***GREAT ENDS: SHOW THE WORLD!***

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Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:10-25 and Luke 13:18-21; 17:20-21

Over the past six weeks in this sermon series we have considered five of the Great Ends of the Church identified by our Presbyterian ancestors:

* The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind
* The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God
* The maintenance of divine worship
* The preservation of truth and
* The promotion of social righteousness

There is no ranking among these as to which is the most or least important. But if there was a ranking of the most difficult to accomplish, at the top of the list might be the last of the Great Ends, the one we consider today:

***The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world***

That Great End suggests that when the world looks at us – at the church – they should see something of the Kingdom of Heaven. When they see how we act and live and love, they should say, “Ah, so that is what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like!” That is the goal – and it is hard!

It is hard because being the church usually means being counter-cultural. It means doing what Jesus would do, and as we know from our Bibles, what he did led him to the cross. As Reinhold Niebuhr writes of Jesus, “How much easier it is to adore an ideal character than to emulate it.”[[1]](#endnote-1) How much easier it is to talk about Jesus and sing songs about how Jesus loves me and to pray to Jesus than it is to follow Jesus! How much easier it is to tell others what they should do than it is to do those things ourselves! How much easier it is to make faith something you say and not something you do. Jesus warns us, “If you would be my disciple, then deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow me.” We can talk about being disciples, wear a cross around our necks, look up at the cross and sing, “In the cross of Christ I glory”, but it is a hard thing to pick up the cross and bear it day after day in order to follow where Jesus leads.

Our calling, our mission, our duty is to show the world what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like, and until God’s will is done here on earth as it is in heaven that means bearing the cross. For truth be known, the world does not really want to see the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. What the world wants to see is a kingdom of its own making here and the promise of a heavenly kingdom somewhere else after we die. But as Jesus told the Pharisees, “The Kingdom is among you.” It is already here – among us – not somewhere else waiting for us. As Tom Wright writes:

*The “kingdom of heaven” is not about people going to heaven. It is about the rule of heaven coming to earth.*”[[2]](#endnote-2)

It is about the here and now! It is not about replacing earthly kingdoms with another kingdom called *Christian* which shares the same earthly values as the kingdoms before it; it is about a different kind of a kingdom. For almost 1700 years, since the days of Constantine, the Christian religion has had favored status in the Western World and has been entwined with governments from the Holy Roman Empire to modern America. But that is not to say that any of those societies has looked much like the Kingdom of Heaven. Listen again to Tom Wright:

*The establishment of God’s kingdom means the dethroning of the world’s kingdoms, not in order to replace them with another one of basically the same sort (one that makes its way through superior force of arms), but in order to replace it with one whose power is the power of the servant and whose strength is the strength of love.”* [[3]](#endnote-3)

Jesus says, “My kingdom is not of this world.” While some want to suggest that he is speaking of some unearthly kingdom up in the clouds among the angels, it is in fact a warning that his kingdom is nothing like any earthly kingdom, for it is a kingdom built not upon power or violence, but upon humility and servanthood and love. It is not a future kingdom that exists in some unearthly heaven among the angels, but a kingdom that is among us and with us and in us, for that is what he said! We are called to live in that realm now:

to live as Jesus calls us to live,

and to love as Jesus calls us to love,

and to forgive as Jesus calls us to forgive,

and to serve as Jesus calls us to serve.

And if we do, then we will show the world what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like; it is a beautiful thing, but it makes little sense to the world.

It was no different in Paul’s day. In writing to the Corinthians he noted that the message of the cross is foolishness to the world. The world finds no power in weakness, no triumph in a crucifixion, no wealth in poverty, no king in a servant who consorts with the dregs of society and washes the feet of the poor. But Paul contends that the world’s wisdom is foolishness; God’s foolishness is wiser than the world’s wisdom and God’s weakness is stronger than any human strength.

The Kingdom of Heaven is something distinctly different from what we have known, something founded not upon the rule of law but upon the rule of love, a kingdom whose manifesto is laid out in those beatitudes that bless the very people the world considers cursed: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. “Blessed are they!” says Jesus, “Theirs is the kingdom of God!” How then do we show such a kingdom to the world? What does it look like?

It looks like the Emmanuel African American Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC in the aftermath of the horrific shooting of nine people in a Bible study there. Instead of spewing hate and demanding revenge for their losses, the families of the victims acknowledged their pain, but offered forgiveness and prayers for the victim. As the sister of one of the victims, DePayne Middleton-Doctor, said at the arraignment of the shooter, “We are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul.” It looks like the Amish families of the children who were killed in a Lancaster County schoolhouse some years ago as they attended the funeral of the man who killed their children and offered condolences to his family, saying, “They have suffered a loss as well.” Jesus says, “Forgive as you have been forgiven, not seven times, but seventy times seven.” Such is the Kingdom of Heaven!

The Kingdom looks like the boxes of dishes and towels, pots and pans, linens and appliances that collected outside the church office this week for a total stranger who was in need of furnishing an apartment as he moved out of a nursing home with no family support and little funds. It looks like our youth crawling under a trailer in southwest Virginia to staple insulation in place for another total stranger. For Jesus says, “As you do for the least of these, so you do for me.”

The Kingdom looks like the embrace of Ellen Mullins and her family following Bob’s death, and the embrace of Cassy and Craig Whitacre following the baptism of little Faith. It looks like the Covenant member who said of another member, “How can I love someone so much with whom I disagree on practically everything.” It looks like a family in which no one is a stranger, for all are brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Kingdom of Heaven looks like the world the way it is supposed to be – a world in which love triumphs over hate, a world in which people may disagree but love one another through the disagreement, a world in which forgiveness is freely given because God freely forgive us, a world in which everyone is welcomed because everyone is a precious child of God, a world in which following Jesus is more important than anything else! It is a Kingdom that is characterized by hope and joy even in the face of death. It is a Kingdom that we are called to show the world! But each time that we disagree disagreeably

or turn our backs on neighbors in need

or gossip or whine

or try to bend God’s will to fit our stubborn wills

or fail to welcome the stranger in our midst

or seek war more ardently than we seek peace

or abuse the world entrusted to our care for selfish purposes

or think more highly of ourselves than of others

or dare to think we are wiser than God in knowing what we need,

we distort the Kingdom of Heaven in our midst and reinforce the impression that the church is no different from the rest of the sinful world and has nothing more to offer.

But if we hear what Jesus says and dare to live into his vision for our lives and our life together, then the world may catch a glimpse of God’s Kingdom among us. For, our lives and our life together say something about what it is to be living in the Kingdom of Heaven. What we are called to say is this: Repent, believe the good news and rejoice always! What we are called to do is this: love God and one another. And who we are called to be is this: the people of God living under the reign of God in the Kingdom of God. What does that kingdom look like? It looks like faithful disciples facing the challenges of each new day with hope in God’s promises for us, with confidence in God’s presence with us, and with joy in God’s Kingdom among us! If we do that, then the Kingdom of Heaven may look a little like us –like you and me – and that is something we can show the world! AMEN

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 1929, 1957, 1980, p.90 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. N.T. Wright, *How God Became King*, HarperOne: New York, 2012, p.43 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. N.T. Wright, *How God Became King*, HarperOne: New York, 2012, p.205 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)