

Among You
Luke 17:20-37
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First Central Congregational UCC
7 March 2016

The Day of the Son of Man will be “one in which men will be going on with their daily occupations, absorbed in them and seeing nothing in life beyond them. To such people the Kingdom of God comes and they miss it,” wrote theologian W. T. Connor. “Those who are absorbed in their ordinary occupations will see nothing beyond these. To them this is all there is in life. A bed is only a place to sleep and a mill only a place to grind.”

Instead, the disciples of Jesus “should be ready to meet him at any time.” “The breaking of the eternal into time . . . is liable to take place at any time and for it we should be ready.”

The religious leaders come to Jesus and ask him a question, as they were accustomed to do, this one inviting speculation on another lively theological controversy—“When will the kingdom of God come?”

For Jesus’ first century Jewish audience, the kingdom of God was a collection of expectations. The idea referred to the universal sovereignty of God and to the nation of Israel as God’s chosen kingdom, while also looking forward to what Connor calls “the good time coming.” That “good time coming” was viewed differently by various segments of the Jewish population.

Some imagined a political kingdom, when Roman oppressors would be overthrown and a free and independent nation of Israel established again. Some imagined a renewal of the priesthood and temple, getting back to an original, purer religion. And others looked forward to a Day of the Lord, an apocalyptic, end-of-time when God would judge the Earth. According to Connor, “a coming day of the Lord in which the Lord would appear either in person or by his representative, would deliver his people, avenge them of their enemies and bring in the golden age.”

These were the ideas swirling around the question the religious leaders asked Jesus. And Jesus, as he was accustomed to do, avoids speculation and instead reaffirms the practical side of the topic. What is called for is a response, a commitment, not an answer.

For Jesus says, the “kingdom of God is among you.” Or, in some translations of the Greek “the kingdom of God is within you.”

In the Gospel of Thomas, when Jesus is asked “When will the new world come?” He answers “What you look for has come, but you do not know it.”

What, then, for Jesus, is the kingdom of God?

The kingdom is first God’s rule. More specifically, the kingdom is the way that God wants us to live. And God’s rule is based upon love. Not an easy, sentimental sort, but a demanding ethic of love and compassion, welcome and inclusion, service and sacrifice.

God's rule creates a new spiritual order. The grace God is offering to us changes us, heals us of our sin, and provides a way of growth and development as we become more like God.

For Jesus the kingdom is not some future reality or afterlife, but is present, even now, developing, growing, changing us and changing the world. God is at work in the world even now and those with the eyes to see and ears to hear see and hear God at work.

And God's reign is a transformation of human society. God is changing people's heart, for salvation is personal, but God is also redeeming society. For, as W. T. Connor wrote, "A salvation that saved a man but did not affect his relations in life would be a poor kind of salvation. In fact, it would be exactly no salvation."

Finally, Jesus proclaims that God's reign will arrive at a final consummation, established by God breaking into human history, not because of the ingenuity of humankind or technological and intellectual progress, as important as those are.

So, to put it simply, the kingdom is both now and not yet. The kingdom is already here, already at work, and still in the process of growing to maturation and completeness.

Harvey Cox, retired Harvard professor, has written that he doesn't like the term "kingdom" because "it inevitably evokes the static idea of a spatial realm." He writes, "I prefer to use the phrase 'Reigning of God.' It implies something that is going on—not a place, but a 'happening.' . . . To be a 'follower' of Jesus means to discern and respond to the initial signs of this 'happening' and to work to facilitate its coming in its fullness."

Connor puts the final point this way, "unless a [person] has spiritual perception, the values of the Kingdom will mean nothing to him [or her]. They will belong to every [person] who sees them and spiritually appropriates them."

So, some people will see God at work in the ordinary parts of their lives and some will not and those will miss out on the kingdom that is already present among them or within them. They will be waiting for something to happen and miss God at work, miss their chance to participate in the salvation God is offering.

As Luke Timothy Johnson then points out, the "question of 'when' the kingdom will come is therefore entirely inappropriate. For Luke, the call of God, the visitation of God, is constant for every life, as close as death itself. The point is not chronology, but conversion."

And so we get to an explanation of the final verse of today's passage, when Jesus says "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather." Jesus is pointing out that if you are looking for a corpse, you look to where the birds have flocked. By analogy, and the analogy is admittedly morbid, if you are looking for where the reigning of God is, then look to where the people have gathered who are empowered by the spirit of God and doing the sorts of things that we know God wants people to do—walking humbly, living righteously, loving neighbors and enemies and themselves, bearing fruits that are kind and gentle and compassionate.

Our Lenten theme is Gracious Hospitality. God is the host, inviting us to receive God's amazing, saving Grace. And the question we are exploring all Lent is—How will we receive God's grace?

God is at work in our world. Our challenge is to perceive God's work and then join up. And hopefully others will then see God at work in us and join up as well. And together we will

become God's agents bringing about the change that God desires.

But it begins with us and with our own conversion. With the forgiveness of sins. And repairing our weaknesses. With growing and maturing and becoming more like God by following the example of Jesus.