the presence of the kingdom, contrasted with its greatness in the final day...

Matthew 13:44 (IMAGE OF TREASURE)

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Matthew 13:45 (IMAGE OF PEARL)

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls; on finding one of great value he went and sold all the he had and bought it.

Some just got the surface story...some understood this to mean that...

Jesus is saying invest in me before you invest in everything else; Recognize what I am offering you is of great value... if you make God your first priority –then you understand the extreme worth of a relationship with me. Seek me above all else.

There are many other instances when Jesus uses this phrase...the kingdom of heaven is like...

And this is the point for an after Easter sermon I want you to get that’s practical for you today.

Just as **Jesus** used the common situations of life circumstances to describe to describe to people what the kingdom of heaven was like...so he **teaches us today about himself in and through the common situations we find ourselves in NOW; in the ordinary, the everyday**

So in your life, pay attention to the deeper meaning!
The kingdom of heaven is in your midst in the simple and the ordinary!

Centuries ago a man named Nicolas Herman, who was an uneducated household servant from a poor family, got converted looking at a tree.
He goes into a monastery, spends his life in the kitchen, dishwasher, but he devotes his life to being with God. He is known as Brother Lawrence.

When he dies, they gather some of his letters together and turn them into a book. The book is called **The Practice of the Presence of God**, written in the seventeenth century.

It is now thought to be beyond the Bible, perhaps the most widely read book in the history of the human race, by an uneducated dishwasher all about life with God now in this world today.

His whole thesis is that **we can know the presence of God NOW and practice it by observing and participating in the world we are in.**

We can learn, as the Holy Spirit teaches us, not just to tune into the surface level of our story that we are living called “our lives”, but we can actually go deeper and learn more about Jesus by recognizing his presence NOW in everything we do.

So you say...well
How do I do that? My life isn't that sensational... I don't see the kingdom of God anywhere!

So folks...How do we – we who are pretty blind to spiritual things – slowly begin see God more regularly throughout our day in the here and now...

Here is something you can try.

There are 86,400 seconds in a day – we can either live those seconds aware of God's presence, of his kingdom/reign in our midst, or unaware...

Our whole lives are a parable...a story in themselves...and
we can choose to live a surface story, from one event to the next, or we can go deeper and become aware of what God is doing NOW in the midst of our most mundane activities, and thereby find greater meaning and purpose in them.

Ask yourself...

How many seconds am I currently at in an average day, where I make a conscious effort to bring God to mind and surrender my thoughts to him?

Lets be conservative...Maybe six seconds a day...?

To be able to see God in the very normal event of each day maybe it is as simple as bringing God to mind and surrendering your thoughts to him from 6 to 10 seconds...a day...bit by bit
It doesn't seem like much but it is a way to practice the presence of God NOW...

Here's an example of what I am talking about.

Let's say you are at work, and it's a normal ordinary day.

And lets say...your just take a moment...pause...recognize the Lord is with you NOW...you are in his presence and then ask God, **"Would you help with the work I am doing? Can we do it together?"**

When I ask this of God sometimes a tremendous load falls off. I remember that my wellbeing does not depend on how people think I am doing.

Or if I get preoccupied with myself I think "Boy if I don't do this really well that will be really bad and people won't like it and I will feel miserable."

Then I focus my thoughts on God, remembering that he is right there with me. Jesus is with me. The kingdom of God is in my midst!

I realize I want to do the best I can, but my eternal worth and destiny do not ride on what some group of people think about me. God is holding my life and he loves me.

Then I feel life. I feel joy. Sometimes I feel peace...as if I am being held. I am so grateful just to be alive!

And I look and I notice that the kingdom of heaven is like what just happened to me...its like someone carrying a huge burden and realizing it was unnecessary and then putting it down, and standing up a little straighter, a little taller, and a lot more encouraged.

All of a sudden the mundane and the ordinary of my day has been become sacred, simply because I have tuned in to the God who is there.

If the kingdom of heaven is in out midst, as Jesus said, then let's notice it everywhere— if Jesus is resurrected then he is here now...

That's the high of the Sunday after Easter...often called the low Sunday

Jesus with us NOW

So lets train our eyes and ears to see and experience the truth of the NOW presence of God...the presence of his kingdom

Tune in...from 6 seconds to 10 seconds...and then maybe you go all the way to 15 seconds...and each day keep consciously upping the time you intentionally spend focusing on the truth of Christ with you...and surrendering your thoughts to him

Frank Laubach was an amazing man who by faith created orphanages and organizations that helped the poor.

This is what he wrote: **"The most wonderful discovery that has ever come to me is that I do not have to wait. Any hour for anybody can be as rich as God himself."**

Jesus is with us NOW, and that means that the kingdom of heaven is in our midst.

Notice it. Be aware of it.

Practice tuning into see it and experience it in the simple and the ordinary – from pearls, to yeast, to trees, to seeds – to computer chips, to cubicles, to car seats, to lines in Target, to traffic, to baggage claim, to the classroom, to cooking broccoli....Jesus is present.

Here me now...you are about to get a free offer.

Anyone who tries what I am talking about this week to increase. their conscious awareness of God with them in the NOW, in the ordinary, in their regular day, and writes to me about

how they did it— if you write to me **I will give you a free copy of Practicing the Presence of God.**

You can let me know how many seconds you focused on God in one day

What helped you focus and connect with him?

What kept you from connecting?

How did God show up for you?

I hope you will write to me and let me know how you consciously make the choice to see the kingdom of heaven in your midst this week!

And now as we move communion, it is right here at this table that we seen the simple and the ordinary – the bread and the juice – transformed into the sacred. It is right here in these common elements that Jesus speaks to us of his presence, of his forgiveness, of his sacrifice, and unconditional love.

Invitation to the TABLE