

Kin-Dom of God Sermon Series
Thinking Like Outsiders – Luke 17:11-21
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“A movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.” That’s part of our denomination’s identity statement, and, as Disciples, we are called to dedicate our lives to living out that wholeness, as individuals, as a church, and as a denomination. Since that statement was adopted over a decade ago, our world has become even more fragmented, which is all the more reason for us to work toward wholeness.

One of the ways we do this as a denomination is our General Assembly, the every-other-year gathering of the whole church. We come together to worship, to learn, to do business, and to rekindle relationships. We pray, we eat, and we have fun, like playing the game where you take a drink every time one of the denominational leaders says “a movement for wholeness” from the stage. Our flasks are filled with grape juice, of course.

This year’s General Assembly starts at the end of July and is being held just down the road in Louisville. The theme of this year’s assembly is “The Kin-Dom of God, Within Us, Among Us.” It’s a provocative statement that can cause us to question a lot of things, the first of which being if the word “kingdom” was spelled wrong. I promise the missing “G” is intentional and we’ll unpack why that is in just a minute.

I’m excited about General Assembly this year, partly because this is our first time gathering as a denomination since Covid. So much of being the church in this world relies on presence, doesn’t it? After all, God didn’t place a Zoom call to humanity. No, God came to us incarnate, in the flesh, fully embodied, able to touch and hug and heal. When we are present with each other, we are strengthening the ligaments and tendons of Christ’s body. It will be good to be incarnate with brothers and sisters of the faith from across the United States and Canada, to be the earthly embodiment of God’s kin-dom here on earth.

Ok, so what’s up with “kin-dom”? It’s not a word that’s mentioned at all in the Bible. Whenever Jesus talks about God’s community, he calls it the kingdom, like in our passage today, where he says, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” We pray each Sunday that God’s kingdom comes here on earth. So what’s wrong with kingdom?

Well, as you can imagine, the concept of a ruling king can be fraught with complexity. If you disagree, ask the folks on the Mayflower, who sailed to the new world to get away from a king. While a king may have been the most accepted form of earthly rule in Jesus’ time, in today’s world, we don’t give kings a lot of respect and they no authority over us. In a popularity poll, Americans would easily favor Burger King over King Charles, probably because the Burger King slogan “Have It Your Way” is about the most American thing I’ve ever heard. So, the concept of king doesn’t have relevancy for us.

But the problem runs deeper than that. I did extensive research this week, which means I did a Google search, and as far as I can tell, throughout history, 100% of kings have been male. And – spoiler alert – guys don’t do great when they’re given unlimited access to power, money, and weapons. Sorry, dudes, hope that doesn’t spoil your Father’s Day. In a world where we are striving for wholeness, equating God with a king is limited in its ability to convey the totality of who God is for us.

In addition, in a kingdom, there is a built-in hierarchy based on the structure of rule. There is a royalty and there are commoners. There are those who live in the palace and those who don't. Even the most benevolent kings enjoyed a privilege that most of their subjects could only dream about. Inequality is built into the fabric of a kingdom, so the concept of the kingdom of God is almost oxymoronic.

But "kin-dom" has a whole different connotation to it. Theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz put it this way: "The concept of kingdom in our world today is both hierarchical and elitist. The word 'kin-dom' makes it clear that when the fullness of God becomes a day-to-day reality...we will all be brothers and sisters – kin to each other." In God's kin-dom there are no rulers and subjects, no haves and have-nots. Everyone is equal. Everyone is welcome. It's not about having it our way, but about following God's way.

That brings us to our passage today in Luke's gospel. We're told that Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem and is in between Samaria and Galilee. In other words, he's in the middle of nowhere. He's not in the town square or near the capital. He's on the edge, traveling across borders, one foot in the foreign land of Samaria and one in his homeland of Galilee.

While in a border village, Jesus is approached by 10 lepers who ask him for mercy. Leprosy was believed to be a disease not just of the skin but of the soul. It was often considered to be a punishment from God, and it was an especially tragic disease because it was so obvious for everyone to see. Jesus tells the lepers to go show themselves to the priest, and on the way they are all healed. But only one turns back, praising Jesus in a loud voice, falling at his feet and offering words of gratitude. And then we get the punchline. The one who turned back was a Samaritan, a foreigner, an outsider.

This story is followed by a bit of a non-sequitur. We don't know if this happened right after the 10 lepers or not. Jesus is asked by the Pharisees, the religious ruling elite, when the kingdom of God was coming. The belief was that the Messiah would be sent by God to re-establish the kingdom of David, Israel's most popular and successful king. The Pharisees were testing Jesus to see if he might really be the Messiah. And he gives such an obscure answer: "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." Before Jesus is born, his mother Mary proclaims in her song, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." Could it be that Jesus is ushering in a different kind of kingdom than the one the Pharisees are expecting?

While we don't know that these two things are connected, I like to imagine that the Pharisees question Jesus about the kingdom of God with his disciples and the healed Samaritan standing next to him. Imagine that: 12 rag-tag commoners, a healed outsider who used to be a leprous outcast, and Jesus, facing off against the religious elite in their fancy vestments, trying to trap this rabble-rouser into incriminating himself. And Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is among you."

Where is it? Does he mean it's the Pharisees, those who've given their lives to religion, but done so at the cost of colluding with the Romans and abusing their power? Does he mean it's his disciples, who've left their families and jobs to follow him yet still don't understand the magnitude of Jesus' message and mission? Does he mean it's the former leper, an outsider who may not even believe in God in the first place?

Or could he mean all of the above? Could the kin-dom of God be big enough to hold in faithful and theological tension all these folks: the religiously pious who think they've got it right, the seekers and doubters who are still figure it out, and the outsiders who don't even know

if they belong? Is it possible that when we move from kingdom to kin-dom, the idea expands so radically, so graciously, that the hierarchy dissolves and all three groups find themselves on the inside?

Jesus didn't work from the inside out. He didn't start in the halls of power and move his way out to the borders. From the moment his birth announcement was given to a bunch of stinky shepherds, Jesus has worked on the edges, the in-between places, the borders where people and ideologies clashed over questions about who's in and who's out. And Jesus simply says, "In God's kin-dom, you're all in."

That has real-world implications for us today, because we have drawn our own borders in order to distinguish who's in and who's out of our earthly kingdoms. And I'm not only talking about the borders between nations. When I was looking to rent a house, most of the properties available were on the north side of the city. My immediate reaction? "I don't want to live there." I'm too embarrassed to tell you the subtext of why I didn't want to live there, but I wonder if some of you share the same prejudices.

Now, Amy and I live off Loudon Avenue in an eclectic neighborhood that is populated by older couples enjoying their retirement and newly married couples in their first home. A house with an American flag sits next to a house with a pride flag. Several languages can be heard coming from the open windows. Families of all shapes, sizes, and colors weave a tapestry of life, from getting ahead to doing the best they can. Some people even have chickens. I don't know if that's a kingdom, but I hope it's a glimpse into God's kin-dom.

I wonder what would happen in our world if we focused less on the borders that divide us and more on the common humanity that unites us. After all, borders are human constructs that can shift and move based on the whims of power and privilege. Before there was Canada and the United States and Mexico and all the other countries, there was earth. Full stop, end of sentence. Everything that has come after that is purely our own doing.

To those of us on the "right" side of the borders, we can forget what it's like to be outsiders – outside of power, outside of access to resources, outside of the room where decisions are made. If we were on the outside, we would be more dependent on God and less dependent on ourselves. So, I wonder what would happen if those of us on the inside began thinking and acting like those on the outside. I wonder how many perceived enemies would become friends, how many threats would dissolve as shared dreams were revealed, how many claims of "mine!" would become declarations of "ours." After all, in God's kin-dom, there are no Pharisees and lepers, no citizens and foreigners, no north siders and Chevy Chasers and Shadelanders and Kenwickers and Cardinal Valley-ers. In God's kin-dom, there is only us, all children of God, all loved and valued and accepted. The kin-dom of God is among you. You are a part of it! But...so are the outsiders. How would your life change, how would this world change, if there were no outsiders?