

March 8, 2020

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Today I'm going to be using the phrase "the kingdom of God" a few times, and I think it's important I explain what I mean by that right off the bat. Because it's one of those phrases that means a few *different* things, and it's also one of those religious-isms that we say in church all the time but that someone just walking in off the street may not know what we mean by it. Like "narthex" or "lent" or "salvation."

When the Bible, or a minister, says "the kingdom of God" ...just like the word "pool" there's a couple of different things it could mean. I'll let you think about that one for a second.

When I say the word "pool," who immediately thinks about a swimming pool? Raise your hands. And who thinks about... a little pool of water in the forest? It means that too. And who thought about the *game* with long sticks and the balls with numbers on them? Sorry, "*billiards*."

At some points, when people are talking about the "kingdom of God," they're talking specifically about Heaven—the concept of an afterlife paradise ruled over by God that everybody wants to get to because they're scared of the alternative. I'm not going to be talking *about* Heaven today, both because I've never *been* there, and because there's *another* meaning for this phrase that has

bearing on something I think God has been trying to get us to see here on Earth.

See, “the kingdom of God” also refers to something God has been trying to *make* of this world since it was born.

I’m not talking “kingdom” in the classic sense of the word: where some fancy *man* with the right family name sits on a throne, demands tribute, and rules the powerless populous from on high without a care in the world for their struggles or well-being. “Kingdom” is just the *limited* word I’m stuck with.

When I’m talking about the “kingdom of God” today, what I’m talking about comes straight from “The Lord’s Prayer,” which we read together earlier in the service, and it’s printed in bold in your worship bulletins for your convenience. It’s a prayer drawn from the Bible, taught to us in one form or another by Jesus Christ himself. And right near the beginning, we see the phrase: “Thy kingdom come.”

Now in English we put a period right there. Punctuation in Biblical languages was a little different ballgame back then, and the punctuation we use *now* is based in *part* on an educated... guessing game. It might actually clarify what’s going *on* there a little *more* to put a *colon* instead of a period. Try to read it that way. Thy kingdom come, *colon*, thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven. This isn’t a list of two separate things we want: God’s kingdom to come, and then also for God’s will to be done. The second part is describing the first! We

will know God's kingdom has *come* when God's will is being done on Earth as it is in heaven.

The problem is, we don't *know* what that *looks* like! We might *think* we know what God's will is... but, *thinking* we know what "God's will" is has caused... a lot of *trouble* throughout history. Right?

But as Christians, disciples—*followers* of Christ and the *way* of Christ—we have a responsibility to try to discern God's will and *live* by it. To not only *hope* for the kingdom of God and just sit back on our laurels until it *happens*, but to let God work *through* us *to*—as Reverend Estelle says almost every Sunday—bring Heaven to Earth.

But how do we do that? Especially if we don't know how to *see* it?

It's kinda like the situation Nicodemus found himself in in our reading for today. Nicodemus was a Pharisee—a well-educated man from a noble family who had spent his life studying Scripture and not only that, interpreting and *extracting* laws and ways of life from the words of God. The Pharisees' whole thing was being able to understand what God *meant* when God said x, y, or z, and how that is *supposed* to apply to our daily lives.

As far as Nicodemus knew—and he'd spent his whole life building up the kind of knowledge and practice it takes to do his job—he understood the

way the world works. He knew *how* it worked, how it was *supposed* to work, and what we could *do* and *couldn't* do.

So when he heard about this random guy named Jesus who was walking around the region healing the sick, feeding the poor, uplifting the oppressed, and changing people's lives in truly miraculous ways, he knew that wasn't the way things normally worked. You can't just *touch* someone and instantly cure the coronavirus. You can't feed five thousand people with only five loaves of bread. It'd be pretty surprising if someone was just walking down York Street *doing* all those things, right? It'd kind of crash into our understanding of the way the world works.

Nicodemus knew, then, that this had to come from God. He didn't understand *how*, because it didn't match up with the way he *saw* the world after a lifetime of study and experience... which is why he came to Jesus. To try to understand.

And Jesus tells him: you *can't* understand it. Not the way you are *now*. He says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

"Born from above." Now there's another one of those religious-isms. A phrase that not everybody on the street knows what it means, *and* a phrase that actually means more than one thing. The Hebrew word *and* the Greek word for this phrase has *three* explicit meanings taken three very different ways. We don't

really have a word in English that matches that, so different translations of the Bible try to render it different ways.

There's "born from the *beginning*, completely radically," there's "born *again*, as in *for the second time*," and then there's "born from *above* or *God*." Some versions of the Bible try to wrap all three meanings up into the English phrase "born anew." Now to define *that* I'm gonna read for you a sentence—it isn't mine, I read it in a book—but it might help you get a sense of the weight of what Jesus was trying to say to Nicodemus. And to us too.

"To be born anew is to **undergo such a radical change** that it is like a new birth; it is to have **something happen to the soul** which can only be described as being born all over again; and the whole process **is not a human achievement**, because it comes from the **grace and power of God**." All three meanings wrapped up into one... *heavy* package.

And Nicodemus could see how heavy it *was*. All Nicodemus wanted to *know* was what God was up to, and Jesus basically said: you'll never be able to see what God is up to until you undergo a change *within yourself* that is so *radical*, so *fundamental*, so *impossible to do without God*... that it's like rebirth.

Nicodemus is a great example of a person who—like a lot of us—figures he understands how the world works. Maybe even understands how the world

should work. It's election season, and every one of us has an opinion on the state of the world and the way we think things *should be*.

But Jesus says we can't enter the kingdom of God—we can't *see* God's will for heaven *or* Earth, and we can't be *part* of *doing* that will—unless we are born anew, through the Spirit of God. What God *wants* for this world, and what God has wanted each one of us to be a *part* of since the day we were born, isn't something we can see... the way we are now.

I think if we really were born anew the way Jesus is describing, it would be like... waking up and suddenly being able to see the wind. Not just the leaves moving or sailboats *catching* the wind, but actually seeing the air molecules themselves. Like we're waking up to a world that's been there all along that we were just blind to.

Think about a fish in a little pool of water. Yeah, I brought back the “pool” thing. This shallow little pool is the fish's whole world, and everything the fish sees and understands is *this*, from the bottom of the pool to the top. And the only experience this fish has of the thing called a *human* is when a human comes walking through the woods and happens to step through the pool. To that fish, it's very clear—*obvious*, really—what a human is. Hold on a sec. A *human*, is *this* [holds up shoe]. For those of you in the cheap seats, I'm holding up my shoe. As far as that fish knows, *this* is a human.

But say that fish was to be born anew in the way Jesus is talking about. Imagine that human, instead of walking off into the forest, was to get a Ziploc bag, and catch the little fish and lift it out of the pool, slowly enough that the fish could watch as it was lifted out of the world it knew. From this new vantage point, the fish could watch as shoe goes up to leg, goes up to torso, goes up to face. All of a sudden, the fish realizes that what it *thought* it knew about what a human was was only the tip of the iceberg, and there was a lot more going on that it just couldn't see.

So too should it be with *us*. What we think we know about the world, what we think we know about God's will, God's kingdom, heck God's very *nature* is just *this*. No more than a boot that comes out of nowhere and disturbs the pool for a bit before disappearing again. Our responsibility as people of faith is to tear down our preconceptions about the way the world is supposed to work, let the Spirit *in*, and let it change our entire perception of *everything*.

What each of us should be doing, every day, is inviting the Spirit of God to work a fundamental transformation within us. And if we *work* at that kind of transformation, every day... it will change the way we look at the world, the way we look at ourselves and other people, and the way we look at God's kingdom.

It takes a *lifetime* to be able to be born anew like that, and to be honest, it really isn't a one-time thing. It's easy for the fish to fall back into its pool... and even if it doesn't, seeing *one* human is only the *start* of what's out there to see.

So let's do what Nicodemus thought was impossible. Let's strive every day to let the Spirit of God work within us, and transform ourselves from the inside out—born *anew*. Because only then will we be able to see the kingdom of God Jesus has been trying to show us all along.

Thy very same kingdom we have been praying to come every Sunday... it's out there. And the *work* of that kingdom... starts in here. Amen.