

Strive for the Kingdom

Luke 12:22-34

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One day, Jesus took a look around and noticed his disciples were investing their energy in lots of things that mattered such as what they would eat and what they would wear, but they seemed to be spending precious little energy on the things that mattered, ultimately, things of the spirit, things that can't be measured in calories or sizes, things that have no monetary value, things that pertain to the soul. He sat everyone down and spoke kindly to them: 'God knows you need food and clothing. God also knows life is more than these.' Then he said, 'Strive for the Kingdom, and you'll find that these other matters of food and clothing will take care of themselves. Strive for the Kingdom.' So, this sermon is about striving for the Kingdom, the Kingdom of God.

Most of the parables spoken by Jesus can be described as parables of the Kingdom. That is to say, each of the parables is meant to reveal life as God hopes for it to be lived on earth. Parables are like a window. We look intently through these windows and we begin to see God's priorities. A paraphrase might be: get your priorities straight and don't sweat the small stuff.

Most of us know and love the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In this parable, we see that in the Kingdom of God, our neighbor is anyone who might need a helping hand, anyone! Our neighbor is the one in the community who often feels left out. Our neighbor is the one who everyone else picks on. Our neighbor is the one we choose to ignore and hope will disappear. Our neighbor is the one who speaks with a different accent or wears a different color skin or eats things that aren't served at McDonald's. To strive for the Kingdom is to embrace these different ones as our true neighbors.

They are the ones God has given us to befriend. And when we make this a priority, befriending the ones who aren't exactly in our own clique, the other stuff: what we'll eat and what we'll wear will fall into place.

Most of us know and love the Parable of the Prodigal Son. You know the one...a man has two sons...one squanders his share of the inheritance and one stays home on the farm. In this parable, we see that the willingness to forgive trumps everything else. The older brother who stayed at home and obeyed his parents argues his case mightily, that he deserves more, and I suppose he has a point; but forgiveness matters more than fairness. The parent has every right to punish the wayward child, every right to ground the boy, take away his allowance for 6 months, make him wait until he's 21 until he can get his driver's license. But the parent's desire to forgive and to reconcile and to restore trumps all of those other choices. When people of faith allow themselves to forgive and to be forgiven, the Kingdom of God thrives! To strive for the Kingdom is to give forgiveness a chance to work its power. I can tell you I am never more alive than when I am speaking those blessed words, 'I forgive you,' or those even more blessed words, 'can you forgive me?' It's when we strive for the Kingdom that peace has a chance!

I hope we all know and love the parable that describes the Kingdom of God as yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. Can you picture her? Stirring yeast into the flour, kneading the dough? Can you picture the bread dough rising? Can you catch a whiff of it? In this parable, we see that the yeast is a symbol for faith, and that when even one woman lives by faith, the whole loaf; that is, the whole community is blessed; the whole community arises; the whole community comes to life; the whole community prospers.

When one woman strives for the Kingdom, lives by faith; lights come on in every darkness; doors open in every prison; music is heard in every treatment center; the table is spread in every soup kitchen. To strive for the Kingdom is to trust that every time I take a leap of faith, I am being used as a vessel of God's steadfast love. To strive for the Kingdom is to have a yeasty faith, a faith that is not afraid of daunting odds.

Last Sunday, at the 10:30 service, I caught a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. It occurred during the organ postlude. While most of us were sitting listening to the sacred melody flowing down from the organ console in the loft, a little girl, maybe four or five years old, sitting all the way in the back, slipped out of the pew, out of her parents' jurisdiction, and ran as fast as I've seen anyone run in a long time, up this north aisle, around the front, where she threw herself into the waiting embrace of her friend, another four or five year old girl. They hugged and they smiled and they giggled. The whole scene lasted maybe 30 seconds. For those of us who witnessed the dash and the embrace, it was the best thing that happened in the whole hour. Right before our eyes, the Kingdom of God was revealed to us. Unbridled love. Warm friendship. Neighbor to neighbor. Pure joy. There they were: two nursery school aged girls striving for the Kingdom; a living parable; making the rest of us glad, so glad, to be alive, glad to know that love still rules!

Sisters and brothers, strive for the Kingdom and all the other things will be yours as well. In the greatest of hope, Amen.