

“The Kingdom is Good News”
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Psalm 103; Isaiah 52:7-10;
Romans 14:13-19; Luke 8:1-10

Last week we talked about God as King, and how that sense of power is sometimes something we struggle with. We see power as corrupting, so we have to struggle with who is God. And yet we looked at the character of God and recognized that it is the character of God that comes out through that power, a character of God that invites us to make decisions and to be involved in what God is doing and to live our lives and show the wonder and grace of God. That kind of recognition of God's character and how it might be reflected in us gave a sense of joy at how God can be king and we might reflect some of God's goodness. So that sounds wonderful if we could just be that beautiful reflection of God in the world and be the Kingdom of God.

Yet, we all know that it's not quite that easy. It is, perhaps, why Paul wants to give this little warning. It comes out of that conflict over people saying you shouldn't eat this or that because of how that food was used to begin with or where it comes from. It is that sense of judgment that he is warning us against. If we recognize that the kingdom of God can come out in our lives as we reflect the character of God, or as he says it here, it's about righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, how can that go wrong? It's wonderful stuff! And yet Paul is saying there is something we stumble over. It feels to me like it's that very first word that we tend to stumble over. If the kingdom of God is about righteousness and peace and joy, my sense is that we begin to stumble over that idea of righteousness.

What is righteousness? We begin to think of it as what is right, or being right. You know that I would like to go beyond that and talk about it as right relationships. I'll probably get back to that. But let's focus on the idea of rightness. If there is a right, then we can begin to define things. What do we do when we begin to define things? We define who is in and who is out, who is a winner and who is a loser, who is righteous and who is not. Why would Paul ask people to be careful about judgment? There is no human proclivity to judge, is there?

It feels like there is that stumbling block right there when we hit the word righteousness and begin to think about what it means to be right. And then it becomes that situation where it feels like it builds on itself. I think about this in terms of the way we can be judgmental or see something as not right and use that to determine a relationship.

I think about a little child doing something like playing the violin for the first time and being so proud that he can do it, and how hard it is for someone not to say, "Well, you could do something a little better." There's a sense of judgment in that. There's this moment when you see a child do something and they are so excited about it, and then they come to an adult and the adult doesn't share the excitement. Then what happens? There can be that sense of crestfallenness. That's the word that came to me.

Crestfallen. Perhaps that little child is in all of us throughout our lives as we experience our lives. Isn't there a sense of crestfallenness when we hear and feel that judgment, especially if we're trying to do something well or we think life is going all right? I wonder if that crestfallenness, if that sense of judgment, doesn't sometimes lead to a hardness of heart.

I don't usually think we should use scripture allegorically, but I'm going to anyway. If we begin to think about what Jesus is saying about the hard path, that sense of judgment can divide us and begin to make us hardened to others. It's like having that hard path in our lives. We can then begin to have a dry place, hard rock where it can lead us to shrivel up in some sense, or be choked out by a different perspective.

If you've ever spent time with someone who knows it all, someone who is sure that for everything you say they can say something that shows they know better and you are wrong, you have probably experience that kind of moment when you can begin to feel your heart harden. It's a shriveling kind of experience. You feel like any thought you might have is choked out. To some extent it feels to me that there's this force in our lives that suggests we all need to be right. If we all think we're right, how can we even relate? Well, keep calm, we have good news.

It does feel to me in the midst of our world and our struggles and the divisiveness that's around us, we need good news. I think that's what Jesus is bringing. It's interesting that he brings it in the form of a story, a parable. At the end, there's this saying that I have always struggled with—why would I say something that people don't perceive and don't understand? If they don't perceive and don't understand, they can't say they're right. A story that I can't understand right away and that I have to keep trying to struggle with engages me more, because if I think it's right then I can move on. Maybe there's some good news in that—it's not always straightforward because it engages us.

It engages us in a variety of ways. Jesus goes on to talk about the different kinds of ground and what they are like, but think a minute about the story itself. Here we have a person who's sowing seed. If you're a person in Palestine who knows you're going to be sowing seed and that what you get from that crop is all that matters I would be surprised if when you went out to sow, you were going to sow on the rocky ground, or you were going to sow on the path, or you were going to sow where you knew the thorns were going to grow up. But in this story, the sower seems to be sowing everywhere. What's that about? What's he sowing? What's the seed?

Earlier we heard Jesus proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God, and here he's telling a story about seed being thrown around. I think it shows that there is no lack of abundance of God's good news. Sometimes I think it's so everywhere, we don't even see it anymore. But that's another story.

Sometimes I've wondered about this parable in terms of whether I can change what kind of ground I am. As I was thinking about it, maybe it's that I have all these different

kinds of ground within me. I have had the experience of the crestfallen child. I have had the struggles with the thorns. I know dry places. But maybe there's a place in me that can still be prepared, that is good soil. Do you know what the struggle I have with that is? Sometimes that good soil looks pretty barren. It's a taking away of everything else for a bit so the seed can actually be sown and interact with the earth and grow.

So sometimes it feels like it's a little hard to want to go there. In fact, what it feels like is, as Jesus proclaims the good news of the kingdom there's some sense in which it's hard to believe. It's hard to believe there's good news, especially today. When I pick up a newspaper, sometimes it's hard to see the good news. If I look at national news, it's really hard to see good news. Where is that good news? Can it be in the very barren ground that we plow up together and make ready for that good news that it might grow? I think that both Paul and Jesus are telling us that in spite of a world that sometimes looks very different, there can be good news.

In not so many words, I have been told over and over again that I'm an idealist. There can't be a place of righteousness and peace and joy in this world. I think that's exactly what God is asking us to believe—that there can be. That it is true. That if we trust in him he will lead us there. The problem is that we don't trust in him. But if we trust in him, he can lead us there. We can turn and not judge. We can turn and do what brings peace. It's what Paul says: pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding.

It is as Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God, what he's proclaiming is that this can be true in our lives. Maybe it's not true all over the world at once. But the only way it's going to be is if it starts someplace, if it starts growing, if we prepare the ground, if we become that ground, not only personally, but together. Then we can truly pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Amen.