



SUNDAY SERMON

The Two Kingdoms

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PREACHER
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There are two different kinds of children's soccer. The first is quotation mark soccer. In this version of soccer there are "goals." There are "plays." There are "boundary lines." This kind of soccer is loosely structured group-play time, kids running around the field like an amoeba chasing a ball. Don't get me wrong, this kind of soccer is a total riot. Lots of laughter from the parents, lots of fun for the kids.

As they grow older, though, inevitably there's a shift. The children gain a certain control over their bodies. They pass the ball with discernable purpose. They look up to find their teammates, "defense" as a strategy becomes a thing. There's a shift too in the parents. They've gone from being "fans" to being fans. What you might witness on early Saturday mornings are legit thrills and even, occasionally, heart stopping excitement.

Even though there are exciting changes between quotation mark soccer and this other kind of soccer, there is too something of a loss of innocence. No matter what the parents say, for the kids, there is a score. Which of course means at the end of the game there will be winners and there will be losers. This the children know and this they let burn in their hearts.

During one of our children's games, the opposing team decided to install a goalie, which in this league is strictly verboten. There aren't many rules like this, but this rule--the no goalie rule-- is respected equally by the kids and the adults. Well, this aberration in norms spread like a virus and quickly consumed our team. They felt cheated and mocked. And you could see it happen on the field in real time. They decided to fight fire with fire. They made a calculation. If they're going to cheat and have a goalie, so would we.

The frustration continued to mount, tempers began to flare. The players began to push and yell at each other. And the tension between the parents could be cut by a knife. By the end of the game everyone left defeated.

The gospel today is a story of two different kingdoms. But we hear only the second half of the story. The full story makes it clear that the feeding of the thousands in a "deserted" place is Jesus' response to state sponsored violence. Our passage this morning starts with this, *Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place.* What precedes Jesus' withdrawal, what he had just heard, was the news of the murder of his friend, John the Baptist, by Herod Antipas, the Roman puppet who ruled Jesus' homeland, Galilee.

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John had become such a threat to Herod's power that Herod had wanted to execute him, but because John was loved as a prophet by many Galileans, Herod, fearing a local uprising, decided to hold him indefinitely as a prisoner. Though, after enough internal family pressure and to avoid losing face with the political elite, Herod eventually gave into his violent impulses and murdered John.

Jesus was no stranger to this kind of brutality. After Jesus' birth, the Holy family fled Palestine to Egypt as immigrant refugees because Herod Antipas's father, Herod the Great, fearing the Christ child, had set out to murder scores of male children.

In other gospels Jesus confronts Herod Antipas directly. In the Gospel of Mark Jesus warns against Herod's idolatry of power, and in Luke Jesus demeans the head of state by calling him a "fox"--an unclean, ravenous animal.

But in the Gospel of Matthew, in this still early stage of Jesus' ministry, his response to Herod is different. He retreats from the crowds, he seeks out the solitude of deserted places. But the love that the Galileans had for John was held at least equally for Jesus. And they followed him.

Scholars think that Jesus' hometown, Nazareth, probably had no more than 12 families when he grew up there. In this feeding miracle--recorded in all four gospels-- that Matthew puts the number of the crowd somewhere near ten thousand people means that the author wants to imply that, basically, all of northern Israel had chased Jesus into this deserted place.

Jesus seeing the sick and the vulnerable was moved by an inner compassion. He heals them and gives them such attention that suddenly the end of day has come. They are tired and hungry. They are mourning the wrongful death of John, their prophet, and the force that drives them to Jesus equally blinds them to their need for food.

The disciples have the most human reaction possible. Jesus! We do not have the resources to deal with this problem! Send these people home! Sending the people home might have solved the immediate stress of the disciples, but it would not solve the underlying problem of their hunger. Having spent the day with them, taking in their presence, a sacred space had formed between the crowd and Jesus, and he refused to let an apparently impossible situation upset the needs of this new family.

You feed them, he tells the disciples. Earlier in Matthew Jesus refuses by himself to turn stones into bread. What makes this miracle of food different is that it starts with a hungry crowd. Jesus embraces them in compassion. He empowers his disciples to look with fresh eyes on a practical absurdity. How to take a few loaves of bread and strips of fish and feed an entire region of people.

In this mutual ministry. In this ecosystem of grief and healing, sadness and joy, scarcity and abundance, food appears. Eternity pierces through the veil. The human and the divine begin to dance. And wonder of wonder there is enough. More than enough. Manna from heaven. Food brimming over baskets. God's provisions are universal.

This is Jesus' political and spiritual response to Herod's kingdom of violence and domination. Jesus invites the presence of God and in that sacred space their physical and spiritual needs are met. They are seen. They are restored. They are sent into the world to proclaim a new kind of kingdom. A kingdom that meets violence with compassion. A kingdom that is not defeated by the fear of scarcity but transforms it into superabundance.

Returning to our soccer game. The week before the kids and parents had felt defeated by a joyless game. The next week, sure enough, we played the same team and the same scenario began to unfold. But this time, just after the game had begun, our coach walked over to the other coach and sued for peace.

He called our players together and told them, he didn't know what the other team would do, but, no matter what, he said, "I want you guys to have fun out there. Encourage each other, encourage the other team. Don't hold back, play hard!" After a few minutes of anxiety, fun returned. These reassuring words proved antiviral. The kids looked like they had been freed.

They slowly stopped worrying about whether the other team was strictly following the rules and began to focus on their own play, on what was going right. Not only did they leave the game with their hearts uplifted, they played better. (And, even though no one was keeping score, we won!)

God's kingdom is a kingdom that meets dominance with compassion. A kingdom that is not defeated by the fear of scarcity but transforms it into superabundance.

Even today there are multitudes of people suffering from discrimination and hunger. But even today there is enough. There are enough resources for every child of God to live in dignity, if we but have the courage to see it. To trust one another. To give without sparing.

Even today there is state violence in the streets. At the end of Jesus' journey, he himself takes to those streets, the streets of Jerusalem, and directly confronts the kingdoms of religious and political domination. He does not look away. And like John he suffers a murderous fate.

But today. Today in a deserted place in the hills of Galilee, Jesus confronts Herod's kingdom by pulling the people of God together and reminding them of their true home. A home built by compassion and mercy and love. We are a people defined by love. We will not be overcome by the kingdom of violence.

As the life of John Lewis so powerfully testifies, we can see through that kingdom, confront it, and rest in the eternal knowledge that the power and love of God will in the end prevail. *Amen.*