***What is the Kingdom of God Like?***

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Text: Luke 13:10-21

Are you a risk-taker, or do you prefer to play it safe? In one of the Washington Nationals’ baseball games this week, F. P. Santangelo recalled walking across a bridge in Pittsburgh near the ballpark and meeting a guy who was setting up fireworks for after the game; he had powder and shells and fuses all around him – and a cigarette dangling from his mouth! F. P. said he could not get off the bridge fast enough! Crystal Gosnell took a different kind of risk, though perhaps not much less dangerous. She left her teaching position here in Staunton to go to Nigeria, a nation wracked by violence, to teach in an orphanage. It was a risk she took in response to God’s call.

Sixty years ago some folks on the north end of Staunton took a risk of their own, though decidedly less dangerous than setting up fireworks while smoking or traveling to Nigeria! They decided that there should be a Presbyterian Church in their new neighborhood on this north side of Staunton. There were a couple of Presbyterian churches downtown, and in this neighborhood the Lutherans and Brethren had recently planted churches of their own, but there was no Presbyterian presence to do things decently and in order in this part of town. So those folks – including some of you – went door to door to invite neighbors to join them in planting a Presbyterian church. Thus was born this Covenant community that first met in an auto body shop on North Augusta Street in 1959. It was known as the Body and Soul Shop: auto body work downstairs, soul work upstairs. Four years later they moved to these holy grounds at 2001 North Coalter Street. It was an act of faith that was not without risk, but they took the chance and invested their time, talents, and monies to make that vision, God’s vision for them, a reality. Sixty years later, here we are!

In choosing to be Presbyterians, the charter members of this church embraced a family of faith that believes that one of the Great Ends of the Church is this: *The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World*, which is to say that our lives and life together as a Covenant community should be a shining example of what God’s Kingdom is like. Across sixty years that has been our charge and our challenge. What then is the Kingdom of God like?

The words we just sang in the last stanza of Yulee’s hymn offer one expression of our continuing attempt to live into that charge:

*Each in our way, we creatures sing our never-ending praise:*

*Birds warble carols on the wing, and choirs their anthems raise.*

*So may our lives be one great song, resounding in this place,*

*Reflecting, echoing along the music of your grace.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Our lives and life together are full of the music of God’s grace resounding in this place across the years! It is the music of beautiful anthems sung by choirs of adults and children; it is the melodies of instruments – bells and bongos, organ and oboe, piano and pipes. And it is the joyful noise of the rest of us. But the music of God’s grace is also carried along in our life together without songs or melody, in grace-filled moments of learning and fellowship and service side by side. It is the music of God’s grace carried to Mexico on mission trips and to the Gulf Coast for disaster relief and to Trinity Church to serve meals in their soup kitchen. It is the music of God’s grace sung by preschool teachers providing comfort amid the tears of new parents – and some students – as a new year began this week. It is God’s grace, God’s praise, God’s presence in and through our lives that resounds in this place!

In the miraculous healing of the woman whose back was bent for eighteen years, Luke tells us that upon being healed, the woman stood up straight and began to praise God. She didn’t run to tell her friends and family; she didn’t praise Jesus who touched her. She praised God, for in Jesus’ touch she recognized the power of God at work through him. The crowd joined in the praise. As Luke tells it, “The entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things Jesus was doing.”

Praise and rejoicing are our responses to all that God has done for us. It has been the response of God’s people in this Covenant family for sixty years, because we have so much for which to be thankful, so much to celebrate in what God has done, is doing, and will yet do in us, through us, and when necessary, despite! We creatures sing our never-ending praise because the wonderful things God is doing never end. Here at Covenant it started sixty years ago, and it has never stopped. We trust that God will be doing even more wonderful things in this place sixty years from now! Do you recognize all the amazing things God has done and is doing among us?

I remember Joan Sayers telling us some years ago that a big part of the journey of faith is just showing up and seeing what God will do. Just showing up for worship, for Bible Study, for fellowship events, for Outreach projects, and letting God take it from there – that is how faith is nurtured in surprising ways. Showing up is all the crippled woman did; she showed up at the synagogue to worship God, and Jesus took it from there. He healed her, not because she was so good or faithful or righteous, but because God is all of those things and more. Because she showed up, she experienced God’s healing touch, and so praised the Lord. Because the crowd was there to see it all, they rejoiced and praised the Lord. Do you “show up” to experience the wonderful things God is doing among us – or are you busy with other things? Do you echo the music of God’s grace in your life – or are you singing another tune, like “*Lookin’ for Love in all the Wrong Places*” or “*I’ve Got Friends in Low Places*”?

God blesses us every day, sometimes in amazing ways, yet gratitude flows too reluctantly from our lips, praise is raised in relieved murmurs instead of joyful songs, and some of our offerings look more like tips to the divine server than tangible expressions of gratitude to God. It is as if we expect to hear, “Hi, my name is God and I’ll be your server today,” instead of “if you would be my disciple, then deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.” We forget that God’s faithfulness is new each and every day. A friend in Richmond began each day of his 80+ years by saying, “Good morning, Lord!” He knew God was with him and had blessed him even before his feet hit the floor to start the day. That alone is reason to rejoice! As disciples we are called to rejoice with those who rejoice and to mourn with those who mourn, but in all things to give thanks to God for what God is doing in our midst! Do you do that?

The leader in the synagogue didn’t. You know this guy! He is the one who notes that a child was squirming in the pew and dropped her pencils, the bulletin wasn’t folded quite straight, and my stole is slightly askew, but he can’t tell you what the sermon was about. He is the one who has the rules engraved on his heart, but not the law of love. Instead of rejoicing in the healing of the bent woman and shouting, “Praise the Lord!” he was indignant that Jesus would heal on the Sabbath. He was so intent on protecting the Sabbath for God that he was oblivious to the work God was doing right under his nose. He thought Sabbath was about keeping rules, but the Sabbath is really about accepting a gift of grace from God and reflecting the music of God’s grace to the world. Jesus let him know that when God does what God does, whenever God does it, it is cause for rejoicing – even on the Sabbath. The Law allowed an animal to be untied and led to drink on the Sabbath; if the leader would do that for a donkey, how could he complain about Jesus untying the bonds that had bent that woman for eighteen years! The Law could not do less for the person than for the animal, and he, a leader of the synagogue, should have known that above all others.

Across these sixty years some of the rules have changed here. There was a time when all the men wore suits and the women wore hats, but not so much anymore. Today our music includes jazz and folk tunes! We gather at this table to share the Lord’s Supper, not just once a quarter, but every month at 10:30 and every week at our early service. We sing a host of hymns that didn’t even exist in 1959! Our Session has included not just men, but women, youth, gay folks, and even former Methodists! We have been blessed by women preachers and pastors and by young ushers. We have plumbed-in coffee makers in the breezeway and Great Hall, covered coffee cups that find their way into classrooms and the sanctuary, and we drink a fair trade coffee called *Love Buzz.* How times have changed! Sometimes rules and traditions need to bend so that God can do the new things God will do. Even Presbyterians who like things to be decent and in order may find reason to rejoice in what God is doing in the midst of less decent and orderly things in our midst!

This is what the kingdom of God is like, says Jesus. The Kingdom of God is about the new things God is doing! It is about big things like Resurrection, but it is also about the little things – the healing of a bent woman on the Sabbath, the planting of a mustard seed, a pinch of yeast in baking, the planting of a church – it is about little things that grow to be great things! That is our history, not only here at Covenant, but across 2,000 years! The Kingdom of God was present in the healing of a bent woman on a Sabbath’s day, and the Kingdom is present in the welcoming of a child with dripping hands at this font. It is present in Jesus’ telling of parables and in our words of encouragement to someone who is down and out. It is present in Jesus’ welcome of Zacchaeus and in our welcome of a stranger. It is present in the feeding of the 5,000 and in our feeding of the hungry. Wherever you find a patient ear, a tender touch, a smile, a touch of grace – the little things that grow from the heart – you will find the Kingdom of God.

Here at Covenant across sixty years we have been blessed to experience the Kingdom of God in our midst and challenged to exhibit that Kingdom to the world. That is what we have tried to do, for God does amazing things among us – great and small! So it has been! So it is now! And so it will be – as the music of God’s grace continues to resound in our lives and in this place in the sixty years to come! Amen

1. Jane Parker Huber, *Creative and Creating God*, 1996 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)