

PASTOR'S NOTES. Kingdom thoughts, Part 1.

When Jesus began His ministry (when He was about 30 years old), He began with what appears to be a simple message:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Mark 1:14-15 (NRSV)

We repeat this message every time we say the Lord's Prayer. And yet, I wonder if we have ever grasped in 2000 years what Jesus was really trying to communicate. Have we really caught how different God's Kingdom is than any kingdom we know? And I don't just mean kingdoms like the Holy Roman Empire, but also "non-Kingdoms" like the United States?

From baptism of Jesus to when He rises from the dead, the gospels tell us that His teaching, His parables, His healings, His other miracles, and His suffering all point to this Kingdom of God.

But what has caught me over the last several weeks is the idea that the gospels are unfolding this idea in gradual steps, and the climax of His teaching is found in this passage, shortly before He goes to Jerusalem and suffers:

So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Mark 10:42-45 (NRSV)

This "Kingdom" is not about control, but service. When the Bible talks about God's love (agape), it means the kind of love that puts others first. So how do we live out that love? The one who lives out this love would be a willing slave or servant of others. This is what Jesus was doing in His healings and in His teachings. I believe that the lesson He spoke in Mark 10 was one He repeated many times. In Luke's gospel, the similar teaching is repeated at the Last Supper (Luke 22:24-27). For Matthew, it comes out while teaching at the Jerusalem temple in His last week:

"But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher (master), and you are all students (brothers). And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors (teachers, masters), for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Matthew 23:8-12 (NRSV)

I suspect the reason that Jesus is so hard on rabbis, fathers, and teachers is that these are unequal kind of relationships, but they are meant to be only temporary. My job as father or teacher is not to be always above others, but to bring them to my level (and maybe beyond). This Kingdom is finally realized when we see all of God's children as equally valuable, and when we reach that point where everyone is willing to live for others – to be that servant of all. When God chose to live among us as Jesus, He lived and died as the servant to all.

So I have started to read the gospels backwards; that is, with the idea that this is what Jesus was trying to teach us all along. All the healings, miracles, and the earlier teachings were designed to lead us to this point. I know that this might not seem interesting to you, yet... but I think that following up next month (and maybe after), I might be able to show how significant it can be for understanding what Christ has truly done for us. At worst, some of you might dig into the scriptures yourself, if just to prove me wrong.

This Advent season we are all challenged to get ready for the coming King. My prayer for you (and me) is that we open our hearts to see our Lord in new ways, and to be ever more committed not only to seeing Him, but to living out the life of service He modeled.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rami". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.