

“Kingdom Values”
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Amos 5:14-15, 21-24; Psalm 97;
Luke 10:25-37; John 12:20-26, 13:31-35

Oftentimes as we have gone through this series on the Kingdom of God, I have encouraged us to recognize how God is leading us into the kingdom and offering us the kingdom and in that, giving the king the right for judgment. It can almost feel like we aren't supposed to do any kind of judging, but I think there is a kind of judgment that we are to engage in. We are to judge what kind of values we should have. We have value judgments that we need to make. We need to think about where Jesus is leading us and what kind of values Jesus invites us to embody.

It's not that hard, I don't think, to notice values in scripture, and to notice there is some contrast with the world. I took a short cut and typed in “values of the kingdom” and what popped up was pretty clear. I think it did a reasonable job in identifying what the world's values tend to be: wealth, power, pleasure, revenge, fame, vanity, pride, and status. Now, do you think that those are scriptural values? No! It's pretty obvious. I could spend the whole time trying to convince you that the values of scripture really are things like kindness, respect, humility, honesty, generosity, self-control, and forgiveness. And I think scripture is pretty obvious about what the values are. As we live those out we are to promote good will among all people and peace, living together in harmony through kindness and respect and honor. I think those things are pretty obvious if we spend some time reading through scripture and looking at what Jesus taught us.

Last night I was talking about being pretty tired and how having two services in a weekend is a little bit of a struggle. My daughter-in-law told me, “Why don't you just read the sermon on the mount, because you get there the values of Jesus.” That's all we really need to do. So understanding the values of the kingdom isn't all that hard. What's harder is living them. The scripture said something about hating the world. The word there is more about renouncing it. It's renouncing the values that the world tries to inculcate into our lives, that it tries to get us to imbibe and become.

Now, we talk a lot about righteousness and justice. If you noticed, both in the Amos reading and in the Psalm that we used in the Call to Worship, really when we talk about righteousness and justice, we are talking about the same thing. Righteousness is just saying that we are living those values; they make up the character of who we are so that we live well together. Justice is saying that we are trying to put those values into practice. It's the action, the making things right, the way of thinking about things, the way of bringing respect and honor and kindness and grace to the world, to make it real, to make it part of our lives. So when we talk about righteousness and justice, that's really what it is. And in Psalm 97 it says the foundation of God's throne is righteousness and justice.

So all I'm trying to say is there's a real clarity from scripture about what's important. But it seems to be something we struggle with. And it's something we have struggled with for ages. Who were the first two children? Cain and Abel. What happened? One got jealous of the other and one killed the other. That's not really putting kingdom values into practice. It's the opposite. But it seems to me that it shows us the very struggle we have, that we struggle with how we get along because we get jealous of one another, we begin to want what the other has, we want to hold on to what we have and to be better than others. Let me suggest that the way that we tend to try to deal with those things is often with violence. In some of the worldly values there's almost the suggestion that the way to get what you want is through violence. That's an old, old story that has not gone away. It's with us still.

When Jesus was walking this earth, the chief priest's name was Caiaphas. He got pretty upset and felt like Jesus was messing things up. What was the way to solve that problem? I think it says it in Luke 11:49-50, "He must die for the sake of the nation." Violence to solve the problem. Has it changed in our time?

It feels to me like as we look at the world around us and the violence that still is happening, we have to acknowledge that it is a human problem and that one of the issues with it is that we look at violence as a solution to problems. Caiaphas said it—the solution to the problem is just to kill him. That's one end of the spectrum, where violence actually occurs. But how much of that is present in our own lives in other ways?

What is Jesus showing us when he confronts our world's violence through his own sacrifice, his own death? At least one thing he is showing us is that our world will sacrifice innocent victims to its desire to solve things through violence. It feels like in our own world today, we continue to sacrifice innocent victims to violence because there is this undercurrent of belief that violence solves problems or that violence is somehow glorified.

As I was thinking about this, I found that there is a direct connection between our media violence—that is, violence in TV and movies and video games—and actual violence. We have this undercurrent with us and it's been a problem for us forever. When I state it in that way, you may wonder what this has to do with stewardship. You may wonder about how to deal with such a global issue. It's an issue of humankind since our beginnings. And yet, what I would like to suggest is that if we think about the word "steward," it means somebody entrusted with caring for a superior's goods. So we are being entrusted with God's goods. And what are God's goods? I would say that the central good of God is the grace that God gives us in Jesus Christ. If we are entrusted with that good, what does it mean for us? We have to recognize the context in which we live, that there is a world that has different values and often tries to get to those goals through a way that is contrary to the will of God. I think violence is contrary to the will of God.

So if we're entrusted with caring for God's grace, what do we do? The thing that's a little surprising is that it starts with simple ways of caring. When Jesus is confronted by the violence of a lawyer trying to trip him up, and as the lawyer tries to justify himself, Jesus goes on to talk about what it means to simply care for another across boundaries, to not let boundaries create the violence of breaking relationships. Samaritans were not somebody the Jews should pay any attention to, and vice versa. And yet, the neighbor became simply the one who needed mercy and the one who gave mercy. It begins to work down right into our lives in a way that's fairly straightforward and simple.

I was listening to the radio yesterday, and they were talking about a study on how people get along. A predictor of how well a relationship will actually last is whether, when somebody says something like, "Well that's a really interesting thing," the other person doesn't go, "Ugh," or simply ignore it, but instead says, "Oh, it sounds like that's interesting to you. Can you tell me more about it?" That simple act of turning to the other and recognizing what's happening with them makes a difference. When Jesus says you have to lose your life to find life, it's about redirecting our attention from self to others. In those moments when we actually pay attention to each other, we are doing the opposite of violence. We are learning to love.

So you have these values that can be expressed as righteousness and justice. Or, if you want to narrow "to love one another as Jesus has loved us" down to one word, it would be "love." All that is easy to say, but in that daily living as we make our choices, do I choose the values of the world? Do I choose to glorify violence in some way? Do I choose to look and see the person next to me? Do I begin to really listen? Do we create that relationship that really is one where we care for each other? Do I notice my little ways of doing violence to someone else—disparaging them, dismissing them? Do we begin to create a different culture together? A kingdom that is Christ the Lord's?

I think we can begin to recognize that we have choices to make. Because we have a good, good Father it doesn't mean we are good, good children. We have to choose to be good. We have to choose to let God show us the way. We have to let those values become ours. We might have to renounce the world in some ways, but as we do that, as we—as Isaiah puts it so poetically—let justice roll down like waters and righteousness flow like a mighty stream in the simple actions of our daily lives we allow God's kingdom to come, God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.