



SUNDAY SERMON

Your Kingdom Come

Well friends, I think “Let the dead bury their own dead” ranks right up at the top of the list of difficult and confusing things that Jesus said. Jesus is just not willing to let us forget — not for one second — that he is a radical, and that the life he is calling us to, the life of the Kingdom of God, is a radical reconsideration of how we live life on earth.

In our Gospel today, a man has come to Jesus because Jesus’ teaching has woken him up: he wants to learn more. He wants to become a disciple. And Jesus recognizes him as someone with potential, someone who could be a disciple, someone who is in fact awake and alive. When Jesus says that the dead can bury their own dead, he means that all the people this man is leaving behind are dead; not just his father. Anyone who isn’t woken up, anyone who doesn’t get Jesus’ message is dead.

And they might as well be the ones to deal with the mundane tasks of life, like burying the actual dead. But if you’re awake, if you’re alive, then there’s work to do: as Jesus says to the would-be disciple: “go, and proclaim the Kingdom of God.”

Now imagine if this is how we treated newcomers to St. Columba’s. Imagine, indeed, if this is the standard that we held ourselves to. I wonder if anyone would be fit for the kingdom of God, if this is how hard it is.

There was a book everyone was talking about my senior year at seminary: Barbara Brown Taylor’s 2006 memoir, called *Leaving Church*. It took me a long time to work up the courage to read this book — but I finally did, and it really helped me think about the difference between God’s kingdom, and the church.

Taylor is an Episcopal priest, and during the time she worked in the church, became recognized as one of the most gifted preachers of our generation. But — parish ministry wore her out, and she “left church” (sort of) to become a professor of religion at Piedmont College in Georgia.

Leaving Church was published just as I was about to join the church as an ordained professional. Which is why I didn’t really want to read it — I suspected it might ring too true, and then where would I be?

Well, it turns out, much of it does ring true to me now, probably more so for having been in pastoral ministry for more than a decade now. Taylor articulates my growing concern about the gulf between the kingdom and the church. She writes: In a quip that makes the rounds, Jesus preached the coming of the

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DATE

Pentecost 3
Sunday, June 30, 2019

PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

St. Columba's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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kingdom, but it was the church that came [instead]. All these years later, the way many of us are doing church is broken and we know it, even if we don't know what to do about it.

We proclaim the priesthood of all believers; while we continue with hierarchical clergy, liturgy, and architecture. We follow a Lord who challenged the religious and political institutions of his time; while we fund and defend [the religious institutions of our time]. We speak and sing of divine transformation — while we do everything in our power to maintain our equilibrium.

If redeeming things continue to happen to us, in spite of these deep contradictions in our life together, then I think that is because God is faithful even when we are not.

I do believe that “redeeming things” continue to happen in the churches. But sometimes they happen in spite of us, rather than because of us. Later in the book, Taylor lays her finger on the fundamental disconnect that pulls the church in two directions: are we trying to build God's Kingdom? Or are we mainly here to help people grieve, and heal, and celebrate life's passages? Are we a rest stop (that is, a place of comfort and respite in a crazy world)? Or are we a Kingdom incubator?

I want to go on record saying that I think it's ok if we veer towards being a rest stop — sometimes. People come to us when they are sad, or lonely—or joyous—and our call is to grieve with them, to offer the love and support that we can, and to help them funnel that joy into building community. All of this, despite what Jesus says about letting the dead bury their own dead.

We're not in the same position that Jesus was, and I don't think it's realistic to maintain a purely radical stance, and also expect that the church to survive from one generation to the next. I think you have to be willing for the radicalism to be sanded down a bit, if there's going to be a church.

But we are still called to build God's kingdom. Do you think we can do both? Once we have welcomed people in, once we have comforted, what are we doing to wake them up to the reality of injustice in the world? What are we doing to open their hearts to the in-breaking Kingdom of God?

It matters how we talk about this. We can wear people out on church — just like Taylor was worn out — if our message is always that we're not doing enough, that we're failing to live up to Jesus' standard. Guilt is not a motivating emotion. But if we can offer opportunities to put faith into practice, and then connect that practical work with the transformation of the heart — from hard to soft, closed to open, selfish to generous — then I think we are on the right track.

A lot of this is about finding ways to get close to people who are in need — the way our youth and adults did on SCAP this past week, or the way our Water Ministry volunteers do every day. God is present with the poor, and the more we are as well, the closer we come to realizing God's Kingdom.

But I don't think we get there by working harder and doing more— by grasping and fixing and trying to do it all on our own. Do you remember how it felt learning to ride a bike? Becoming God's Kingdom is a little bit like that. At first you just can't see how you're going to do it: gravity

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is too much and no matter how hard you pedal, you're going to fall over. You try, and you fall, just like you knew you would. You need someone's steady hand on your back to give you confidence and get you going. And you try again. And again.

And then you let go, and trust a little, and seemingly like magic there you are, defying gravity and moving forward.

So it is with Jesus' call to us: go out there and change the world. If we keep thinking of that as something that we have to do, a thing to achieve through our sweat and hard work, we'll never get there. But we aren't called to do the kingdom of God: we're called to be the kingdom of God. So let go, and trust, and let God's love living inside of us carry us into that future. Amen.