

## Eyes on the Kingdom

Rev. Jonathan Carey Goodell, October 27 2024

My father and mother were mad cap antiquers. They didn't just love Shaker style furniture and tin lamp shades decorated with nail marks. They bought a colonial house, moved it seventy miles, reassembled it and lived in it for twenty years.

For me, the dance of the old and the new can be fascinating and even life giving if you pursue the original vision of the creator ... whether the ladder back chair, the Shaker table, the oil lamp, the Colonial homestead. Or spiritually the Lord's Prayer! Can we find its original power, its curious beauty and vision. Perhaps, like that old house, it will have strong features like a great fireplace, curious details like a window with rippled glass. Even its drafty loft area may have secrets and possibilities that we need to explore.

Since we are praying for the kingdom, let's start with that phrase... Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven

This is my guiding text as we look at opening the doors of God's work, getting involved in God's realm, investing in God's kingdom.

Here are the questions I want to explore. Can you and I actually see the realm or kingdom of God? I will look to Jesus' early ministry, to the 'stem cell' formation of his vision, to ask about 'seeing the kingdom'.

This will then lead to the question have you touched and been touched by the realm of God? Bartimaeus will be our guide into that question.

And finally we will examine the virtuous cycle of investment in the kingdom or realm of God, the keys if you will to the mighty doors of God's kingdom or realm.

Let's look at a question of a word. Can we or even should we use the term "kingdom of God"? In a country that has rejected kingship from its founding, is the idea of "king Jesus" simply off, a drafty part of our heritage, possibly even full of terrible secrets? Must we take our white gloves and dust this relic off and put it carefully to one side as just a historical feature of this prayer.

A member of our Roots and Branches group last weekend said this about “our Father” ... this is not something that I visualize or equate with any image I carry of an earthly father or mother. It is an open term, a way of conceiving of love and authority and presence in a new way ... and as a form of illumination and growth.

Listen to the text from Jeremiah... as if from inside its beating heart...

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor together; a great company, they shall return here.

31:9

With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back; I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path where they shall not stumble, for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

I was thinking of the phrase “king Jesus” I realized that it was part of an African American spiritual. It was sung by the enslaved in our country. To those who are not experiencing in any way the care and justice of earthly rulers,

how life giving is the term “kingdom of God”? Surely it’s a way of anchoring one’s self with a good God who will see history to a just judgment and fitting conclusion.

To talk about a realm of God is to invoke the qualities of God in the world. To use the word kingdom is to invoke the activity of God in a special way... and to find ourselves accountable to that activity.

Walk with me along the river Jordan. Its shores are rocky and the river is a bit shallow. A wild looking man, roughly clad in animal skins, gathers a large crowd. “Repent ... bear good fruit ... soldiers, don’t use force to extort money... tax collectors... collect no more money than you are authorized to do ... if you have two coats share one”

Out of the crowd stepped a man, Jesus, someone who was not part of this spiritual movement of longing for change, of repentance and cleansing in the Jordan. He had no life style concern to repent of. His cousin John recognized him and immediately reacted to his request to be baptized. “What are you doing here... you don’t

need to be baptized! In fact you should baptize me!”

But Jesus insisted on being baptized. Why? Have you ever been with a group that was very socially diverse, drawn together by a shared love, even a shared love for God? During the later years of my career I found a discussion group like this. Just when I felt like the group was too diverse, too challenging I would recognize a common thread among us... a common hunger, a common desire to be whole and to relate in some way to God even.

One can focus on the ‘outside’ and discover too much dissonance to make a feeling of community happen. Or ... you can focus on the shared yearning for God, the common longing and desire for growth. You can see God at work and be glad for that.

I believe that Jesus saw the kingdom of God, the realm of God in the hearts of the crowd. He saw God in the movement toward grace and forgiveness. It was not about background or social position, not in the things done but the promise of God for the next steps and for the future.

Rather than name the kingdom of God, the realm of God as an ideal, a political aspiration, Jesus looked in a different place. He saw that God was already doing something, causing something to come together. He was conserving and saving, rather than casting off and building a movement from scratch.

He wanted to stand with, in community with the crowd that longed for God ... that named their faults, sins and great needs because of that longing. He did not have sins to confess, but he still wanted to stand in the river of grace, the stream of God’s forgiving mercy, to stand with those moving toward what he would call the “kingdom of God”.

Today’s passage, the healing of blind Bartimaeus, sets up our next question. Not only do you see the realm of God at work in the world, beyond buildings, programs and institutions ... Not only do you see the realm of God. But will you enter into that realm, that kingdom?

The poetry of Mark’s gospel is the way he uses the encounters with Jesus as points of contemplation. Tradition held that this gospel

consisted of the preaching notes of the apostle Peter. Two encounters in chapter ten of Mark leave us much to contemplate! One is with the rich guy, the ruler who wants to follow and cannot. This man comes to Jesus asking what he might do. He calls him “good teacher”. And when Jesus questions him about what he has done Jesus pushes past the ten commandments to a more basic question. Will you sell what you have and give it over to the work at hand, to the poor? And the startled young man shakes his head and says that it is too much for him. He slips away unchallenged and unwilling to be a follower of Jesus. Jesus looks after him with love but realizes that he will not be a disciple. The rich guy had great resources but no particular heart to follow, to change and to grow. He couldn't let God close to the great resources in his life.

Remember that the first question leads us to the second. Do we see God at work in the world leads to the next question... are we willing to let God get close to us and us to God. We do more than see we touch are are touched.

The rich guy remained unnamed in the gospel. He stayed aloof and was not known. Here is where the contrast picks up. We see Bartimaeus, a man

with little material wealth, it would seem. He too refers to Jesus as “Good teacher” as did the rich ruler. But this is where they differ. Bartimaeus asks for something from Jesus. It's a big ask... an ask based on Jesus' reputation and his own faith or trust. “Let me see”. And when Jesus grants him his wish, the blind beggar decides this is too much for him ... at least he needs to respond. And so he decides to follow Jesus. He points out the virtuous cycle of sight and investment. As you see more you are willing to invest further. And as you invest more you also see farther into the realm of God, the kingdom of God.

Perhaps you know about this virtuous cycle. The giving, the investing... the reward of more sight, more connection, more meaning. The Dwelling Place in Woburn, a monthly meal that we provide for those who are living on the margin, is one of these moments. We give a little and we then understand our connection with the beloved people who come to the Methodist church to eat, to be served.

Here's the backwards logic of investment. When our selves become smaller our vision becomes larger. When our sense of self dies back, our

hearts fall open. When we step away from money as status and marker of progress we are ushered into a sense of purpose from another source. The realm of God sneaks up on us and taps us on the shoulder. I guess I am saying that when our hearts are full we see the kingdom and we respond like Bartimaeus with joy and commitment.

With eyes on the kingdom we can experience one further beautiful benefit.

I have a good friend, Kay. She's part of a little group of watercolor painters that I paint with each week. I asked them as a group if they had any stories of seeing and she told me this. My family couldn't afford eye glasses. And so I developed the pattern of sitting in the very first row of the class to read the black board. I knew that I was running the risk of being called a teacher's pet... but I was hungry to learn too. In eighth grade I finally had the chance to get a pair of glasses. The world went from being a blurry out of focus place to a place with sharp, rich detail. It was a revelation. Very exciting and ... she recalled... quite challenging. I looked at the whole class sitting behind me and considered what it meant to see with a lot of detail. No

longer were the lights on the Christmas tree prickly balls of color... they had shape and meaning. I had lived in a world where everyone looked a bit misty and out of focus. I put on the glasses and I suddenly realized that they could see me in the way that I could see them. The world got bigger and I began to have a place in that world. We don't know much about Bartimaeus. But we DO know that he was seen clearly and that he had a name and a place in that community.

A blind man with nothing at all opens these doors for us, these doors of the heart. Bartimaeus throws open the doors of the kingdom. He says come in without obligation, without a sense of duty. Come in because you are loved and know how to give from that place. Remember that I was completely surprised by grace, by freedom, by joy.

This week you are going to get a letter of commitment. Something that puts you into the circle, that allows you to see and be seen like my friend Kay. Before you fill that out, though, I would like to do something very simple. I would like you to put a little scratch list by your elbow and to fill out some of your gratitudes in giving, to

clarify your eyesight with rich detail, to let you put your eyes on the kingdom, the realm of God. To open to the marvel of this church with this history, this building, so many prayers, the serving spirit and powerful graces of our staff, the community that hungers with us for God.

We thank God together for the kingdom, the realm of God already at work in our world, amplified by what we can see, by what we can touch and by how we might open the great doors of grace.