

“Heaven on Earth”

1 Samuel 8:1-9, Romans 8:31-39;
Colossians 1:9-14; Luke 17:20-21;
John 3:1-12

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Throughout this fall we've been thinking about our identity, as we've gone through various ways we try to work at discovering who we are. I suggested that the main way we really find our identity is encountering Christ, and that it is in him we begin to understand a bit about who we are. Through him, we begin to recognize that perhaps we do so not only by looking inward but by looking outward, and we see that he calls us also to notice those around us. We have an identity not only as who each of us is as a single person, but as a family of faith, a part of a community. We started locally, talking about our individual relationships, our communal relationships, and then last week we thought about how we're part of much larger things: we're part of a community, Moscow; we're part of a state; we're part of a nation; we're part of a globe. And in that, there is particular authority that God has given us to use, making it possible for us to get along together, to try to work things out. I suggested that as Paul was speaking, he gave some boundaries to that. One of the boundaries he gave was that that authority should be there to enable us to do what is good. That's enough to keep us going a long time, if we truly tried to figure that out.

Jesus also, I think, gave us another way of looking at a boundary. He said “Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's.” So as we begin to think about what that means, we recognize that there is another boundary on human authority, the authority of God. All authority is under God's authority, all rule is under God's rule. We live in the kingdom of God in that respect. After all, God is creator.

So how do we think about that huge thing we call the kingdom of God? We can't get much bigger than the kingdom of God. We think about God as creating us, earth, and everything on it. It's always a little astounding to me. If you're sitting at the back of the room, I bet you can't read what's on this globe I'm holding, and even this distance is miniscule in terms of the size of the universe. That's incredible. I don't know if you can even see where Idaho is. When I think about the nature of God's kingdom, that he is creator, that creation is so huge, and yet there is some way in which he knows this little spot, and each of the people here. It says in scripture he knows the hairs on our head. All I'm trying to say is that it's just beyond me how that happens, how that works. How it is that God created all that is and still knows every one of us and knows us so well as to know the hairs on our heads? It's incredible.

So when Jesus is inviting us to be part of the kingdom of God, is he saying we're all of a sudden going to be able to see all that? All of a sudden we're going to perceive space and distance? I don't think so. What God seems to have done, instead of inviting us into this huge space, is that he seems to have come down into our space. When Jesus comes to be among us, that incredibly huge God comes into our experience in a way that we can understand.

And so, I begin to wonder what it means when he says the kingdom of God is among us. You might read that in different versions, sometimes it says “The kingdom of God is within us.” I’m a little worried about that translation because the “you” there is plural. So when it’s saying “within you,” it means us as a group. It doesn’t mean it’s just within my heart, not to say that Christ can’t dwell there, but he’s talking about the way the kingdom is within *us*, among us, present. So we know this huge creation is with us, but he doesn’t talk about that that much. So when he’s inviting us into the kingdom of God, what is he inviting us in to see? When it’s among us, how is it among us? Jesus says it’s not completely simple—you have to be born again. That’s just one way he describes that change, born again, new life. It’s described as taking off a cloak and putting on a new one, as being washed clean—there’s some way in which we’re going from one place or set of knowledge to a new one.

I think about what it’s like to have a baby born. First of all, it’s pretty incredible to see that new life and to wonder at it, and then to think about the change that has happened for that baby. Sometimes we even say things like, “well, we weren’t sure it wanted to come out, because it was, you know, nice and cozy in there.” And now, it’s entered into this new world. All kinds of new things happened. It’s breathing in a new way. So when Jesus talks about being born again, he’s talking about that kind of thing. A new thing, a new way of breathing in, and it works through what God does with us in Christ, through this Spirit, he says, that blows wherever it will. It’s so interesting that right after he’s talking about this birth he’s talking about the wind blowing wherever it wants to. We are entering into something of God that we don’t quite understand, but it blows wherever it will and it’s going to take us with it. Still, what is that like? What is it?

Well, one way that it is described over and over again for us is realization that God’s love comes to earth in Christ, and is given to us. There’s that description in Romans: “Nothing can separate us from the Love of God.” Jesus invites us to love God and neighbor. When we’re invited into God’s kingdom, how do we begin to see that? What does he ask us to see? I think the very first thing he asks us to see is that he loves us. No matter who we are, how we are, what we are, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. That’s entering in—when we acknowledge that love, it’s entering in to the kingdom. It’s a beginning to see the realm of God. It’s allowing Jesus to move us away from earthly human limits into the grand kingdom of God..

There were lots of ways after I was a baby that things began to happen in my life. I was born in a particular place at a particular time. I was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1959, and we could look back on what happened on that day; all kinds of things going around that time. That was my life. Each baby is born into a particular life. It makes a difference in our experience of life: if I were born in New York City vs. that little town in Nebraska, or in rural Idaho, or in Guatemala, or on the sands of the Sahara. It matters, doesn’t it? Each of us will develop differently depending on who we’re born to, where we’re born, the kind of culture we’re in. So I can give you a little description of one of the things that came about because of the culture I grew up in. I grew up in the Midwest, and so there’s a particular way that we sometimes do things. As I grew up, I felt that even if something was really great, you don’t say that. If it was really good, it

was “not bad.” There’s a way in which because of the culture I grew up in, I became unable to express fully the joy of life. And that’s just a simple example of a way a little child grows up to enter into the containments of our world, the ways we get bound up. And that doesn’t hold a candle to that character study that’s been on TV we call *Breaking Bad*, which describes really going down the wrong path and becoming bound by it.

There are all kinds of ways that we can, and do, get tied up and caught up in the ways of the world. And I think, without Christ, we get bound up, one way or another. Whether we take on the expectation that we just need all kinds of things; or we put too much weight on our human relationships, thinking our salvation is there; or we think we have to be successful and either are always despairing because we feel like we’re not, or we have the successes and think, “well, that wasn’t so big a deal, I have to find the next one.” We get bound up.

What Christ invites us to do is to see that God loves us. Our value isn’t dependent on how much stuff we have, who likes us, or who doesn’t. It’s not about how successful I am. It’s that I’m a child of God, and as insignificant as I can feel when I think about how big this entire universe is, God loves each of us. And it is that love that lets us know we’re valued. In that love we’re invited into that kingdom. I think the way that we begin to know God’s kingdom among us is in the sharing of that love. It’s as we accept that love and begin to share it.

In C. S. Lewis’s book *The Last Battle* the children who are the main heroes realize that now they’re going on into heaven, and they keep saying, “We need to go further in, and farther up.” It feels like that’s exactly what Christ is inviting us to do as we encounter the love of God and begin to share it: it’s an invitation to go further in and farther up, to live into that life of love. And when we do it, every now and then there are moments when you share something with someone or you share your life together, you share a moment—and it’s like heaven on earth. It’s those moments when the window seems to open and it’s like we’re there. Jesus said God’s kingdom is among us. We’re invited to recognize it, to be born into it, to enter that new life and to share it together and to find that wonder. A little heaven on earth. Heaven knows we need it. We’re called. It’s here. Amen.

Prayer:

Lord, it’s pretty clear to me that I don’t understand all of who you are. I can’t understand the fullness of the space we live in; I don’t even understand the ups and downs of daily life sometimes. Yet it is clear to me that your spirit is among us, that you do invite us to know the wonder of your grace, the goodness of your love, and the hope it give us. And through sharing our lives together and sharing that love you’ve given us, you invite us into a kingdom, a place that frees us. And we see a little, we have a foretaste of that heaven on earth. We thank you for it and ask that we might continue to go further in and farther up. Amen.