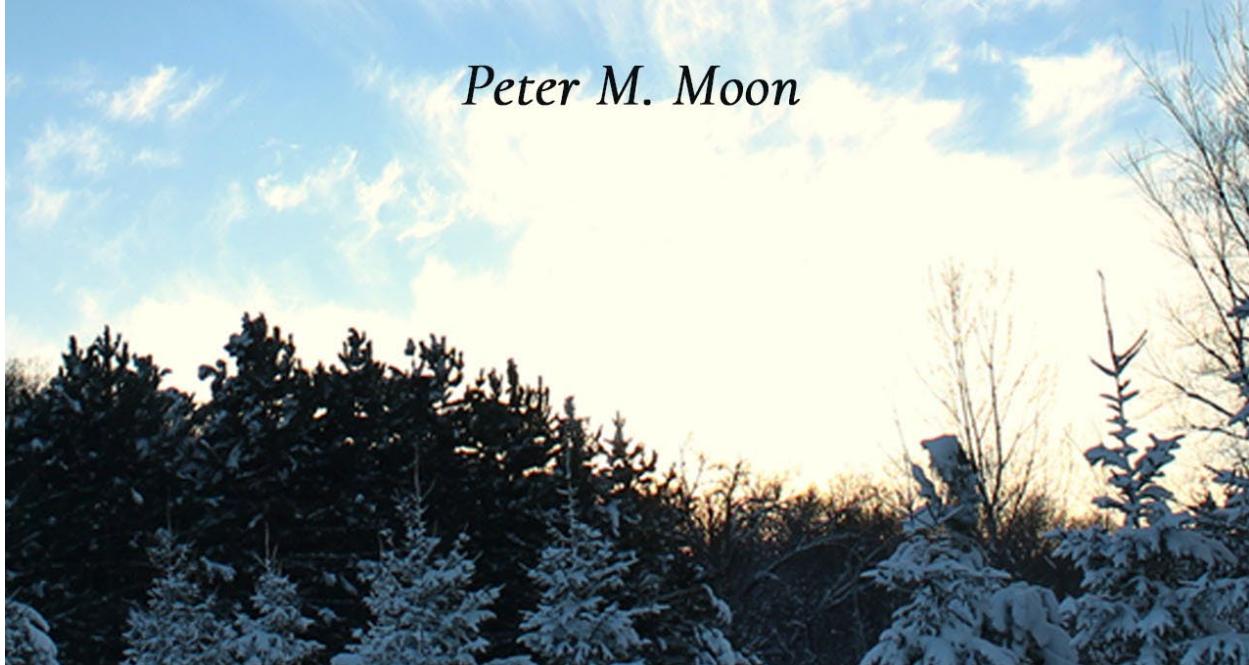


# THE TIME HAS COME:

*A Kingdom Centered Journey to  
Personal and Church Renewal*

*Reveille UMC Study Edition*

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# Table of Contents

Introduction	Pg. 3
Chapter 1: Kingdom Possibilities	Pg. 12
Chapter 2: The Kingdom is Near...Now What?	Pg. 26
Chapter 3: The “Upside Down” Kingdom	Pg. 41
Chapter 4: Kingdom Diversity	Pg. 55
Chapter 5: What About Justice?	Pg. 70

# The Time Has Come

## Introduction

Many of us are looking for some kind of spiritual renewal. We may not call it that. It may be hidden or camouflaged, but it has a way of rising to the top of our wish list when we get a hint of what might be. We look for it in our own lives. We want it for our church. Perhaps we are a bit scared of what might happen if God really showed up and offered it, but all the same, many of us, in one way or another, seek it. We humans, at least a substantial portion of us, have a chronic condition, an uneasy feeling. We know that there is something more to this life and even more within our faith. This isn't as good as it gets.

I put myself in that camp. A few years back, I was packing for a road trip to visit with my sister, who lives in Illinois. I live in Richmond, Virginia. Reports were breaking out about an unusual thing unfolding in the small town of Wilmore, Kentucky. At Asbury College, in a very old auditorium, a chapel service had just kept going...and going. It was now a couple of days later and it seemed to be just getting warmed up. They were calling it a revival. Thousands of people were showing up. It was focused on college students and young adults.

I have done a good bit of work on revival over the years. I have traveled to foreign countries to study seasons of renewal and have done some graduate work on spiritual movements. I did a quick calculation. I could change course just bit and stop in Wilmore on my way.

When I arrived, I was taken back. First, I couldn't find a parking place. Even after I did, I had to wait in line for twenty minutes to get into the chapel. I have been in ministry a long time and that had never happened. The people in line were like me. Many were from out of state, some brought their children to see this event. Most were older. That wasn't the case inside the auditorium. It was all about the college students and other young adults. They filled all the front rows, the leadership roles on the stage, and most of the seats in the room.

We will speak more to this event in the pages to come but standing in that line with the hundreds of people waiting to get in, it seemed a bit like the story of John the Baptist. There were crowds who traveled far into the desert to see John. In the words of Mark, "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him" (Mark 1:5).

There was apparently a spiritual hunger among the people for something real. They found God breaking out at the River Jordan and with John in a way that had not been found in the traditional place of faith and practice. There was nothing nominal or institutional about John. It was all about a living God who was at the same time right there in front of the people but also coming in a very real way. That arrival was of course in the person of Jesus, and in the kingdom which Jesus was now bringing near.

I was struck by the way that those crowds, standing outside that chapel in Wilmore Kentucky, were there, just like me, looking for the real thing. We look, because if we are honest, right now we are not finding it.

I am a pastor in the United Methodist Church. Like many, I serve in a declining denomination. As we will see, Jesus announced the nearness of the kingdom in the context of "good news". In contrast, most of the news that comes across our mainline denominational streams is bad. We do our best to dress it up and make it palatable, but we are still dealing with rapid decline, denominational separation, and internal bickering. We have lots of clergy retiring and fewer young faces kneeling for ordination. Some do exceptional work. In the midst of decline, many hard-working clergy and laity maintain and sometimes heroically, keep things moving. There are a few outposts and outliers with growth. But there is the chronic spiritual sense, especially as we open our Bibles and seek this kingdom, that there must be more. Church folk are not designed by God to be managers. We are meant to be multipliers. We have the troubling sense that our wings are clipped.

But, into a day that was likely more spiritually starved than ours, Jesus came out of the gate swinging for the fence with his first words; "The time has come...the kingdom of God is near..." (Mark 1:15). It was time then; it is still the time now. The kingdom was near then. The kingdom is still near now. This book is written in the conviction that this is not all there is. Our role as disciples and church leaders is not destined to be managing decline and disappointed hope. Spiritual renewal is still available to all of us. *Because the kingdom of God is near, there is the possibility of new spiritual life, both personal and congregational, when we, like Jesus, seek first the kingdom.*

This is admittedly a bold and aggressive claim. Some might say that it is too good to be true. They might well ask: But will it work?

## But Will It Work?

It can work because it worked for Jesus. Our Lord offered abundant description and guidance for us concerning the kingdom. He described the governing principles through the primary commandments. Famously, we are to first love God and then love our neighbor (Mark 12:28-31). Broadly, this is what life in the kingdom looks like. There is, however, another oft overlooked “first” commandment. Jesus said we are to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness...” (Matthew 6:33). We seek the kingdom first, not simply because Jesus commanded us to, though that is certainly true. We seek it first, because that is what Jesus did, and it worked.

Unfortunately, our church creeds, largely ignore the kingdom. They also skip the majority of Jesus’ earthly ministry, moving from his birth straight to his death, resurrection, and ascension. The creeds are beautiful and necessary, and there are reasons why they emphasize what they do. There is also a cost for what is missing. A lot happens in between the birth and death of Jesus, and a substantial portion, if not most of the work, is grounded in the kingdom. His first recorded words were about the kingdom, as were his last just prior to his ascension. It occupies a central place in his prayer. Most of the parables speak to it. The list could go on and will. Jesus’ purpose for coming to this planet was certainly to live, die, and be resurrected so that we could have eternal life. But there is more, so much more to his life, death, and resurrection. He came so that the kingdom could be established on earth as it is in heaven. If he made the kingdom such a priority, it certainly offers warrant for us to do the same. As he sought the kingdom first during his time in this world, he brought new spiritual life into the world. If we really want new spiritual life personally and, in our congregations, why not follow his lead?

Additionally, seeking the kingdom first in our pursuit of renewal is much more inspiring than most of our current efforts. How many new programmatic themes have we launched with grandiose titles such as: “Greater Things...”, “Sing A New Song”, “God is Doing a New Thing”, or to quote an old 70’s song, “We’ve Only Just Begun”? We have launched great biblical thematic titles and found modest results. It isn’t because we haven’t worked hard. We gathered in meetings, attended conferences, and listened to multiple leadership seminars. Our institutions have poured out videos, social media postings, and other options. They are all good and well intentioned.

There are a host of great resources out there about how we can improve ourselves institutionally, and they have offered help to many people and churches. Unfortunately, we may have to confess that we have become a bit jaded. Church work becomes church work and not ministry. For many of us, there is a growing weariness when we hear about one more renewal program coming from our institutional sources.

In contrast, pursuing faith and renewal through the lens of the kingdom of God abruptly changes the equation and the conversation. To put it bluntly, we are no longer seeking renewal through a spreadsheet. Billy Abraham, in his book “Logic of Evangelism” paved the way in this effort years ago.<sup>1</sup> His premise was that most of the conversation around evangelism had become stale and encumbered with controversy and terms like “Church Growth”. His idea was to change the subject, literally. He called us to envision evangelism, not through the standard and mostly pejorative lenses, but instead to see evangelism as “introducing people to the kingdom of God.” One of his arguments was that this enabled us to look with new life at a key part of the faith that had become embattled and weary. The kingdom of God afforded inspiration and forward movement to an institution that had become wary of the word evangelism.

Pursuit of the kingdom of God draws us to a deeper spiritual engagement. You can't have (or as we shall see, you should not be able to have) a conversation about the kingdom without the King. We are drawn closer in our relationship with Jesus and the Spirit that he has breathed upon us. Kingdom conversations force us to look deeply into the parables, but also into the book of Revelation. The focus draws our souls above the institution to a higher plane. From there, we are invited to return to those institutions, clinging to that view.

Processing the faith through spiritual/kingdom lenses can be harder, but there is a cost when we don't. Our role becomes that of maintaining. As such, the church becomes a means of managing the faith. Our role is to keep the doors open and schedule our religious practice. Such a view can keep the church afloat for a season. But such a view can, if we are not careful, be dry and offer little motivation to return or invite others.

The kingdom of God is not dry nor lifeless. Indeed, in the kingdom there is life, life as it is meant to be. Life in the kingdom is about relationships. Life in the kingdom is about multiplying seeds and celebrating new possibilities. Life in the kingdom is about fellowship, joy, laughter, and community. Kingdom life is contagious. The list goes on but the one thing that unites this kingdom life is simply the word life. Lots of words describe this water turned to wine but the words “manage” and “maintain” don't rise to the top of that list.

The point here is not to be anti-church. As we will see, the church of Jesus Christ is the community of the kingdom. But seeking the kingdom first, invites us to see the church as who we are in Christ before it is who we are in a building. Seeking the kingdom encourages the church to be more, not less. The institution then exists to serve the kingdom, instead of trying to make it go the other way around.

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<sup>1</sup> Billy Abraham, “The Logic of Evangelism” (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989)

## Weaving the Rainbow

Centering on the kingdom also works because it is God's designed way of bringing together the multiple facets of the faith that we all too easily separate. The chapters that follow will address multiple pillars within our practice, things like discipleship, prayer, justice, and pursuit of diversity. Many of us pursue these things zealously, but also separately. As a result, these critical features can become entities within themselves.

The kingdom of God opens our silos. We have many who speak with some frequency about the cross, but not as much about the kingdom. Others speak with the same measure of the kingdom but not as much about the cross. As we will see, we can't speak faithfully to the kingdom without clear reference to the cross, and we can't speak of the role of the cross, without including the place of the kingdom. The kingdom says these two silos must be joined.

In the same way, we are reminded that our silos are not entities to themselves. Justice, an oft embattled subject in our churches finds its merit and beauty in the kingdom of God. Diversity is not something that we pursue for diversity's sake. As we seek it, we are not pursuing an updated version of that old 1980's song "We Are the World". Pursuit of diversity is the seeking of a place of passionate beauty within the kingdom and heart of God himself. Prayer is not just about me asking God for what I want. I am praying, as Jesus taught us, for God's kingdom to come in my life, my church, and my community. The list can and will go on in the chapters to come, but as a means of introduction, centering on the kingdom keeps us from seeking first our particular and favorite silos, stopping there, and assuming we have arrived.

Long ago, John Keats offered the following stanzas in his long poem "Lamia":

... *Do not all charms fly*  
*At the mere touch of cold philosophy?*  
*There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:*  
*We know her woof, her texture; she is given*  
*In the dull catalogue of common things.*  
*Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,*  
*Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,*  
*Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine –*  
*Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made*  
*The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.*

The poem offered a romantic critique of the advance of natural science and philosophy. It was written in opposition to the encroaching sense of modernity and rational thought that was seemingly fast approaching. To Keats, all these modern trends were “unweaving the rainbow”.

Outside of the kingdom of God, we can do the same thing. We can focus on this or that part of the faith that fills our particular passion. In so doing, we also stand in danger of “unweaving the rainbow”. The kingdom of God, in contrast, keeps all the parts tightly and beautifully wound together.

Which brings us to a final highlight of this kingdom emphasis. A focus on the kingdom of God brings life because the kingdom is beautiful.

### **The Kingdom is Beautiful**

The pages that follow will strive to live out this truth. The kingdom is not just an entity of power and truth. It is that, but it is also the living representation of God’s character and will. It is the place where God’s will is done. God is beautiful. Naturally, God’s kingdom is beautiful.

In all fairness, none of the Scriptural references directly describe God’s kingdom in the context of beauty. The image comes when you stand back from the picture and take in the whole. Jesus tells us that we must become as children to enter the kingdom. In the description of sheep and goats, we are reminded that compassionate character is a requirement for entrance. The book of Revelation offers an image of justice reigning forth as The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King so poignantly foresaw with at the end of a long arc. The list goes on but each parable, and each description from Genesis to Revelation builds this holistic and perfect picture of beauty. In some ways, it is the most fitting word to describe the whole.

Jonathan Edwards was an advocate for this view. Edwards is most famously known as the author of the classic fire and brimstone sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Unfortunately, he is remembered almost exclusively for that sermon. Methodists need to be reminded of the debt we owe to Jonathan Edwards. Wesley and his revivals were deeply influenced deeply by him.

Edwards grounded his work and thought in God’s beauty. God is beautiful, not only in essence, in the glimmering pictures of Revelation, but also in style and character. The beauty is seen, as we will discover in the pages to follow, in the love and relationship of the

Trinity. That non-ego-driven love, with the consummate desire to serve and lift the other, is a perfect representation of beauty, and one that we should seek and emulate.

Each of the chapters to come will attempt to speak to this beauty, beauty that is reflected perfectly in the kingdom of God. The pages to follow will also prayerfully encourage believers, both individual and gathered, to reflect that beauty.

The goal is illustrated through the classic painting by Vincent VanGogh, "Starry Night". Tragically painted from the window of a nineteenth century mental hospital, the picture is yet a classic and striking image of beauty. The colors are incredible with cobalt blue, popping yellows, all underneath a radiant, spinning sky and moon. The lights of this night sky radiate out upon the town below. In some ways, the scene looks pastoral. The lights are on in the homes; the moonlight is shining. The homes and buildings modestly reflect that light.

Except for the church. The church is in front and center in the picture but is almost dismissed. It is adjacent to the contrasting dark, large and foreboding cedar tree. In contrast to the homes of the village, the windows of the church are dark. Unlike the surrounding homes which reflect the starry night, there is little or no reflection from the rooftop of the church. Tragically, Vincent saw the mountains and homes reflecting the radiant and wondrous night sky above while the church did not.

Dostoevsky famously said: "Beauty will save the world". The Scriptures and the classic image beg the question. Does my life do better than the painting? In contrast to the image, does my church reflect the Starry Night? More specifically, do my life and my church reflect the radiant and dynamic beauty of the kingdom of God?

The following pages will ask the question by dividing each chapter into two sections. The first portion will focus on the meaning of the kingdom of God as reflected in some fundamental elements of our Christian faith and practice. The premise within each chapter will be that renewal, new life, and new possibilities are available as we look at these classic elements through the lens of the kingdom of God. The second portion of each chapter will be labeled "Seek First the Kingdom". This section will seek to apply insights in a practical way. The kingdom of God is distinctly related to prayer. What does that mean for my life and for my church as we seek renewal, individually and corporately? The kingdom of God is justice. How do I seek this kingdom justice in a world that sees the word not through the lens of the kingdom but more likely, through a favorite news network or church-dividing sermon or communication? The list will go on but each chapter will invite you to seek first the kingdom as we seek its resultant individual and church renewal.

Finally, let me assure you that seeking the kingdom really does offer the possibility of renewal in life and in ministry. This is the case for me. Spiritual renewal doesn't have to

happen at an auditorium in Wilmore Kentucky. It doesn't even have to happen in the church sanctuary. It can also occur by reading. This was the case with folks such as C.S. Lewis and Tim Keller. It is also the case for me. As of this writing, I am beginning my thirty seventh year of pastoral ministry. In years past, I have envisioned these years as the closing years. However, for the last decade, I have had the opportunity to dive into the work of some of the incredible spiritual leaders around us as they remind us about the power and availability of the kingdom of God. You will see their hand in my writing. I am indebted to Dallas Willard, N.T. Wright, Tim Keller, Barbara Brown Taylor, and others.

The gift of the church is that our mentors and friends need not be present or even living. I have never met any of these leaders and yet they have befriended me and encouraged me throughout this new season of kingdom ministry. They have reminded me that despite church challenges, denominational decline and frustration, in the person of Jesus, there is no place where there is no hope. Their writing, but even more, the promises of Jesus and his kingdom have encouraged and inspired me to move energetically into a new and renewed season of ministry. It is my humble prayer, that as you dive into these pages, you will sense that same encouragement and inspiration as together, we seek the kingdom of God, which is still near. Indeed, the time has come.



# Chapter One

## Kingdom Possibilities

*"The time has come...The kingdom of God has come near..." (Mark 1:15)*

It is intriguing to read the first words of Jesus in each of the Gospels. Luke has the young Jesus asking his parents "Why were you searching for me?" Matthew has Jesus fulfilling righteousness at the river Jordan with John the Baptist. John is even more pointed in his initial words, presenting Jesus as challenging the potential window-shopping reader with the question "What do you want?".

Mark takes it to the next level. He is a famously impatient writer. "Immediately" is one of his favorite words. He is a bottom-line, cut-to-the-chase communicator. There is no infant story, and in just fourteen verses, he covers the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus' own baptism, and Jesus' time in the wilderness.

And then, he highlights the very first words of Jesus: "The time has come...The kingdom of God has come near." (Mark 1:15)

It is worth pondering. The first thing Jesus says is that "the time has come". That means the time is now. It wasn't yesterday, nor is it tomorrow. The time is now. Right now. The Greek word here for time is "kairos", but it means that when you look into the face of this Jesus, there is an open window. There is an opportunity in front of you. There is hope. There is possibility but also urgency. Something is happening and you would be a fool to ignore it. In this man, there is everything that you have been looking for. In this man, there is everything the world has been looking for. Mark may be about cutting to the chase, but the chase is worth cutting to.

We need to hear the words of Jesus anew today. When Jesus spoke those words into the world two thousand years ago, he was addressing a world that hadn't heard much from the living God. The Old Testament ends on an anticlimactic note. The people of Israel had received all the covenant promises. God had been faithful to them. They returned from exile; they rebuilt the temple. Unfortunately, it was mostly disappointed hope. It wasn't what it once was. Many were still scattered, and in truth, even though many came back to Jerusalem, the nation was largely both literally and figuratively, still in Babylon.

And then.... four hundred years of silence. There is no substantive word from the Lord, and the people of God are left with a Bible that doesn't have a clear ending or resolution while living in a land that is chronically under pagan occupation. They are still waiting.

Into this thundering silence, disappointment, and enduring exile, Jesus speaks words of hope and possibility: "The time has come..."

Have you ever been there? Maybe it wasn't four hundred years, but have you found that your life, and that your church life, has been one of managing modest expectations, dealing with disappointment, and patiently abiding one thing after another that just didn't work or at best, worked modestly well?

I serve as a pastor in the United Methodist Church. Our denomination has gone through substantial conflict in recent years, and we are now formally and officially divided into separate camps. We are smaller and have fewer resources. New leadership is in place.

Recently, I attended a gathering of church leaders as we sought to develop some new, innovative, and hopeful initiatives that would offer, if not revival, at least some new life in our denominational work. The skills in the room were remarkable. The experience of those leaders was noteworthy. The communication abilities of every speaker were clear. It was a gathering of many of our best and brightest.

We offered some very good thoughts and tools. New initiatives were planned. New strategies were mapped out. We considered innovative ways to attack financial challenges. The list went on and after two days, most of us felt reasonably good about our work.

But not that good. There was a nagging feeling, at least on my part, that it was Groundhog Day. We were waking up to the same thing. We had at best different take on what we had always done. But we would press on because that is what church people do.

Every one of us has been in a meeting like that. I have been in hundreds of them. Good people who love Jesus, working hard to put together possibilities, who then go home clinging to the scraps of hope we found under the table.

What if Jesus is speaking to us right now in our day and age? Could this kairos opportunity reach into my life today? Could this open window be offering a fresh breeze for my church? Could this nearness of the kingdom of God of which Jesus speaks actually move the needle on our disappointed hope management meter?

This book is written with the conviction that the answer is yes. The time has indeed come and there is rich possibility in this kairos window that is still open. In Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near. And, in Jesus, there is no place where there is no hope.

All preachers need a side hobby. A substantial portion of our efforts, though important, do not always bear visible fruit. Subsequently, it is helpful to do something where we see tangible results and closure. For me, that is car repair and restoration. Despite my best efforts, I can't always fix things in the church (or in the people in the

church!) But I can fix cars. I can take a broken car, replace a part or two, and get it running down the road again. The closure is therapeutic!

There is typically a big challenge awaiting me on these projects: rusty bolts. A lot of my work is done on old, big trucks and typically, I need to replace a substantial part. But standing in my way are multiple big, rusty, deformed and frozen bolts. They are intimidating and just stare me down. In my early days, I would take some pliers and go to work. I would squeeze as hard as I could, but the bolt would just laugh. In honesty, I typically made the situation worse, stripping the bolt and making my job even harder.

In time, you learn. You begin with heat. You heat up that bolt, and the metal expands. Now the bolt is no longer laughing. Then you put on a special liquid that penetrates and dissolves the rust. Then, you pull out a three-foot wrench (called a “breaker bar”) and after a brief prayer, you crank on that bolt. Typically, the bolt will literally groan in complaint but often it actually moves. You have enough leverage to move the bolt, without breaking it.

There is bad news and good news here. The bad news is that you and I are rusty bolts. Our churches are rusty bolts. Our world is made up of rusty bolts. We tend not to move. We have been to multiple church meetings, we have brought our best tools, and we have squeezed hard on those pliers with all our might. But for many of us, the tools just have not worked. But the good news (literally!), according to Jesus is that the time has come. The kingdom is near. In this kingdom, but even more, in the One who brings it, there is enough leverage to finally move that bolt. There is possibility, and there is hope.

### **Looking for the Kingdom**

People have been seeking this kingdom for a very long time. This search is thematic to the Old Testament. N.T Wright, in his book “How God Became King” says:

“This is a point of fundamental importance for the whole New Testament and indeed the whole early Christian movement. The gospel writers saw the events concerning Jesus, particularly his kingdom inaugurating life, death, and resurrection, not just as isolated events to which remote prophets might have distantly pointed. They saw those events as bringing the long story of Israel to its proper goal...”<sup>2</sup>

One of Wright’s points is that we tend to overlook much of the Old Testament. We read the story of the creation, see the fall of Adam and Eve, look at some of the prophecies about

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<sup>2</sup> N.T Wright, “How God Became King” (New York: Harper One, 2012), 73.

a Messiah, and then jump right into the birth of Jesus. We overlook the way that Jesus is the climax, the fulfillment of all that for which Israel was searching.

In other words, we moderns tend to use the fast forward button. From Adam and Eve, we look a bit at those Genesis stories, listen to the Exodus, skip Leviticus, and then fast forward through the history of kings and battles and land, maybe stopping for the racy parts about Bathsheba. But there are those lists of kings, and exile, and two kingdoms. There is that time in Babylon. Those prophets keep speaking about idolatry, justice, and punishment and it is hard to understand why God would be so strict with his people and kick them out of the Promised Land. Finally, we open the first chapter of Matthew, and after one more fast forward through a genealogy of names, we hear these words: "This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about" (Matthew 1:18). Whew! Now we can watch the movie...

By hitting the fast forward button, we miss something critical, something that is a part of who we are. Within those eclipsed chapters, there is an enduring theme which continues up to and beyond the time of Jesus. The people of Israel are seeking a king and a kingdom. It is not just any king and kingdom. At their best, they are seeking a king who can lead like God. They are seeking to live in a land, a kingdom that is led by this king. To be sure, they fail within this desire. Too often they want a king so that they can be like the other nations. They get what they want. The kings come on the throne but fall short time and time again. The occupation of the Promised Land typically looks nothing like God's kingdom. It is full of injustice and idolatry. And yet, the search and hope goes on, king after king, through exile and return. This is why Mark cuts to the chase with Jesus' words "The time has come...the kingdom of God has come near.", and why it is such good news.

We are no different from Israel. Within all of us there is a need for a king, a good king or queen. How many times have we elected a leader in the United States, only to see that leader fall short of our expectations? How often have we hoped that our nation would offer some reflection of this kingdom, a place of justice and hope for all the people in our land and all who seek to join us? How often have we desired a leader to whom we could go, make our case, seek justice for us and others? We want a leader who will be powerful and strong but at the same time exercise that strength benevolently. It is the theme of one of the most popular books and movies of all time "The Lord of the Rings." The author, J.R.R. Tolkien notably wrote most of the books within his Trilogy during the tumultuous events of World War II when Mordor seemed so close, but those books' thematic message of a search for a king and just kingdom is timeless.

## But What is the Kingdom?

But what is the kingdom? For all the emphasis in the New Testament and beyond, many may find a definition challenging. In addition, the definitions that do come to us can be stiff and cumbersome.

We come to our foggy understanding of the kingdom honestly. The kingdom was the primary preaching topic of Jesus. He began with it, preached regularly about it, and even centered on it after his resurrection and just prior to his ascension. For Jesus, the kingdom was the deal.

But for all the emphasis, His primary means of describing the kingdom was parables. At first glance, the parables seem plain because of the allusions to common things such as “seeds”, “pearls”, and the like. Klyne Snodgrass, in his commentary, “Stories with Intent”<sup>3</sup> reminds us that Jesus told parables for a reason. In other words, the parables are “stories with intent.” The challenge for any interpreter is to discern the intent of Jesus in telling the story. What is Jesus trying to communicate here? What is Jesus trying to change? Most of the parables describe the kingdom. Jesus is telling us what the kingdom is like. He is pointing us to a life that reflects the kingdom and challenging us to be like that. At the same time, when he offers The Parable of the Sower, he describes the kingdom as a “mystery.” In other translations, it is a “secret” or “unrevealed”.

This is admittedly frustrating. Why all the mystery? Why not just put it on the table clear, plain and simple? Why speak in all this seemingly cryptic language? The kingdom is here! Why not let it fly and let it go viral?

Recently, I had the opportunity to serve as one of the leaders on our church’s youth mission trip to Orlando, Florida. We spent four days in mission, working with children in the community, the homeless, and senior adults in their resident facilities.

We had a day off and took our youth to Universal Studios. It was my first time there and I was looking forward to seeing the Harry Potter section of the park. It is a substantial portion of Universal, and my children all grew up on the Harry Potter books. However, for all its size, the entrance to the section is not obvious. There are no substantial signs or directions, although the area is pictured on a map. In fact, the entrance is disguised. But, with modest persistence, you walk through a nondescript brick walkway that honestly looks more like a bathroom entrance than anything else. But sure enough, you (dare we say magically?) find yourself looking down Diagon Alley. Suddenly right before you is the Main

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<sup>3</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, “Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parable of Jesus” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008)

Street of Harry Potter's world in all its glory. There are fire breathing dragons, bustling shops that sell wands, restaurants that offer "butter beer", and of course multiple rides.

The point is that this "kingdom" is somewhat hidden. You must seek it and look in unexpected places to get there. But it was there, as the map depicted all along. And when you finally see it, it is awesome, and right there behind the mysterious entrance

This is why Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God in parables. As Kline Snodgrass states, "The parables hide in order to reveal"<sup>4</sup> The casual window shopper will easily miss it. The kingdom is there, hidden and yet all the while right in front of us. In the pages to follow, we will take some time to dig into these parables and unpack the mystery. But.... you must stay with it. Part of the intent of parables is to draw us in. They are stories that ideally pull us closer to the campfire to hear the narrator. The kingdom is like that. We have to lean in.

## **Water or Wine?**

Mystery is not the only challenge to understanding. If we are honest, many of our descriptions of the kingdom are a bit dry. For many years, I served as a member of what we call the "Board of Ordained Ministry." This is the group that interviews candidates applying to become clergy and recommend them as they move into leadership in the local church. Most of that time, I served on the "theology" committee. We read papers and listened to hundreds of clergy as they defined what they believed and sought endorsement to carry those beliefs into their local churches.

As you would imagine, there was an standard question, or more specifically a challenge: "Describe the kingdom of God". This was to be answered within the space of a couple of hundred words. Naturally, many struggled but most candidates learned. There were certain key phrases that needed to be named. Typically, if the candidates acknowledged the fact that the kingdom is "here but not yet" and unpacked that to some degree we moved on to the next question.

It is important to name that truth. We believe that because of Jesus, the kingdom of God is here right now. Or, as he stated, it is tantalizingly near. That means that there is power and hope as we seek the kingdom. The kingdom is also not yet. There will come a day when the kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. That means that the impassioned and inspired claim of Julianne of Norwich that "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all

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<sup>4</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, "Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parable of Jesus" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 157

manner of thing shall be well" will finally be fulfilled. We must live our life in this broken world anticipating that day and the fullness of the kingdom to come.

The challenge to us modern church folk, clergy and lay, is that our descriptions of that day are not nearly as appealing as the one Julian of Norwich gives us. Jesus presented the kingdom as this wondrous new thing in our midst, celebrating its arrival and subsequent possibilities but typically, our characterizatrions don't match the wonder. Often, as we reflect on the meaning of the kingdom, it is as if we are still in that first part of the movie "The Wizard of Oz." The film begins in black and white, as Dorothy lives out a hard life in Kansas. Then, as Dorothy arrives in "Munchkin Land", she opens the door, and the movie shifts to color. It was a first for movies in 1939 and you can almost still hear those crowds gasp as she opens that door to the vibrant picture of a new kingdom.

Perhaps our understanding of the kingdom needs to take on Dorothy's classic line "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore..." and see the wonder in color instead of black and white.

Many would say that the gospel of John doesn't speak much about the kingdom. John is, however, cryptic in the conversation. He is quick to depict Jesus turning the water to wine as the first miracle in his gospel. Many struggle to understand the meaning of the miracle. Did Jesus do this to demonstrate his power? To prove that he really was and is the Son of God? A deeper understanding is needed. The word "life" is thematic for John and Jesus changed the water to wine to show us what life in the kingdom of God is like. Like wine, life in the kingdom is a celebration. Like wine, life brings joy and laughter. The kingdom really is like a wedding feast and banquet and there is enough for everyone, even the unexpected arrivals. Like wine, kingdom life has color, and Jesus has saved the best until now. And of course, like wine and the blood it prefigures, tells us that life can be hard but that its trials will be overcome by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Maybe your life doesn't look like this kingdom wine. Maybe your church doesn't look like this wine. Most of us may be living on the water/Kansas side of this miracle. After all water certainly isn't bad. It is good and essential for living. But Jesus' miracle reminds us that there is more to life than survival. There is more to life than grinding it out, more than just treading water and holding on.

The wine is there to offer a picture of life as life is meant to be. That life is lived in the kingdom. It is easy for us to mistake this wondrous new thing for water, but Jesus has come, and because he has come the kingdom has come near. Water has been changed to wine. It doesn't have to just be about survival. There is color, celebration, joy, and flavor to this new thing that God is doing in our midst. It is there even in hardship.

Here we are also encouraged to put some color, even some specific color, to the “not yet” portion of our kingdom description. We believe that there will be a day when the classic petition of the Lord’s Prayer is answered in full and the kingdom of God will be on earth as it is in heaven. God’s will shall be done perfectly on this re-created planet. That not yet aspect offers us a picture, an image of how things ultimately will be.

Some bristle at the spiritual conversation around eternity and the kingdom. Our comfort zone lies within a more earthly focus in seeking this kingdom. The Scriptures push back at that tendency. A cursory glance at the book of Revelation or even the parables will remind us of the innate beauty and wonder of the kingdom in its fullness. It is all wine and no water in the best sense.

Our role in the meantime, is to be missionaries of that day, both in our lives and in our churches. We look to what we will be in eternity and seek for our lives to be more like that right now. We strive to see what our church and what our neighboring communities will be in eternity and seek to make those places like that right now. In other words, we let the tension of the “here and not yet” work for us, or more importantly, for God.

One of the scariest parables of the Bible is the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. Some commentaries caution against seeing the story as a picture of the afterlife, but they may be letting us off the hook too easily. Jesus’ characterization is too concrete and it matches other Scriptures. Of note, the rich man is not named, but the poor man, Lazarus, is. The rich man is sent to Hades, while Lazarus is taken to Abraham. What is notable in the story is the lack of change within the rich man. Even in eternity, with its stark clarity, he still expects Lazarus, and even Abraham, to do his bidding. He does not change. It is a stark picture of how the essence of our personalities continues into eternity. Who we become in this life matters. Who we become in this life continues into the next. And this means that what we make of this world around us, including seeing the poor at our gates, matters.

We can argue with the interpretation, or we can take Jesus’ warning seriously. Our role in this life is to become more like the best of what we seek in eternity. Our mission is to make our church, our people, our community, and our world more like what will be in eternity. We aggressively pursue this kingdom work now, in our own lives and in our world, so that when we enter eternity, we will see before us not so much a chasm as a speed bump. Embracing a real and living vision of the eternal kingdom can empower us to live a more eternally significant kingdom life right now. As C.S Lewis said, "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who

thought most of the next"… It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this".<sup>5</sup>

## **Seek First the Kingdom**

Jesus' description of the nearness of the kingdom is foundational for our understanding but there is an additional verse that needs be incorporated into our pursuit of the kingdom renewal.

There are several "first" commandments in the Bible. The Ten Commandments begin with the call to "have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Jesus put it all in the context of love, that we are to first, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). The second great commandment is to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39).

It is easy to overlook a third "first" commandment of Jesus: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well" (Matthew 6:33). Not only are we to first love God and then neighbor, but we are also, first, to seek the kingdom.

Jesus is speaking primarily here about God's practical provision for our lives. We are not to worry about clothes or food; our lives do not have to be consumed with anxiety over those things. Instead of obsessing about what we don't have, seek first the kingdom and things will have a way of working out.

When you think about it, this commandment is exactly what Jesus did. He sought the kingdom of God first in his life. As has been mentioned, he began with it, he preached it, he died and was resurrected for it. In fact, it can be argued, as NT Wright does thoroughly in his book "How God Became King", that along with saving us, establishing the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven was Jesus' primary purpose for coming to this world. Jesus yielded his life to this first commandment. Perhaps we should too.

For us individually, that means that we seek God's reign and rule in all areas of our life. We seek to yield to that will in our family, in our finances, in our relationships, in the workplace, in our retirement. Many of us can recall a stewardship message in worship where someone offered this verse up. We sought out God's will first in our finances, made this offering unto God, and things worked out.

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<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, Harper edition, 2001), 135.

Dallas Willard speaks of the kingdom of God as “the range of God’s effective will.”<sup>6</sup> That is a mouthful, but it means that God’s kingdom is present wherever what God wants done is done. When we seek first the kingdom, it means that we are seeking to have God’s will done in every part of our life. We are yielding our personal kingdoms to God’s reign and rule.

It is a great and timeless message and needs to be offered repeatedly to us individually. What if, however, we extended this first commandment to our local churches? What would it look like for our congregations to seek the kingdom first, to seek that what God wants done is done? What would it look like to dedicate our churches not to our own kingdoms but to that of God’s rule and reign?

It is certainly worth a try. For many, what we are doing is not working. Each year, in my denomination, our local “Annual Conference” meets. We have several thousand people in an auditorium as we make decisions and policy for the coming year. We work hard to have joy. We typically have upbeat music and get together with people we have not seen in a season.

Even so, there are hard moments. There is a point where the Conference statistician stands up and give a report. It feels like the Grim Reaper is at the microphone. Everything is down, contributions are down, attendance is down, membership is down. We have some great treasurers, and they do their best to find some good news, but it is a struggle.

But the worst is yet to come. Each year, our Annual Conference must vote on closing churches. One by one, pictures of the once thriving churches pop up on the big screen. One by one, we vote to close the church. The number of closures is always in double digits and seems to grow each year. In all fairness, we follow it up with a celebration of new church starts and plants. But typically, the closures overwhelm the new starts.

What if it doesn’t have to be this way? Those churches were once thriving. People filled their pews. Lives were changed and signs of the kingdom were present. Admittedly, the saints of these churches are tired. They have heroically kept those churches open for years past their prime. The time has come and the best they can do is to close the doors.

But what if Jesus speaks today into our churches before we get to that place? Jesus announced the nearness of the kingdom into a people longing for spiritual renewal. If there was hope then, there is hope now.

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<sup>6</sup> Dallas Willard, “The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God”, (New York, HarperOne) p.24

## **Seek First the Kingdom: A Story of the Kingdom Come Near**

For years, I have had the privilege of working with a special small church, in a struggling community south of Richmond Virginia, Belmont United Methodist Church. Belmont is different. As our southern cities changed, when so many of our members headed to the suburbs, Belmont stayed. They remained while their community changed. Now, they are a light in the middle of an under-resourced community. The community is multi-ethnic. Many residents are undocumented. Poverty abounds.

As is the case with many smaller churches, Belmont has had a series of pastors. Some offered strong leadership, others struggled. Currently, the church is led by Pastor Larry Cochran. Larry has a quiet, gentle style of leadership but he maintains an often-unspoken kingdom focus. If you come to Belmont early on a Friday morning, you will see hundreds of cars and people lining up for the weekly food distribution. Over one thousand people will be served in the coming hours. Larry will be there with several of those waiting in line, gathering them up, offering a devotion, a Bible teaching, a prayer and a word of encouragement. Many of the folks waiting in line are fearful of an ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raid, but they are there nonetheless. Such is the intensity of the need.

Belmont also sponsors a team of folks who help local churches and the community pursue race reconciliation. They conduct seminars, workshops, and consultations. They are not loud or abrasive. The tone is gentle and inviting. They make you want to come back and hear more.

You may also be able to join a Spanish language service that is held on Sunday afternoons. For a season, Larry's church sponsored a pastor who fled Cuba to come to America. Together, they served many of the Hispanic community in their midst.

But, if you come to Belmont on Sunday morning, you won't see a large crowd. They do well, they hold their own, but they fight to keep their attendance above seventy each week. They often celebrate as new members join from among those who have been served by their food distribution ministry. They, like many of our churches, struggle as more of their senior members age out and move on to the church eternal.

They do all this on a minimal budget, fighting and scraping for every dollar. But they do it and they do it well. Recently I had the chance to participate with Belmont as they sought a time of renewal. I was part of a team that worked with them and coached them. I have known this church and Larry for years but was simply amazed at the kingdom desire within. They didn't name it that way, but as we will see in the chapters that follow, all their efforts pointed to this kingdom of which we speak. They are a little church that is seeking the kingdom first. The reward is often more kingdom work, but miraculously, in contrast to

so many other churches on that screen at our Annual Conference, they are still there, dare we say, even thriving - kingdom style.

Jesus said the kingdom is near and called us to seek the kingdom first. Jesus' words are just as true today as they were two thousand years ago. It means that there is joy, that the water has turned to wine, that everything that Israel in those days and that which we seek today is available to us and in fact is "near." Sure, it is not here fully, but even that image on the horizon is there to inspire and encourage us to be missionaries right now of the future fullness. As we add this additional "first commandment" to our arsenal, and seek the kingdom first in our churches, as well as in our individual lives, there is hope, real living hope. Our churches may not have to grind out an existence in black and white. What if we could really be like Dorothy, even in our local church, and open the door to this new full-color kingdom and celebrate that "we are not in Kansas anymore"? It is possible, because in Jesus and in the kingdom, he says is near, there is no place where there is no hope. But it doesn't just happen. In these inaugural verses of Jesus, he is just getting warmed up....

**Chapter One**  
**Kingdom Possibilities**  
**Study Questions**

1. This book began with the claim that most of us, in one way or another, are seeking some type of renewal. The claim continued that many of our churches need new life. Would you agree? Are you looking for a “new thing” in your life? Has the “time come” for a new season of life in your church?
2. What are the first things that come to your mind when you hear the phrase “The Kingdom of God”?
3. What do you believe Jesus meant when he said, “Seek first the kingdom of God...”?
4. Describe the ways you believe that your church reflects the kingdom of God. What more might your church do?
5. The opening words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark are: “The time has come....”. As you reflect upon your life, what has the time come for? What about your church? What has “the time come” for in your congregation? Discuss this in the group as you are comfortable.
6. Have you found yourself becoming a bit jaded when it comes to renewal programs? When a new possibility comes your way, either individually or to your church, are you Eeyore (of Winnie the Pooh fame): “It’ll never work....”? Or, do you still find a little “Tigger” in you, bouncing with the possibilities?
7. The chapter worked to describe the kingdom in the context of new life: Dorothy in Munchkin Land and Jesus turning the water to wine. Describe your impression of what life is like in the kingdom of God. What would water turning to wine look like in your own life? What would it look like in your church for you to open the door to a kingdom that says, “We aren’t in Kansas anymore....”
8. The chapter made the claim that we are all in search of a kingdom, with a king or queen who rules with justice. That assertion is thematic to the Old Testament and in many popular movies today, including “The Lord of the Rings”. How do you believe this theme is played out and how is it not played out in our world today?
9. How comfortable are you in speaking about eternal life? Is it helpful to open the conversation or would you rather move on? C.S. Lewis said it should encourage and inspire us to go to work now. Was he right?



## Chapter Two

# The Kingdom is Near...Now What?

*“...repent and believe the good news! (Mark 1:15)*

Mark has Jesus coming out of the gate swinging for the fence with the announcement that the kingdom is near. Everything that Israel has been longing for is set before them on a bounteous table. All that we seek is right in front of us. That for which creation has been groaning is opened. The next question is reasonable and natural. Now what? To see next steps, we need to take some time to define key terms and questions. What is the good news? What does Jesus have to do with it all? What do we modern folks do with this call to repent?

### **Believe the Good News!**

On one level, the message and the next steps are not complicated. Repent and believe the good news. But, as the message simmers, the soup gets thicker and the flavor better. We will address the “repent” part in a bit. Let’s begin with Jesus’ announcement of this good news.

How is it working for you when it comes to following Jesus’ example? How often do you get outside the church doors and into the streets to go loud and proud about this good news? I am the first to admit my struggle. I have the privilege of serving as the pastor of Reveille United Methodist Church in the City of Richmond, Virginia. Before I was appointed as pastor, the congregation established partnerships with two African American, non-denominational churches that are in an underserved community in Richmond. That partnership has proven to be helpful for all of us, but at times, I think we need them more than they need us. We are a large, brick, high steeple church. We have all the bells and whistles, including a large choir and organ. We are doing better than we used to in our diversity, but our demographic is mostly white. When our nation was going through the racial tension after the George Floyd murders, we took some time to listen to our partner churches and their experience. It was humbling, informative, and helpful and we will speak to this with some depth in a later chapter.

As partners, we pray together and for years have joined in an annual fall prayer walk through our partner churches’ neighborhood. This was a knock-on door, “do you know Jesus?” kind of walk. Presuming I had some ability as pastor, they asked me to take on one

of the most challenging areas, the local convenience store. I was far out of my comfort zone, but I dutifully put on my army-colored olive drab shirt, with the brightly emblazoned words “Prayer Warrior”. I joined a willing partner from Reveille, and we took up our station outside the doors of the convenience store, asking people how we could pray for them as they entered.

Please understand, we were in one of the most impoverished areas in Richmond at 9:00 in the morning. Many people were coming in to buy beverages, but it wasn’t coffee. I spoke with people, invited them to our churches, and prayed with them. I am not sure I did what Jesus did as he called us to “repent and believe the good news”, but I will never forget the last man I met that morning. He was rushing into the store, looking haggard. I asked him if I could pray for him and what I could pray for. He just looked at me with some desperation said, “yeah...ask God to help me get off these drugs...” I gladly prayed and prayed exactly for that and would like to think that this more modest style of proclamation was in keeping with Jesus’ invitation. But the question remains. Was this it? If not, what was this good news that Jesus publicly proclaimed and invited us to believe?

The sending of messages was not uncommon in ancient times. When there was “good news” from a Roman Emperor, heralds would be sent out with the message. It would be proclaimed with a call to take in that good news (i.e. gospel) and to believe it. Tim Keller, in his book “King’s Cross” says this:

“When Greece was invaded by Persia and the Greeks won the great battles of Marathon and Salamis, they sent heralds (or evangelists) who proclaimed the good news to the cities: “We have fought for you, we have won, and now you’re no longer slaves; you’re free.” A gospel is an announcement of something that has happened in history, something that’s been done for you that changes your status forever.” <sup>7</sup>

N.T. Wright has written an entire book with the goal of clarifying the meaning of Christ’s “good news” or gospel.<sup>8</sup> Both these veteran church thinkers and leaders seek to correct an insufficient understanding of this central theme of which Jesus speaks. They remind us that most religions tend to give us “religious advice”. Other religions tell us how to live so that we will have the result we seek from God. Live this way and you will go to heaven. Do this and things will work out.

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<sup>7</sup> Tim Keller, “King’s Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus” (New York: Dutton, 2011) 15.

<sup>8</sup> N.T. Wright, “Simply Good News: Why the Gospel Is News and What Makes It Good. (HarperCollins. Kindle Edition).

Jesus' proclamation sets us apart from other religions. Our faith is not based on religious advice about how to go to heaven. It is based on an announcement of what God is now doing in the world through Jesus. The good news is that with Jesus, heaven is coming on earth. The good news is that God is recreating this world and moving to reclaim this creation and reclaim us. And the best news is that you and I are called to believe it, appropriate it, and join in this groundbreaking work. In so doing, we become not only who we were meant to be but also more like who we will ultimately and eternally be. We become agents of this new kingdom as we seek to make our church, our neighborhood, our community and our world more like what it will look like when heaven does come on earth, when the kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.

Perhaps N.T. Wright says it best:

"So how might we in turn summarize the good news—both the good news announced by Jesus and the good news that his first followers announced when they talked about him later on? The good news is that the one true God has now taken charge of the world, in and through Jesus and his death and resurrection. The ancient hopes have indeed been fulfilled, but in a way nobody imagined. God's plan to put the world right has finally been launched. He has grasped the world in a new way, to sort it out and fill it with his glory and justice, as he always promised. But he has done so in a way beyond the wildest dreams of prophecy. The ancient sickness that had crippled the whole world, and humans with it, has been cured at last, so that new life can rise up in its place. Life has come to life and is pouring out like a mighty river into the world, in the form of a new power, the power of love. The good news was, and is, that all this has happened in and through Jesus; that one day it will happen, completely and utterly, to all creation; and that we humans, every single one of us, whoever we are, can be caught up in that transformation here and now. This is the Christian gospel. Do not allow yourself to be fobbed off with anything less.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus has made the announcement of good news. The kingdom is near. There is possibility. There is hope. This world really can look like what it will ultimately be. We can be more like who we will ultimately be. This is groundbreaking material. It will change the world.

But there is a problem. For various reasons, we have not gotten the memo. Different parts of the church have different reasons for it seemingly not showing up in our inboxes, but we are united in the fact that although the kingdom is right here, many of us are

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<sup>9</sup> Wright, N. T.. *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel Is News and What Makes It Good* (p. 56). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

squinting to see it. And our reasons for the lack of vision have to do with how we see (or don't see) Jesus.

### **We Can't Do This Without Jesus**

If you take some time to listen to some of the characterizations of the kingdom of God that are available today, a question could be asked; "Do you really need Jesus for this kingdom you describe?" All of these characterizations (or nearly all of them) are well intentioned as they offer a description of God's future and hopefully his present. But not all clearly reflect our dependence upon the person of Jesus to inaugurate this kingdom, much less the priority of his death and resurrection in enabling this kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. As we seek kingdom renewal, we are reminded that there is no kingdom on earth as it is in heaven without Jesus.

The Biblical book of Hebrews helps us to keep Jesus in this center. The language of the letter is thick. The Old Testament references may be unfamiliar. But the people whom the anonymous writer was addressing were very much like us. Hebrews isn't really a book. It is a sermon, written to a struggling congregation. Veteran preaching professor Tom Long, in his commentary on Hebrews says this of the sermon's author:

"The Preacher is not preaching into a vacuum; he is addressing a real and urgent pastoral problem, one that seems astonishingly contemporary. His congregation is exhausted. They are tired – tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being particular and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop..., attendance is down at church...and they are losing confidence..."<sup>10</sup>

Recently I served in the role of what we Methodists call a "District Superintendent". That means that I supervised and served a substantial number of churches in my geographic area. I can tell you with certainty how contemporary those words, drawn from the book of Hebrews are. Many, both clergy and laity, are tired and our hands are drooping. We valiantly try to keep our hearts and doors open, but we are discouraged, many of us are old, and we are weary.

Dr. Long's ultimate point is critical. The solution is not a pep talk. The solution is not a half-time speech to rally the team. Instead, the solution is Christology. That is a fancy way of saying that any hope lies in preaching Jesus, going to Jesus, grounding our lives and

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas G. Long, "Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Hebrews" (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997) 3.

efforts in Jesus and centering on him. There is no hope for new life apart from him. There is no kingdom on earth as it is in heaven without him. In him, we find the present reality of the kingdom and vitality of life in it. The way forward is to announce the kingdom as it comes: with Jesus, crucified and risen, as the Lord of all.

Years ago, a man named Lyle Schaller wrote extensively about the church. He authored several little books about church trends, church growth, and general insights. He offered what have proven to be prophetic insights into where the church was going and where it was not working. Nestled among his many works was a book entitled “The New Reformation”. In this book he included twenty-one things that he thought would be true for the coming new millennium. Thirty years ago, I read one that I have never forgotten:

“The numerically growing churches in the .... twenty-first century will be drawn largely from those that concentrate on teaching and preaching about the second person of the Trinity. The second largest group of numerically growing congregations will come from those that lift up the third person of the Trinity...”<sup>11</sup>

Years ago, just before his death, I spoke with Lyle Schaller after he addressed a large gathering at a church conference. I told him how I appreciated this comment. I explained how his words had spurred my doctoral research, thinking, and ministry. He then looked at me and said, “What are you doing tomorrow?” I simply replied, “Flying home.” He then said, “No, you need to start tomorrow and write a book about this.” That was the end of the conversation as he turned to the next person in line but now I am finally getting to that book!

Strict analysts of Schaller’s prediction would likely say that church growth and Christology are more complicated than he suggested. But, if we look at the world today, and see where the church is growing and where it is not, there would likely be general agreement that Schaller’s prediction has proven true. Christ centered churches, for all the difficulties of categorizing, are in many places doing well. Spirit centered churches, especially those in the Pentecostal and African tradition, are growing rapidly. Again, strict analysis is impossible here, but any who have traveled and worshiped with the churches in developing countries can likely testify to the unapologetic centrality of Christ and the Spirit which characterize these congregations.

Recent research data reminds us that though we are dealing with rapid church decline in the global north, this is not the case in the global south. According to former Saddleback Community Church pastor and popular author Rick Warren, the worldwide church has not only grown substantially in the last century but has also undergone a massive shift. One hundred years ago, ninety-five percent of believers in the world lived in

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<sup>11</sup> Lyle Schaller, “The New Reformation, Tomorrow Arrived Yesterday, (Nashville, Abingdon, 1995), 39

Europe and North America. Five percent lived elsewhere. Today it is exactly the opposite. Ninety five percent of the world population of Christians live in the global South. North America and Europe now make up the five percent.<sup>12</sup> Is it accurate to say that we as North American western mainline churches tend to be a bit more broadly God-centered instead of also highlighting Son and Spirit? I can hear many vehement arguments against the assumption. Certainly, neglecting Son or Spirit is not our intention, but as we decline and endure this weary road that we share with the congregation addressed in the book of Hebrews, the diagnosis merits some self-evaluation. Is our Christianity still about Jesus? What keeps us from raising our hands in praise along with our brothers and sisters in the global south?

### **It's All About All of Jesus**

Earlier, I referred to the time I spent on our Conference Board of Ministry, as we met with and interviewed candidates prior to credentialing them for leadership in the local church and beyond. Again, for a time, I chaired a team that asked the “theology” questions during the oral examinations. Over the years, we found that many of the standard questions just did not draw out the best responses. Answers were stale, rehearsed and predictable. So, we added a surprise question: “On Easter Sunday morning, you will be proclaiming the truth that Jesus is risen. What does the truth of the resurrection mean for your people when they go to work on Monday morning?”

To be fair, that is a hard question, and no one failed because of it. But it was and is revealing. All the candidates blinked a few times. Some just said, “I don’t know...”. A few of the top- tier folks got in a word about hope. But most went running home to momma and said in one way or another, “It means that when we die, we are going to heaven.”

And of course they were right. At the same time, I am not sure how much that is going to help me when I am trying to live as a new creation in Christ in this creation that doesn’t seem so new. Jesus had more to say about this life than simply going to heaven, and it comes largely through his teaching on the kingdom. *But to get to an accurate and empowered picture of that kingdom we must make it all about all of Jesus.*

N.T. Wright, in his book “How God Became King” highlights this truth through an illustration. He says we misunderstand the kingdom by picturing it as a body without a cloak and a cloak without a body. He begins by describing the way that some within our church today highlight the cloak and minimize the body:

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<sup>12</sup> Cary Nieuwhoff Podcast 754: <https://careynieuwhof.com/episode754>

“...readers experience the four gospels as an empty cloak. The outer wrapping is there – Jesus’s birth, death and resurrection. But who is inside the cloak: What did Jesus do in between? Is there anybody there? Does it matter?<sup>13</sup>

His point is that many in the church today can skip over the actual content of the gospels. In our rush to highlight the divinity of Jesus, we underscore the birth and run straight to the cross and the resurrection. This can be the case in classic evangelical doctrine. In overlooking the earthly work and teaching of Jesus, we miss a critical element of the kingdom.

The result of this “cloak without a body” is an over-emphasis on eternal salvation. We risk coming to see faith as a ticket to heaven. We have made a decision for Christ. We have been accepted and guaranteed eternal life. Salvation and the kingdom, lie mostly beyond the grave. As a result, things like kingdom diversity and justice are things that will come into being later rather than things that could be right now. Jesus, however, said that the kingdom is near. He wasn’t talking just about eternity. There really could be much more to our spiritual life and power if we paid more attention to the body inside the cloak.

Wesleyan teaching reminds us of the critical nature of our life right here and right now. Our heritage reminds us that salvation is not just about going to heaven. Salvation is about living eternal life now. Our role in this life is to grow in our Christian character. Additionally, we are to be a means of grace that changes this world. Wesley’s classic word is “perfection” and we are to pursue it. There is an ideal state, within us and this world which represents completion, the end, the telos. Few, if any of us will get there in this life. But that doesn’t stop us. Yes, we are going to heaven, and yes we will be perfected there. In the meantime, we move aggressively in this life, seeking to become more like what we will be, and working earnestly to make this world more like what it will be when the perfect kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.

The error of omission is not limited to those groups who focus on the cloak. We divided mainliners can all too easily highlight the body but overlook the cloak. The more progressive elements within our ranks do well in representing the teaching of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount, and the elements of the kingdom that highlight justice, mercy, and kingdom diversity. We wear our heritage of the Social Gospel with pride. That focus has carried us through battles from standing against slavery to working for civil rights.

But without some care, we can also minimize the cloak. Many in the ranks are unsure and vague about the virgin birth. Some on the rationalist end of the spectrum question a literal and physical resurrection. Atonement becomes one theory amongst

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<sup>13</sup> N.T. Wright, “How God Became King” (New York, HarperOne, 2011) 4-5

others. The purpose of Jesus' death on the cross is not personal salvation as much as it is to conquer this-wordly principalities and powers of sin and evil.

There is a loss of kingdom horsepower within this train of thought. Without the virgin birth, without the cross (or with a reduced emphasis upon it), and without the literal resurrection, the kingdom of God becomes a motivational vision instead of what it is, a cosmos-shaking revolution that gives us power right here right now to make this world more like what we want it to be. The cross and the resurrection give the kingdom sustaining power that will endure the horrors of war and holocaust, which took so much steam out of the Social Gospel movement. It is the cross that shatters the powers and principalities.

I have many close friends who live in both camps which I have described. They would have valid arguments against the categorizations. My conservative friends would likely say that they do underscore the teaching of Jesus and do believe in making a difference in this world right now. My progressive friends would highlight the importance of the cross, especially during the season of Lent. All of them love and believe in Jesus.

Even so, the poles of the spectrum do illustrate the challenge to our kingdom understanding. We are a divided church and have distinctive understandings of and emphases within the kingdom of God. And our partial and divided understandings are simply not working.

We need all of Jesus, all of the Gospels, and all the gospel. We can't have a kingdom come on earth without a cross and a resurrection. And the premier purpose of the cross and resurrection was to bring this kingdom of heaven to earth, just as Jesus demonstrated in those three years of ministry in this world. We really can make a social difference with this gospel right now. We also need to claim and celebrate our personal salvation while acknowledging the reality and wonder of a kingdom that goes beyond me and my own eternal life. The fullness and power of the kingdom is not found in our division, but in embracing and living into it all, the body and the cloak.

Jesus announced this "good news" and invited us to believe it. He also said that we must "repent". What does he mean and why does he require it?

### **Why Repentance?**

As mentioned earlier, a few years ago, I was preparing to head off on a trip to Illinois to visit my sister. As I was packing and loading, I was hearing reports of an interesting thing happening in Wilmore Kentucky. Many may not be familiar with this little town, but it is home to Asbury College and Asbury Seminary. Both institutions had been affiliated with

the United Methodist Church. Decades ago, there was a revival there that was foundational to several subsequent movements. That revival began in an old auditorium after a chapel service and continued for days.

It was happening again. Revival was “breaking out” in this auditorium and they had already been at it for a week or so. As mentioned earlier, I have studied revivals. I did my doctoral work on the historical spiritual movements in our country, and I traveled to Cuba several times to study the revivals in the Methodist Church that occurred throughout the 1990’s and beyond in the struggling island nation. So, my response to the revival in Wilmore was a no-brainer. I was headed in that direction. I could take a slight detour and check it out.

Everyone has expectations of what revival looks like. Let me offer two things I observed. First, I had never before had to stand in line for twenty minutes to go to church. It was 2:00 PM on a Wednesday afternoon and I was waiting in line to get in the packed auditorium.

Secondly and to our larger point, revivals, including this one, give lots of time to confession and repentance. This revival mostly involved college students and other young adults. Those over thirty were not even allowed to speak despite valiant attempts.

Sure enough, one by one, those young adults stood up in front of a thousand people or more (not including the online audience) and confessed their sins. Rest assured, those prayers of confession did not look much like the ones in our printed bulletins on Sunday morning. They confessed their sexual sins, their cheating, and other cringe worthy transgressions. Their words were raw and unnuanced. They offered no disclaimers. They put it out there and then fell upon God’s grace with thanksgiving for forgiveness in Jesus.

That was pretty much it for the entire afternoon that I was at the revival. There were no massive emotional outbursts. There was no shrieking, no speaking in tongues, and no fire from heaven. It was unrehearsed music, rough confession, lots of tears, and solid messages of grace and hope offered to those twenty-year-old college students. That revival went on for weeks after I left.

Jesus says that the kingdom of God is near. Our response, he says, is to “repent and believe the good news”. Is what I saw at the Wilmore revival the kind of repentance that Jesus is speaking of?

Maybe. There are certainly some of us who could use this repentance-on-steroids style of confession. Many of us can look back at our lives and see how things would have been different when we were young adults if we had stood up at a revival like that to confess our sins and have grace fall down upon us like rain. Our lives might have taken a

very different and healthy turn. Sometimes you just have to put the skunk on the table, open the window and let God's grace and sweet breeze clear the skunk and the air.

Let's acknowledge that there is also another more modest style of repentance, one that is not as newsworthy, but is yet sustainable over the long term. Some will know that the word repentance comes from the Greek word "metanoia". The Hebrew word is "teshuva". Literally, the word means to turn. We turn away from some things, and we turn towards others. The most obvious image here is that in repenting, we turn away from our sins, and in the words of the classic hymn, we "turn our eyes upon Jesus". We don't just change direction. We now walk in this new way, again toward Jesus. In keeping with the vision of our theme verse, we are walking towards this dawning kingdom of God that is coming on earth now, just as in heaven. It is Jesus calling us there, from there.

Repentance is about turning. It can also be about turning down the volumes. We are certainly in need of the classic style of repentance. In the long term, we are also in need of the volume-adjusting style of repentance. Repentance entails turning the volume down on some things and turning it up on others. Here, the common understanding of idolatry may be helpful.

The Bible, especially the Old Testament, speaks of idols of wood and stone and how they are anathema to God, to put it mildly. Those aren't the major problem for us today. None of us are out there bowing to a stone or a piece of wood. Instead, our idols are good things that become ultimate things. You can name your own, but the classic idols are money, power, and sex. Our relationships too, can become idols. So can our politics. How much time each day do you spend on your phone?

Hopefully the point is clear. Money, sex, power, relationships, politics, and even our phones are not bad things. They become idols when they become ultimate things. For us, the call to repentance may not mean a full turn around, though we always need to be open to that possibility. Instead, repentance may be about adjusting the volumes of various things in our lives. We turn down the volume of money in our life and turn more towards Jesus and his kingdom. We ignore that impulse to pick up the phone when it buzzes in worship and keep our eyes on the kingdom. Some folks I know who are skilled in the practice of spiritual disciplines have told me that their fasting times are no longer from food. It is much more helpful (and harder!) to fast from social media. The list goes on.

This book is about spiritual renewal. The claim is that because the kingdom of God is near, there is the possibility of a spiritual sunrise in our life and our church. That sunrise comes when we turn away from some things and turn towards this kingdom, and even more, towards the Lord who brings it from heaven to us. In our life, that may not mean massive changes, though again, we should never discount the need. It might instead require volume adjustments. We may need to turn down the volume of those potential

idols, those things that compete to be ultimate things in our lives. We do that so that we can hear the full symphony, God's Opus in all its nuance: the kingdom of God.

### **Seek First the Kingdom First: Personal Repentance**

What things in your life need to be thrown out or turned down? What are the idols or potential idols in your life? Perhaps you could look at the things that make you angry.

Anger is not necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes it can be a good thing. God gets angry and hopefully, we are also angry at the things that incite God's wrath. We call that "righteous indignation"

The problem is that a lot of our anger is not righteous, even though we like to think it is. In addition, anger is not to be lasting, yet we like to chew that piece of anger gum for a long time, trying to nurse every possible bit of flavor out of it. Sometimes we like being angry.

James speaks of our anger this way:

"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't' they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4:1-3).

Within these verses, James is reminding us that our anger is often a symptom of not getting what we want. We are angry because someone is messing with our idols. Our anger wells up to protect our idols. Don't mess with my idol. Don't attack it! Don't speak ill of it. After all, I depend on it, I need it, and I trust in it.

Have you ever been there? Take a seat and write down the things that make you angry. If you are feeling courageous, consult your spouse, significant other, or friend (if you promise not to get angry at what they tell you!) What would they say makes you angry? What is your anger protecting? Is there a way you can turn the volume down on that idol or potential idol? It may be as simple as turning down off your favorite news channel and turning up the volume on that Bible study that the church is offering. It may be turning the volume down on spending on some areas and turning the volume up on your giving to the church. The list can go on but hopefully the point is clear. Repentance for us individually may not mean that we stand up and confess our sins in front of a thousand people. More likely, it can begin by looking at the things that make me unrighteously angry. I can take

some steps to turn the volume down and walk deeper into the good news of that Jesus says is here for me.

## **Seek First the Kingdom: Congregational Repentance**

A church is not renewed unless its people are renewed. Any process for new life in a congregation begins with the spiritual life of those within. Now let's extend this image of repentance to the congregation. Where does the church need to repent? How does the congregation and leadership need to engage in some volume adjustment?

For several years, I served as a coach and team member for various United Methodist Churches in Virginia as they took deliberate steps toward congregational renewal. We called the process "Next Level Innovations". The church would begin with Sue Nilson Kibbey's powerful model of "Breakthrough Prayer".<sup>14</sup> Then, the church would complete a self-evaluation. We would hire "secret shoppers" who would visit the congregation to evaluate their level of hospitality and guest friendliness. All of it culminated in a weekend where we put together a report. This review was offered to the congregation for their prayer, reflection, and possible approval. If they voted to approve, I (or sometimes another person) would be their coach, and together, we would work the approved plan.

In many ways, that written plan was all about this volume adjustment style of repentance. Most often, the church was not faced with catastrophic problems. There were large issues, but not overwhelming ones. The churches were not in danger of closing in the next week. Renewal was not so much about turning one hundred and eighty degrees, but instead it was about adjusting volumes.

There were always problems. But consistently, the churches were also doing amazing things. The trick was about getting the congregation to turn the volume down on some things and get it cranked up on others. This style of repentance isn't exactly John in the wilderness crying out about the brood of vipers, but it seems to work in the wilderness of congregations that are broods of worn-out and weary saints.

You could likely offer a quick inventory in your church right now. What are the issues in your congregation that are speaking with the most volume? I can speak for my denomination, the United Methodist Church. For years we have battled and divided on issues of inclusivity. We are now in at least two separate camps. For decades the volume

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<sup>14</sup> See Sue Nilson Kibbey, "Ultimate Reliance: Breakthrough Prayer Practices for Leaders" (Nashville, Abingdon, 2019)

has been loud (literally) at our General Conferences on the issue of LGBTQ+ inclusion and ordination, and of same-gender marriage. At the peak of the conflict, the local church I now serve lost one quarter of its weekly attendance and a substantial amount of budget. Staff were let go.

Renewal very likely requires that the volume now come down on this issue. In addition, renewal will require that the volume of contempt for the other side come down. It may be impossible to do this on our own. But the time has come...the kingdom is near...there is something much bigger than our anger and contempt on the horizon.

A similar thing may be true in your congregation, not necessarily with this issue, but with division over political issues. Your congregation has two camps, and you survive by managing a bland middle. Perhaps the volume of the politics can be adjusted. As we will see in a subsequent chapter, the switch need not be turned off but perhaps the tune can be played differently.

Maybe the high-volume issue for your congregation is a particular doctrinal issue. Maybe it is a frustration with a clergy leader of the past. Maybe it is a staff member who drives folks crazy. I remember a church I served years ago that was literally divided over pew cushions. At multiple leadership gatherings, there would be a request from a contingent who would advocate for it. They had funds for it. But there was a music group that wanted pure acoustics in the room and fought against the sound-dampening pew cushions. On and on it went for years. The volume on the issue had to be turned down if there was going to be any hope for spiritual renewal in the congregation.

In it all, it is not just about what we are turning away from. It isn't only about turning the volume down. It is, even more, an issue of who and what we are turning toward. It is about the One for whom we are cranking the volume up. It is more about facing the kingdom sunrise and its King. We need to be mindful of this truth because repentance is hard. It has to be. It carries a lot of weight and needs to because we are astubborn people. We like our volume adjustment as it is. We like our particular area of focus on the cloak (Jesus' birth and his death and resurrection), or on the body (the gospel teaching with minimal reference to the cross). But if we turn our eyes upon Jesus and all of Jesus, as we will now see, as good as that is, life in him can seem strangely upside down...

**Chapter Two**  
**Kingdom Possibilities**  
**Study Questions**

1. Jesus made a broad public pronouncement about the kingdom. How comfortable are you with publicly offering of the “good news”.
2. Describe a time when you were suddenly put in the uncomfortable position of speaking about your faith publicly. How was this experience for you?
3. Do you prefer to practice your faith publicly or privately? Why?
4. Does Christianity sometimes seem to you to consist of religious advice on how to live or perhaps, how to go to heaven? How does Jesus’ announcement of “good news” change that?
5. Lots of people speak about living Jesus centered lives. Many churches describe themselves as “Christ centered”. What do you believe that means?
6. Do you think it accurate to describe the contemporary mainline church, or even your own church in the way the chapter characterized the congregation addressed in the book of Hebrews: tired and weary? Does that describe your personal faith? Why or why not?
7. Do you agree or disagree with the admittedly broad and unqualified statement that churches that focus upon Jesus, or upon the Spirit generally do better?
8. On which side of the cloak/body analogy would you say you or your church dwells? Do you lean more towards the body, focusing on the teaching of Jesus and less on the cross? Or, are you more on the evangelical side, focused deliberately on the cross and going to heaven when you die side? Are you a healthy mixture of both/and? Are you offended by the question?
9. The chapter suggested that revival repentance is important but that more often, we need volume-adjustment repentance. We need to turn down the volume on merely-good things and turn up the volume on the ultimate thing: Jesus and his kingdom. What are some of the things we need to turn down in our own personal lives?
10. What things make you angry? Is that anger righteous? Does that anger point to something that has become ultimate in your life? Is there a way to turn the volume down on that thing that makes you angry?
11. Extend the repentance question now to your congregation. What things need the volume turned down? What things need to be turned up?
12. The basic premise of this book is that spiritual renewal can come by looking through the lens of the kingdom of God and seeking this kingdom first. Do you agree? Why or why not?



## Chapter Three

# The “Upside Down” Kingdom

*“These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also...  
(Acts 17:6 NRSV)*

*“Recently a pilot was practicing high-speed maneuvers in a jet fighter. She turned the controls for what she thought was a steep ascent—and flew straight into the ground. She was unaware that she had been flying upside down. This is a parable of human existence in our times—not exactly that everyone is crashing, though there is enough of that—but most of us as individuals, and world society as a whole, live at high-speed, and often with no clue to whether we are flying upside down or right-side up. Indeed, we are haunted by a strong suspicion that there may be no difference—or at least that it is unknown or irrelevant.”*

Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life In God

Dallas Willard opens his book “The Divine Conspiracy” with this noted flying illustration. I can relate. I have spent many hours in the cockpit of a military jet aircraft and have spent a bit of that time flying in all sorts of orientations. Any tactical military flyer is quite accustomed to flying upside down.

As referenced, maneuvering is different when your plane is inverted. Typically, pulling back on the stick gains altitude. Pushing forward reduces altitude. Not so when you are upside down. It is the opposite. If you want to gain altitude you push forward and correspondingly, if you want to descend, you pull on the stick.

It isn’t so hard when there is a point of reference. When the sky is clear and you can see the horizon, you can tell if you are right side up or upside down. It is obvious if you are turning or not. But once you are in the clouds, all bets are off. Thick clouds look the same upside down or not. You can pull on the stick, but you don’t know if you are going up or down.

Except that you have modern technology to help. Years ago, very smart people designed something called an artificial horizon, visible on the instrument panel of the plane. Basically, it has a bunch of gyroscopes inside it. Here is a quick physics lesson. When wheels (like bicycles or gyroscopes) spin, especially when they spin fast, they don’t like to move. They maintain their orientation. That is why we can ride a bike without falling and it is also why aircraft can fly in clouds. Those spinning gyroscopes keep the artificial horizon steady. It always stays the same, mimics the horizon (even in the clouds) and the aircraft actually spins around that little instrument while it steadily does its job from start up to shut down, showing you where up, down, left, and right are.

This is not, of course, a lesson on instrument flying. It is a lesson on how to navigate a life of discipleship, living by the steady and unchanging horizon of the kingdom of God that has come in Jesus. It is a life of living “right side up” when the world is living “upside down”, or per Dallas’ illustration, in a world that may not know up from down.

Onlookers may think the problem is with the kingdom. From their perspective, we are the problem, and they are right side up. That was certainly the case with Paul and his companions as they entered Thessalonica. Paul’s preaching caused a riot in the city. They dragged several of the believers shouting: “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also” (Acts 17:6 NRSV).

Veteran preacher Barbara Brown Taylor does her usual magic in helping us to bring these aerobatic maneuvers to earth. In her essay “Blessed Are the Upside Down” she invites us to the scene as Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount to the crowd:

“I think Jesus should have asked the crowd to stand on their heads when he taught them the Beatitudes, because that was what he was doing. He was turning the known world upside down, so that those who had been fighting for breath at the bottom of the human heap suddenly found themselves closest to heaven, while those who thought they were on top of things found themselves flat on their backs looking up.”<sup>15</sup>

Her point is hopefully obvious. What is so blessed about being poor, or poor in spirit? What is so great about mourning and meekness? Perhaps you have spent your life seeking that elusive “righteousness” and haven’t found this happiness of which Jesus speaks. Last time I checked the merciful tend to lose out. Peacemakers are just called compromisers in our divided political kingdoms.

This upside-down view isn’t limited to The Beatitudes. Jesus turned the tables upside down on money. The rich guy doesn’t fare well in eternity, but the poor man Lazarus does. The ones who make it to the top of the religious pyramid are the ones who are condemned. In contrast Jesus never condemned the non-religious folks who were seeking him and his hope. Jesus reminded us that the last come first, and the greatest is the one who serves.

The list goes on considerably further, but the point is that Jesus is clearly flying by a different reference; the kingdom of God. That horizon will one day become the actual horizon in this world when he and his kingdom come in fullness.

We are not there yet, but the illustration does help us take on a renewed understanding of the role our discipleship plays in relationship to this kingdom. Our

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<sup>15</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Gospel Medicine* (pp. 159-160). Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition.

discipleship is the thing that keeps us flying right side up, always referencing the orientation of the kingdom and the King.

But most of us don't think of our discipleship in such robust kingdom language. Definition is called for.

## Defining Our Discipleship

As referenced earlier, I have spent several renewal seasons and weekends with various congregations as they seek a new level of vitality for their church. We typically address issues of discipleship. One of the common exercises is to invite the church to establish a definition of discipleship. For the Methodists among us, this is our thing. Our well-known mission statement centers on making disciples for the transformation of the world. Most every United Methodist can quote that statement. Even so, we struggle to define what a disciple is.

Some are offended that we even ask. It isn't that hard, they say. Multiple lighter and simpler definitions flow into the conversation. But if discipleship really is the thing that keeps us aligned with the artificial horizon, or more accurately with the kingdom and the King, perhaps more deliberate attention is in order. Flying upside down means being different. It means there is recognizable difference between disciples and those who are not. Jesus was of course more eloquent and called this being salt and light. The problem is that, despite this having been preached in multiple sermon illustrations over decades, every piece of research says that the church is just like everyone else. Our giving, our divorce rate, and other key items don't stand out in the crowd. The problem is fuzzy discipleship. Our definition is unclear and our resultant lifestyle as disciples loses saltiness.

The church I serve, Reveille United Methodist Church, recently completed a substantial restructuring process. We are a couple years in, and it has proven extraordinarily helpful. A part of the process was to establish a team around this issue of discipleship. Their first task was to define the word. The team took several months and established a great **definition**. The transformational power was not only in the final phrasing. It was also in the process. The lengthy conversations changed the way we see our small groups. Our discipleship efforts are not just about transmitting information, though that is part of it. Our goal is to be transformational, and not just informational. Additionally, the process reminded us of the essential nature of relationships. We gather to deepen our relationship with Christ and with one another. Discipleship became less fuzzy, and we pray, that even more lives will be changed as a result.

Taking time to define discipleship also makes it more real. I have always appreciated Dallas Willard's understanding of discipleship. He speaks at length about it but I have

always distilled and summarized his words this way: “Being a disciple is living my life the way Jesus would live my life if Jesus had my life to live”<sup>16</sup>

One of his many points is that we don’t have to move away and be a missionary or a preacher to be a disciple. The life we have right here and now is the life that Jesus has given us. We can be a worker, a mother or father, a grandparent, a retired senior, and the list goes on. Our call is not to leave the life we have, but to settle into that life and live that life the way Jesus would if he were living my life.

How would Jesus make those decisions? What would Jesus say yes or no to? How would Jesus handle that hard conversation that is in front of me right now, one that I would frankly rather avoid? The list of course goes on, but it is all about looking to Jesus and his kingdom and trying to fly this life by that steady horizon, when so many other lives and worlds around me are oriented in the opposite direction and are good that. Flying right side up is hard. We need a real, present, and risen Jesus to do that. And the good news is that Jesus promised us that he would be there always, to the end of the age as we go about living out this definition and teaching others.

### **Big Talk but Does it Really Work?**

In the chapters that follow, we are going to talk about how we measure our “success” in the church. Is it in our attendance? Is it in our finances? Is it in just keeping the doors open and paying the preacher every week?

As we will see, those numbers are important, but one of the key indicators in the quest to measure our success is change. Are lives being changed because our church is here? Is our community different because our church is here? Is my life different because I know Jesus and follow him? Changed lives and communities are hard (though not impossible) to measure. But, they are likely the best measure of our work. Change happens primarily through discipleship.

How does that happen? Thinking about the Sermon on the Mount helps us enter the conversation. All of us are drawn to and intrigued by the beauty of the Sermon. The insight, the teaching, the upside-down way of living call to us, hold us close, and fill us with the desire to heed the sermon’s concluding altar call to build our house on the rock.

It is also common to hear the words differently from the way Jesus preached them: Jesus is the new Moses. Moses came down from Mount Sinai, bringing the law, the Ten Commandments. Jesus now comes to the Mount brings the law 2.0. Now go, be a peacemaker, be merciful, don’t judge, don’t look in lust, don’t worry, don’t divorce.

All those things are of course good things. The Sermon on the Mount is not, however, a new set of nicer rules. As Dallas Willard and others remind us, the Sermon is an

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<sup>16</sup> Dallas Willard, “The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God” (New York, Harper One, 1997) 283.

invitation that comes with a promise. In these words, *Jesus is telling us that if we come to him, he will make us into people who do these things*. As we take his yoke upon us, as we enter apprenticeship under him, as we follow him and live our lives the way he would live our lives, we become like him and as such, we become peacemakers, non-judgers, and people who look at other men and women with purity from both eyes. In the words of Ezekiel, our hearts of stone have been replaced with hearts of flesh. But this doesn't just happen. It happens through the process of discipleship.

Perhaps you remember the old movie series "The Matrix". There are many great spiritual illustrations and allusions within the film, but there is one scene that is not in sync with this style of change and discipleship of which we speak.

The team is in one of their multiple battles against the forces of "The Matrix". The Messiah figure, "Neo" is escaping the evil.... And is in the process of being rescued by the heroine of the series, "Trinity". The only way to escape is by Trinity flying a military helicopter. She has never flown one. The good news is that they are in the computer "Matrix" world. Everything is computer generated. Reality is dictated by the programs. So, conveniently, Trinity calls in to the operator. She says she needs a download to fly this complicated helicopter. With a modest amount of head shaking and eye blinking, the download arrives in her brain. Instantly, she is a skilled helicopter pilot, flies the machine to its limits, rescues Neo, takes out the bad guys, and off they go.

Perhaps this illustration is too personal. It took two years of my life and years at sea on an aircraft carrier to master the military aircraft I flew. It would have been great to just have a matrix "download" to be able to fly it, but of course, it required my life to learn to fly the complex jet.

Being a disciple is the same. People rarely if ever just change. Disciples don't just happen. The process takes time, and the process takes our life.

This non-Matrix, long term, change me and the world discipleship generally happens by three means: supernatural change in us, new narratives and training.

### **Supernatural Change**

The Matrix illustration is not totally wrong. The Bible speaks in multiple places of G supernatural change that God brings about in us. In Ezekiel, we are told of God's heart surgery. God replaces our heart of stone and gives us a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). Peter, on the day of Pentecost, on receiving the Holy Spirit was instantly a different man. The one who had denied Jesus preached a very hard text from Joel at Pentecost and thousands of people came to faith. Jesus told Nicodemus that we have to be born again to see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Paul reminded us that we are new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Something miraculous and supernatural happens in our souls when we humble ourselves, repent of our sin, and give our lives to Jesus. We are changed. But in the classic

words of Winston Churchill in one of his speeches: "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

Upon these humbled hearts of flesh, these born-again creatures and new creations, God's Spirit goes to work on us, building new narratives and shaping us through the training we call spiritual disciplines.

### **Right Side Up Narratives**

For several years, I taught preaching to new clergy, typically just before they took on their first pulpit. One of the questions I would ask the students was about the voices in their heads as they wrote their sermons. What faces show up as you write? What seminary voices speak into your head as you interpret the Bible reading? What voices are you trying to please as you construct a sermon? What questions and whose questions are you trying to answer? What voices are you trying to silence? Hopefully the first voice in our head is that of the Spirit, but I am the first to admit that as I prepare sermons, I still have a great preaching professor speaking in my head, Dr. Betty Achtemeier. She was ruthless in my preaching training (in the best sense) and I still see her firm yet gentle eyes looking at me post sermon. I can still picture her strong and pointed edits on my sermon manuscripts.

The point is that all of us, preacher or not, have voices talking in our head, and that doesn't mean we are crazy. Psychologists, but also discipleship leaders such as James Bryan Smith<sup>17</sup> describe these voices in more eloquent terms: narratives.

We all live out of those voices and narratives. Each of us has a way of thinking about God, thinking about others, thinking about the world, and thinking about ourselves. Those voices, assumptions, or narratives guide us as we act. Because we believe God, others, and the world are this way, I choose to do this or that.

Perhaps there is really no surprise there, but the challenge comes when we operate from inaccurate, false, or harmful narratives. There are some obvious ones: "I am nothing and I have no worth". "I grew up without anyone ever seeing me and I am therefore invisible and consequently, irrelevant in this world". "God is angry all the time, and he is certainly angry at me". "The world is always a dangerous place". "Everything is out there to get me". The list goes on. Some false narratives are not inherently dangerous, but others are.

Making this clear is one of the goals of a good sermon. This is the role of solid worship. Like a soccer match, we seek the truth within the Scriptures to block the shots of the false narratives as they strive to score against the hearts and souls of our people. We seek to score in the nets of our people's souls with the true narratives of God, of love, of grace, of hope, and of sin. If we are doing our job correctly, we are offering our people a

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<sup>17</sup> James Bryan Smith, "The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows (The Good and Beautiful Series), (Downers Grove, 2009)

firm Biblical narrative of God, the world, and ourselves that is in keeping with the kingdom, with this right side up living of which we speak. Ideally, those twenty-minute messages and the music and prayer that underscore them, forms a better voice that then prepares shapes us to answer the people's classic question in Ezekiel, "How then shall we live?" (Ezekiel 33:10). It enables people to fly right side up in an upside-down world. We change to live in accordance with a better, more accurate, and truthful narrative, dare we say a truer reality which we call the kingdom of God.

### **Train or Try Harder?**

Multiple authors, including John Ortberg<sup>18</sup>, James Bryan Smith, and others have also reminded us that change does not typically happen by just trying harder. The classic example is the weight-loss New Year's resolution. Everyone knows how advertisements for weight loss programs fill media space throughout the first part of the year. They are there to play on our New Year's declaration that we will lose weight this year. On their own, most of those well intentioned resolutions fail. Our will is good but not good enough. Note, however, that not all the efforts fail. Many weight loss programs provide sustainable structures. Come to this meeting weekly. Do this routine and establish a form of accountability. Here is a weekly supply of nutritious food. Most who simply "try harder" without sustainable structure fail.

The concept is also true in our discipleship. Change does not happen merely by trying harder but by training. In the church, we train through what we have come to know as "The Spiritual Disciplines".

Spiritual disciplines are not complicated. The traditional folks among us might call them "means of grace". That means that these spiritual practices are pathways of God's work in our lives. The Spirit uses these things to form and change us. They are the ways that God's flow of grace reaches into our souls. They are the exercise machines in the gym that are the "means" of changing us, restoring us, conforming us into the people we were created to be.

There are classic disciplines: worship, study, giving, serving, prayer, and fasting among others. Multiple great authors over centuries have spoken to the styles and ways of practicing these disciplines. The point here is not to tell you how to do them, but to be reminded that this is the way of change. Following these disciplines is a primary feature of the way of discipleship; sustained change will likely not occur if we fail to practice them.

For years I attended church infrequently. That was maybe a couple of times a year. I never really understood the role of spiritual disciplines. As with many young people, college and young adult life were a time of distance from faith and church. The center of my life was flying. There came a time, however, when that center no longer worked. Months at

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<sup>18</sup> John Ortberg, "The Life You've Always Wanted", ( Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1997)

sea, staring at endless ocean spurred more waves of questions than answers. As a result, I resolved that I would go back to church when I finished the sea deployment. I would try harder.

I attended church for the first time in quite a while but to be honest, it wasn't that great. The Navy base chapel service was sparsely attended, the sermon dry, and the music almost non-existent. I walked out of the chapel asking myself why I came when a man approached me. He was a fellow aviator, though from a different community. Out of the blue, he invited me to a Bible study in his home. Normally, I would have politely said thank you, I'll think about it, and blown him off. I didn't do that. I realized that this is why I was there. I joined his study, along with several other Navy fliers. For two years, we gathered and studied the Bible. The curriculum wasn't complicated. Each week we read, we filled in the blanks in a simple workbook and returned each week to process and pray together. It wasn't a deep study, but it revealed a deep truth within me that I had to resolve. I was living one way, and the Bible clearly spoke about living another way. I had to address the difference. It was the Sermon on the Mount. For all my flying experience and focus upon artificial horizons in the cockpit, I was flying upside down. These men were working on flying right-side up. Gradually, I, or perhaps more accurately God, moved the stick of my soul, and turned me right side up, or at least much closer to it.

The point is that it didn't happen only in worship, though worship was necessary and drew me in. It happened because I engaged in other spiritual disciplines. That group taught me how to pray, how to serve in mission, and how to give financially. Those seeds eventually drew me into the life and ministry I now have. That right side living, grown out of a living room Bible study, is the reason that I am married to an incredible woman, have five children, and nine grandchildren.

For the Methodists amongst us, let us remember that this is our sweet spot. We may not have invented small groups, but our heritage put them on steroids. Wesley knew that the Spirit works in powerful ways when a small group gets together, wrestles with the Bible, and encourages and challenges one another. Change happens here. In the words of the classic song within the play "Hamilton", this is "The Room Where It Happens".

This Methodist sweet spot is not just technique. Methodists believe in grace. This grace which we claim is not just a sweet breeze, though it is certainly sweet and amazing. We believe that grace is much more robust. For us, grace is almost synonymous with the Holy Spirit. Grace is sent by God with power to change us.

We talk about it in fancy terms: prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying but we don't need to get bogged down in the theological terms. God, through the Holy Spirit, pours grace upon you with the express purpose of changing you, making you and me into those new creations in Christ of which Paul spoke. Wesley described this process as "going on to perfection". He dared to believe that through this process of discipleship, we could be more

like the perfected soul that we will actually be in the fullness of the kingdom and that we could be that way right now in this life.

In other words, this grace really works. It works as we open our lives up to those streams of mercy and power, sent straight from the heart of our risen Lord. And, that grace is not just generic rays of sunshine. It comes through streams, within these disciplines, through things like prayer, giving, worship, study, and serving. As we do these things, we are training and ideally, we become more like Christ. We don't do them to appease or get what we want from God. But as we dive deeper, we find ourselves encouraged and equipped as disciples to fly right side up in an upside-down world.

### **Seek First the Kingdom**

A quick review is in order. This book is written with the conviction that Jesus offers us a kairos opportunity. Personal and church renewal is available because, as he says, "the kingdom of God is near." We are learning to look at our lives, our churches, and our world through the lens of the kingdom, seeking renewal through this now open door. It worked for Jesus. He sought the kingdom first and renewal came through him. We seek that same renewal by seeking, like him, this same kingdom first.

What does that look like when we speak to our discipleship? It begins with our life and church choices.

John Ortberg says it this way: "For me, this truth brought light to the darkness. For the first time as an adult, I found the notion of following Jesus a real, concrete, tangible possibility. I could do it. Following Jesus simply means learning from him how to arrange my life around activities that enable me to live in the fruit of the Spirit."<sup>19</sup>

His experience is not unique. Being a disciple of Jesus means rearranging your life. Anyone who tells you different is not telling you the truth. Ortberg speaks of it in relatively gentle terms, but veteran discipleship folks like Dietrich Bonhoeffer speak more candidly: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."<sup>20</sup>

Years ago, when I was sixteen years old, I attended our church's youth group. I went regularly, but truth be told, I was more interested in the girls than the programs. (It worked! I ended up marrying one of the girls in that group and we have been married almost forty years!)

One afternoon, one of our church's pastors pulled me aside. He asked me to be the president of the group for the coming year. I might have been young, but I had the classic

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<sup>19</sup> Ortberg, John. *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (p. 44). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>20</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Cost of Discipleship" (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1937), 99

“honored you asked but my life is full and I can’t do it” response down cold. I was starting an important year of high school. I was taking very hard advanced placement classes. I was involved in several school athletic teams. College applications were coming up. I was also very busy as a drummer in a band that was growing in followings and gigs. We played most weekends.

I guess I thought the pastor would be impressed with how busy I was. I figured he would do what frankly I do now as a pastor when I make that ask, as people go through the list with me. I thought he would simply understand and say thanks for considering. He didn’t do that. He said, “why don’t you take some time, and figure out what you need to give up in order to do this.” No one had challenged me like that in my high school path to achievement and college applications.

It worked. I went home and thought about it. I wish I could say I prayed about it, but I really wasn’t there yet. I did something that to this day, I can’t explain. I left the band, ultimately sold my drums, and took the job of leading Sunday night youth gatherings. I wasn’t a very good leader, but I was there. I was learning, and maybe even growing a bit in this thing we call following Jesus.

As we mentioned earlier, as Jesus speaks of the kingdom, and that’s not unlike what my youth pastor did for me. Jesus presents the kingdom in parables. Several of those offer intense pictures of judgement: darkness, gnashing of teeth, and eternal punishment. They are sometimes offered as pictures of hell.

We would be wise not to dismiss the intensity too quickly. Perhaps Jesus, in these strong words of eternal punishment isn’t trying to tell us where we are going after we die. Instead, he presents it and allows us to stand at a safe distance and ponder. Perhaps these judgment parables are a bit like the bold and direct question of my youth pastor. This is the deal, go home and figure out what you need to do to rearrange your life, so that it looks more like this kingdom.

Ortberg spoke about rearranging his life around activities that would enable him to live in the fruit of the Spirit. My youth pastor said to think about what I need to give up. Bonhoeffer says I need to come and die. Perhaps we all would do well to take a spiritual inventory. Kingdom renewal calls for a calendar review. Jesus’ picture of the kingdom invites us to make life choices right now. As we look at the kingdom horizon, perhaps we should say no to some things so that we can deliberately say yes to others.

Years ago, a church I was serving embarked on a campaign, but it wasn’t about stewardship, at least not about the money. We asked our people to become “two-hour people”. In other words, it is awesome that you are in worship, but we are asking you to take an additional step and engage in some of these disciplines. Join a class. Sign up for one of our ministries. The list went on. We even printed up buttons. Despite great efforts, it didn’t go that well. We had a few sign-ups, but we continued to struggle with attendance at

our Sunday morning studies, classes, children's programs, mid-week studies, and other ministries.

It was understandable. Our people are very busy. After a ten-hour day, it is hard to get to a study. After five or six ten-hour workdays, it is hard to get to one hour on Sunday morning. And though we always must be understanding and generous with our people, we also come face to face with a fundamental kingdom truth. We must be at least two-hour people to begin that spiritual change and renewal which we hopefully seek.

Personal spiritual renewal will likely not happen without making some changes in our lives that provide bandwidth for God's grace to go to work on us. The lesson is true for us as individuals, but it is also true for us as congregations.

### **Do We Seek the Kingdom First as a Congregation?**

What does it look like to seek the kingdom first as a church through discipleship and right-side up living? It might begin with some hard questions about our programming.

Does our programming enable right-side up living? Do our weekly ministries facilitate actual change? Perhaps it is as simple as starting some small groups, Bible studies, or other small gatherings in your congregation.

At my current church, we have doubled down of late on discipleship. We have added a substantial number and variety of weekly classes to draw more people into the studies. It is my habit to lead one of those gatherings each semester. On the first week of a recent study, we had a full table of folks as we began our time with some introductions. I noted two people who I didn't recognize. They were both from different churches, each located just a couple of miles from our congregation. I was surprised as we had not advertised the classes generally outside our church.

We of course welcomed them and were interested to know what brought them to us. They both indicated that their churches offered no studies or classes. One of them was from a large church. They weren't interested in changing churches, and we didn't do any recruiting, but the point is that there are likely many churches just like theirs who have minimal discipleship opportunities beyond worship. Discipleship groups can take many forms, but it would be a rare thing to find any congregational kingdom renewal when these gatherings are sparse or non-existent.

It is not enough just to gather. Content matters. The "why" matters. There is nothing wrong with fellowship gatherings. They are one of the joys of belonging to a church. But it may be helpful to remember that these gatherings do the heavy lifting of kingdom transformation in the lives of our people. At their best, these gatherings become the occasion of deep spiritual transformation. It is therefore important to prayerfully consider leadership, leadership training, content and purpose to ensure the gatherings instill kingdom change.

It is also important to do a deep dive into our congregational administrative and leadership organization. Does our structure drive us to the kingdom and renewal? Do our meetings facilitate and pursue kingdom change as a congregation?

Recently, Kay Kotan and Blake Bradford have provided resources to offer this exact style of thinking. They have compiled the efforts into a book entitled “Mission Possible: A Simple Structure for Missional Effectiveness”<sup>21</sup>

The book draws the people of the church to re-vision their structure so that they achieve their mission. Things become smaller and purpose driven. My church recently entered the process, and though we didn’t implement everything, we embraced several features. The premier one is simply reevaluating our leadership gatherings. Our meetings are not just about reporting; they are also about accountability. Are we achieving our mission and or vision statement? To put it in our kingdom renewal discipleship language, we now ask ourselves, “Are we changing lives?” Are we making a difference in our community?” I will be the first to admit that the answers are not always great; we drift into our old style of reporting more than we should. All the same, it is a healthy thing for leadership to ask hard questions about accountability to mission and purpose.

### **What If It Really Is True?**

What if what Jesus said is true? What if the kingdom is near, just as he said? What if I really could change right now? What if the dry bones of my congregation could find new life right now? Jesus didn’t lace his inaugural phrase with disclaimers. He just said that there is good news right here and right now and spoke as if there is more possibility in front of us than we could ever imagine

It is hard to see it when we are flying upside down. But Jesus wasn’t looking at the inverted world. He was looking at the kingdom, and he had the audacity to proclaim that the resources of this right side up eternity on the horizon are available to us right now. To be sure, we may need to make some hard life choices to appropriate the benefits. We may need to embrace better narratives. By itself, trying harder won’t change us nor will it bring the kingdom to us. Grace, however, is still amazing, and this grace is not just a nice gentle breeze. It blows in power through things like discipleship gatherings, worship, and other means of grace we call spiritual disciplines. If we are willing to sell all we have for this treasure we call the kingdom of God, if we are willing to make life and church choices to obtain this pearl of great price, we may just find that life for which we and our churches have been searching all along.

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<sup>21</sup> Kay Kotan and Blake Bradford, “Mission Possible: A Simple Structurer for Missional Effectiveness”, (Nashville, Market Square, 2019)



**Chapter Three**  
**The “Upside Down” Kingdom**  
**Study Questions**

1. Name some ways that the kingdom of God is upside down from the common values of our world.
2. Does your faith compel you to live your life differently than the rest of the world? How so?
3. How would you define discipleship in your own words?
4. How has your faith changed you? If so, how did that change happen?
5. How have faith and church shaped your narratives? How do you see the world, yourself, and God differently because of what you believe?
6. This chapter made a bold claim: We likely won’t be changed as one-hour-a-week people. Would you agree or disagree?
7. The writer told a story of how his youth pastor invited him to think about what he could give up so that he could fill a role in the youth ministry of the church. Would you find the question challenging? Do you need to give some things up to pursue a deeper level of discipleship?
8. Change occurs not by trying harder but by training harder. Would you agree or disagree? Can you name an experience in your life outside of church when this was so? Can you describe an instance or a time when participating in spiritual disciplines made a difference in your life?
9. Do you think your church is making a difference? Are people’s lives changed because of your church? Is the community different because the church is there?
10. Is your church structured to make an impact on lives and on the community? If you had a magic wand, what would you change to make it so?

## Chapter Four

## Kingdom Diversity

*“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the lamb”.*  
*(Revelation 7:9)*

On June 7, 1955, nearly thirteen hundred residents of Prince Edward County gathered in Jarman Hall, on the campus of Longwood College. The atmosphere was heated. Prince Edward County was at the center of the national conversation around civil rights and school desegregation. The county was part of the famous Supreme Court decision “Brown versus Board of Education”. A few years prior, black students at the Moton High School walked out of class in protest of the substandard school conditions. That walk to the County Courthouse propelled the previously non-descript county, located in the heart of Central Virginia, into the national limelight.

One year prior to this meeting the Supreme Court had ruled. Schools needed to be desegregated. Counties across the state of Virginia began the process. Many counties fought the order. Prince Edward fought it hard. A week prior to this community gathering, the County Board of Supervisors had met. They voted to not appropriate money for the public schools. They would rather close the public schools than desegregate.

But what about the children? Where would they go to school? That was the question on the agenda of this Jarman Hall gathering. And so, on that hot evening, intense discussion ensued. The majority was clearly in favor of closing the schools. There was some objection, particularly from the local Presbyterian pastor, James Kennedy. The opposition was substantial and rose against him. He would soon resign from his church. The leaders of the movement to close the schools were also leaders in his church. The meeting continued and the vote was overwhelming. Not only did the community support closing the schools, but they also supported private funding for educating the white children. They took in financial pledges that night for their independent schooling. The black children were left to fare for themselves.

They didn't fare well. For five years, there were no schools. Some left the county to live with relatives and have an education. Others found a semblance of schooling at home. Many just didn't have school at all. Finally, in 1963, Robert F. Kennedy traveled to Prince Edward County. His arrival as Attorney General provided the momentum to finally reopen the schools.

But the damage had been done and would endure for decades. The full account of this event can be found in the book “They Closed Our Schools”<sup>22</sup> but the work doesn’t describe the wounds that remain in the county and particularly, in the town of Farmville, Virginia. I had the privilege of serving the United Methodist Church in that community for five years. It was and is an incredible church and setting. The wounds, however, were still there, forty years later. When I served there, there was a public school, attended by mostly black students. There was a private school, mostly attended by whites. Both sides were still angry, though there were and still are signs of healing.

Throughout my years in that community, I continued to reflect on that June 1955 meeting. Jarman Hall, the location of that seminal gathering, is located directly across the street from the church I served. Nearly every day, I walked past that location and regularly pondered the gathering that night. I looked at the list of the leaders, those who worked so hard to keep the schools segregated. Some, though old, were still members of my church. Many of their children and grandchildren filled the pews each Sunday. Many of our members attended the private white school during those days. When I walked through my church, I looked at the classrooms. For a season, they had been used as school rooms for the private white school, while the black students went year after year, without an education.

There is no record of the names of the thirteen hundred attendees at the 1955 meeting. We know about the leaders, but not as much about those in the crowd. I don’t think it a stretch, however, to assume that many if not most of the people who gathered that night would be in church the following Sunday. We must always be careful about judging history. It is almost always more complicated than we describe. Even so, I still can’t get past the question. Where were the church people that night? Reverend Kennedy rose to the occasion, but where were the others? What would have happened if they stood up, put faith on the table, dare we say a placed a picture of the kingdom of God on the agenda.

You can almost hear the mockery that would have erupted, even now, seventy years later. Certainly, they would have been ridiculed. Opponents would offer Scriptures of their own. Likely, the voices for the kingdom would have been shouted down.

Revelation 7:9, quoted above, offers a startling contrast and counter to the movement of the crowd on that hot June night long ago. While the people gathered to systematize and sustain segregation, our verse offers a very different picture. There, in the fullness of the kingdom, there is celebrated desegregation. There is no white section and “colored” section. There is no white school nor school for black students. The picture of heaven is not all white. It is not even majority white. There are multiple nations, tribes, and ethnicities, gathered around the throne. It is a striking feature. In eternity, people maintain

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<sup>22</sup> ..... “They Closed Our Schools” (place, publisher, date)

their ethnicity. The diversity, multiple nationalities and tribes are something that God celebrates in the kingdom. That holy worship and celebration stands in stark contrast to the nearly all-white gathering at Jarman Hall that night some seventy years ago. It also stands apart from the segregated fruit of that meeting.

Most would agree. Racism is evil. It is opposed to the very nature and ultimate direction of the kingdom of God. As a result, it will ultimately lose. But we are not there yet. When it comes to this demon, the story of Jesus and his disciples in Mark 9:14-29 comes to mind. A man brings his son to the disciples. The son is possessed by a demon. The father reports to Jesus that he “asked (your) disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not” (Mark 9:18). Jesus rebukes our generation for our inability to do it, and then, with demonic shrieks and convulsions, the demon leaves the boy. In the post-mortem review on the event, the disciples asked why they were unable to do it. Jesus replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer” (Mark 9:29).

This story all too well describes our church’s battle with racism. We have prayed, we have marched, we kicked people out of our churches for holding slaves, and we have fought a bloody civil war that Abraham Lincoln described as us “atoning” for the sin of slavery. That list doesn’t even scratch the surface. And yet, the demon mocks us. We have tried, and we have not been able to drive out this demon of racism.

It is worth noting something that has largely missing from our attempts at exorcism; the kingdom of God. There have been references, and as we will see, some modest success. But...

*What would happen if we began to see the battle against racism, and the drive toward diversity, not as a feature of “woke” politics, nor as a progressive political talking point to fight for or against, but instead as a divinely driven pursuit of the kingdom of God which we are seeking first?*

There is ample Biblical support for this drive. We have spent some time in a previous chapter tracing the theme of the kingdom through the sixty-six books of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. We have claimed that within each chapter, there is an innate desire within the people of God for a just King and kingdom. We see it from the Garden of Eden to the wandering in the wilderness. It is there within the entrance into the Promised Land. It is there as the tribes of Israel seek a king, typically to no avail. It is clear in the exile to Babylon, as people as the people struggle to sing songs in this strange land. It drives the ministry of Jesus and propels the church’s work, all the way to the book of Revelation, as heaven literally comes to earth, and God reigns on earth as it “was” in heaven.

It is hard to miss the kingdom thematic train as it runs through Scripture. It is critical to remember, however, that the train is not generic. God’s reign has character and

style that is representative of God's perfect will. It doesn't take much effort to see that this kingdom train rolls out of the station in Genesis 1 and is driving towards diversity. It is headed for a multi-national, multi-ethnic celebration in the heavenly gathering around the throne referenced in Revelation 7. There is the creation, where the God blesses and tells them to increase and multiply. Along comes the Tower of Babel, where God pushes the people to get out of the building in diversity. Abraham and Sarah will be a blessing to all the families on earth. Isaiah reminds the chosen people that they will be made into a "light for the Gentiles that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." Even in their sin, Israel extends to other nations and lands, from Samaria to Babylon. When we open the pages of the New Testament, the theme is put on steroids as Jesus sends the disciples and us out to make disciples of all nations. The book of Acts runs hard on this diversity train, and Paul finishes his ministry, still seeking to go to Spain.

This is a very brief and incomplete summary, but the point is clear. God's kingdom moves toward diversity. God celebrates it and actively pursues it. The ultimate kingdom picture has all ethnicities gathered around the throne. But...despite our best efforts, from a Civil War to Prince Edward County, we have not been able to drive out this demon.

There is one notable exception: The Rev Dr. Martin Luther King. While the movement under his leadership did not drive out this racism demon, he did make some notable progress. His efforts led to sustained change, not only in the hearts and minds of the people of our nation, but also in the governmental structures. In biblical language he, uniquely, was able to put a dent in the "principalities and powers" (Ephesians 6:12) that have long crippled our desire for our nation to reflect this kingdom of which we speak and seek.

He had this modest "success" with a unique emphasis upon the kingdom of God. To say this was the reason for his wins would require a conversation that is outside the scope of this book. But King clearly undergirded his work with a vision toward the kingdom of God, and his efforts worked where previous efforts did not fare so well.

You see it in multiple writings and parts of his work, but perhaps the most familiar evidence is a portion of his "I Have a Dream" speech:

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character".

You must work hard to not see the words of Jesus in his speech as Jesus describes the kingdom in Matthew 25. There, Jesus speaks of the division of sheep and goats, and how judgment in the kingdom occurs through character or lack thereof. People (sheep and goats) are judged by their level of compassion for the poor, their concern for the down and

out. They are judged, as per the speech, not only for what they have done or not done, but even more for the content, or lack thereof, of character underneath their actions.

Multiple other speeches and writings, including his famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail could be called up to testify. As Dr. King pursued his work, he did it with a clear vision of what the kingdom of God was like. It worked for him. It drove him and some of those racism demons were cast out. What would happen if we followed suit? If we did, we would not be just following the thread of MLK's vision, we would also, and even more importantly, be climbing on this kingdom train toward celebrating diversity, as it makes its way through Scripture and into our contemporary church work.

There is a challenge here. We are a very different church today than we were on that fateful day when Dr. King spoke from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. We are smaller, weaker, and intensely divided.

Scores of people and studies could be called forth to testify, but perhaps one of the most telling comes from New York Times columnist David Brooks. Brooks speaks modestly about Christianity in his books but at the same time, he takes a deep dive into Christian concepts such as community, conversion, and at this point, dare we say, kingdom (though he does not use that word).

Brooks has written a pivotal article<sup>23</sup> that calls the nation to rise up in opposition to national policies and leadership. The piece is in some ways shocking because it goes against his typical quiet modesty. His point is that this is the only way forward. Though he doesn't mention Dr. King in the article, his call is not dissimilar from the call to the Civil Rights marches of the 1950's and 1960's. The audience, however, is notably different. His call is to business leaders, the University leaders, and other organizations within the country. He makes a plea for these groups to join in a peaceful and civil protest against what he sees as dangerous policies.

What is most telling is who Brooks doesn't call. Aside from one tangential reference, the article says nothing about or to the church. The absence is noteworthy. Anyone who has read Brooks knows him to be a friend of the faith, perhaps even a part of it. Even so, when he calls the nation to respond, the church is not even on the invite list.

I certainly can't read Brooks' mind, but the reasons for scratching us off the list of quiet revolutionaries could easily be the presumption that the church is not credible. In fact, we aren't even on the radar. Likely, we are just too much trouble to name. The assumption could easily be that evangelicals are characterized as being compromised in their political alliance, and progressives are simply too decimated by massive decline in our

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<sup>23</sup> David Brooks, "What's Happening Is Not Normal. America Needs an Uprising That Is Not Normal," New York Times, (April 17, 2025)

mainline denominations. But all of us are divided and as such, we are without critical and credible mass.

But here, we as the church need to put the skunk on the table. We are a divided nation and a divided church. We are especially divided on this issue of diversity. We have claimed that pursuing diversity is aligned with pursuing the kingdom of God. Many, perhaps even most within our nation, and dare we say, churches don't see it through this lens. The kingdom is not really on the radar. Diversity instead is just a part of an acronym: DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion). As such, for many, diversity is simply part of a "woke" agenda, and therefore at best, to be dismissed, or at worst, to be fought.

If the time has really come, and this kingdom diversity really is near, perhaps it is helpful to name our divisions within our separate understanding of this kingdom of which we are called to seek. And perhaps the time has come to name the primary thing which is driving our division and inhibiting our pursuit of an ethnically diverse and multicultural kingdom: *fear*. The kingdom of God has a lot to say about fear.

When you dig into it, what keeps us from celebrating diversity? What were and are the forces that pushed that crowd in Jarman Hall seventy years ago to keep the schools segregated. In a word, it was and is fear. It is fear for losing our "culture", fear of no longer being the clear majority. It is fear of losing the uniqueness of my way and community. Why has "White Nationalism" and "Christian Nationalism" arisen of late? Fear....fear of losing our distinctive heritage, fear of a different ethnicity and story entering into our historical narrative.

What keeps us from entering those ethnically diverse conversations and worship settings today? What looms large in our nation today as we face growing ethnic diversity? It is fear. I am comfortable with my style of worship. It is a safe place for me. I don't want to risk endangering my safe Sunday place. I fear those conversations with folks who are different. I fear what they may say, and I fear saying the wrong thing and offending them.

The list could go on, but the good news is that the kingdom of God, rightly seen and heard, gets our fears under control so that we can move forward on this multinational kingdom train.

First, there is the reminder of the One at the center in Revelation 7. It is Jesus, the Lamb of God. All the nations are gathered around him. As per the common phrase, at that point, what they have in common is greater than the differences. We are united in the commonality of our worship. We together, worship the Lord and our differences take on a very different perspective.

It is like looking at the sun and the moon. At night, the moon is bright, it is the premier light in the sky. In the day, you can often still see the moon, but it is not nearly as

bright. It is overwhelmed by the light of the sun. This is the way of the kingdom, and Revelation 7 gives us a picture of how it will be, with the encouragement to live into that perspective now. Currently, in the light of the moon, our ethnic differences seem bright. We stumble in the darkness. In the daylight of the kingdom, as the sun and Son rise upon the creation, the differences, like the moon, are still there, and they still shine brightly, but they are not the defining light. In fact, they add to the day with creative beauty. We can live in the daylight of this kingdom perspective now, instead of the darkness where we often stumble along in fear.

Revelation 7 also clarifies our citizenship. Right now, in our nation, citizenship and immigration are key topics of political debate. The picture offers us a clear depiction of where our ultimate loyalties abide. We are citizens of the kingdom first, and citizens of our country second. My first allegiance is not to my country. It is to God and the kingdom that has come through Jesus. I love my country, and I have served it as a military officer and will continue to serve it as a citizen. Even so, my feet are planted firmly first, in the rock foundation of God's kingdom.

And that can allay my fears. Countries come and go. Political movements come and go. The kingdom has come and will come fully. We used to have an expression when things went bad in the Navy: "What are they going to do.... send us to sea?" It is like our kingdom citizenship. We have a certain freedom from the cultural mandates that come to us daily. We follow the laws, but we don't have to embrace the cultural dictates. We have some freedom because of the location of our ultimate citizenship. We can celebrate the multicultural movement of the world and the kingdom even if our culture does not. Our feet are planted there, and not in the latest talking point of popular but passing news networks.

Finally, the kingdom perspective reminds us of the power and freedom that comes through fearing God. The image is foreign to many of our contemporary church folks. I am certain that I am not alone in the many conversations over the years with parishioners and clergy alike who recoil from the phrase with comments such as, "I am not afraid of my God...my God is love"

All those conversations need to be met with pastoral sensitivity and grace. At the same time, it is easy for us modern folk to overlook the power and gift of fearing God. The kingdom picture in Revelation, as all the nations and tribes gather around the throne in worship, is not a church social. It is a picture of the redeemed, bowing down in holy worship, and fear in the best sense of the word. It is fear born of the reality of the kingdom, a kingdom under the King who is holy, full of majesty, wonder, and such love, that all we can do is fall in worship and fear.

This same fear can empower us to move forward in the contemporary challenges of embracing diversity. Aristotle reminded us long ago that fears are relative. Courage is about fearing the right things for the right reasons. Courage is not so much the sucking it up, squashing our fears, and charging the gates. Everyone is afraid of something. Courage, instead, is having an order to our fears. We prioritize the things that scare us. And so, we charge those gates in battle because we fear what could happen to a nation. We conquer our fear of death and run into the flames of the house because we fear the loss of our child or another loved one. We could go on but implicit in it all is a reminder that all of us are afraid of something. The trick is to order our fears.

There is power and courage if our ultimate fear is of God. We might fear a multicultural nation, but when we have a greater fear of God, our position softens. I might fear hearing from someone from a different culture or heritage. When I fear God, I walk into the room in a humble state. Humble people listen, and humble people are open to possibilities. The fear of God does that. It makes us humble, teachable, and dare we say at this point courageous. All those things are key ingredients for moving into a diverse and multi-ethnic kingdom, while living in a culture that often fears that future.

### **What About LGBTQ+ Inclusion?**

As a United Methodist, my congregation and I currently live within a still smoldering world of a denominational separation, largely over LGBTQ+ inclusion. As we speak to kingdom diversity, it is fitting to say a brief and admittedly incomplete word about the kingdom and inclusion.

In all fairness, our theme Scripture from Revelation does not speak to the broader understanding of inclusion. It is instead themed around ethnic diversity, but that is not to say that inclusivity is not germane to the text or the discussion. It doesn't take much of a deep dive to see the welcoming and inclusive nature of Jesus, especially with the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed. It is not without merit that so many of the contemporary imagery around Jesus characterizes him with open arms saying, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened..." (Matthew 11:28). Even though the kingdom parables are generally more exclusive than inclusive in nature, there is a strong case to be made in the words of Jesus for all being invited and welcomed at the table.

I know many pastors and churches. Some are conservative, some are progressive, and most are somewhere in between. I don't know of a single church or clergy person that would not welcome anyone into their church, despite sexual orientation or gender identity. Maybe they are out there, but I have not met them. My more conservative brothers and

sisters may not officiate at a same gender wedding, but no one I know of would bar the doors of the church to people from the LGBTQ+ community or their children. The most conservative amongst us would agree with Jesus' open arms policy.

Even so, we have found that we cannot live together. Our brothers and sisters on one side affirm a traditional ethic of gender identity, marriage and human sexuality. God created male and female, marriage is to be between one man and woman, and the gift of human sexuality is reserved for marriage between one man and woman. Our progressive siblings generally believe that those in the LGBTQ+ community have been born that way. The progressive side of the house has a different understanding of and interpretation of Scripture and believes that the church needs to accordingly move past this issue, welcome everyone, and get on with kingdom business. Both sides love Jesus and desire to serve his kingdom.

In the kingdom, whose side is right? Does the kingdom of God presume a traditional understanding of humans and sexuality or is the kingdom of God more accurately described by extending this ethnic diversity of Revelation 7 to all human groupings? The contemporary Church has divided in the general vicinity of these lines.

But as the church now figures our way forward, there may be an alternative, even after our recent deployment of the nuclear option of division. We can live in tension. It is after all, the way of the kingdom of God right now. The kingdom is here but not yet. There will come a day when the clarity of God's kingdom comes shining through. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis' famous reference, when we get to heaven we will be surprised by who is there, who is not there, and that we are there.

But we are not there yet. We pray for that kingdom clarity to come but in the meantime, we live in tension. We also live in love. We dwell in humility. We continue to seek to love neighbor and seek the kingdom. The price of that lifestyle in our current dilemma is abiding tension. We don't have all the answers and yet we love people who believe differently. We welcome everyone, even if we don't agree with everyone and their lifestyle. The kingdom is not here yet, but we take steps daily, trying to seek it and the clarity that we know is out there.

Living in tension is the price of seeking a kingdom that is near but not yet. But it isn't the worst thing, nor the hardest thing. Division, and living in contempt of the other side is much worse.

The congregation I currently serve is working hard to do exactly that. We have several folks in our church who disagree with the recent decision of the United Methodist Church to allow same gender marriages in our congregations. Even so, they have stayed. We have others who are frustrated that we have not planted rainbow flags outside our

doors. And yet, they are still here. Consciously or subconsciously, we have all decided that it is better to live together in tension than to live apart.

There is a cost. At times we land in the moderate middle, not accomplishing as much as we should. We don't have the privilege of living in doctrinal purity, and the confidence that can come from it. But we do live together and seek the kingdom together. And, when we are at our best, even differing groups still find the joy and laughter that can only come from a community that gathers around the joy and celebration that is Jesus and his kingdom. A divided world is living off water. We may have divisions, but we still have the wine.

## **Seek First the Kingdom**

It is our claim that personal and church renewal is available to us because Jesus said that time has come, and the kingdom is near. We need to seek the kingdom first as did Jesus. What does it look like to pursue this kingdom diversity, both as individuals and as a congregation?

As mentioned previously, seeking the kingdom first may require that we change, update, or reboot our guiding narratives. This is certainly true, and needs be underscored as we look into our guiding perceptions and actions in regard to other cultures and ethnicities. Our culture doesn't always help here. The dominant narrative often rises out of the algorithms of social media and news networks. Like moths to the flame, we all too readily embrace and follow them. The result is division. Our guiding narrative is about what, or more likely, who we are against instead of who or what we are for.

At the risk of repeating, the kingdom gives us a freeing alternative narrative. Revelation 7 offers an image of beauty and is a perfect picture of the kingdom. My role is to seek first that kingdom image. Yes, I am for diversity, ethnicity, and inclusion, but not because it is a progressive talking point, or an embattled rallying cry for conservatives. I pursue and celebrate other cultures because they are a picture of the way the world will ultimately be and when I pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, I am praying and working to dwell peacefully and joyfully with those who look and live differently than do I. With this new narrative, I have the freedom to live and laugh in humility. Humility is a gift, and humility enables us to thrive spiritually. As both Proverbs and James state: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Many years ago, I had the privilege of participating in a mission trip in Sierra Leone. We were there to help with forty children, many of whom had lost parents in the trauma and violence of the bloody civil wars within the country.

One day we had a break from work and had a chance to tour the town of Bo and its marketplace. We walked amongst a sea of African shoppers and activity. The crowd was large and bustling. We were accompanied by a woman from the mission center where we were serving. She lived in Bo. We were in literally the poorest country in the world, and she was dressed immaculately. Royalty is the word that comes to mind. Outfitted in cobalt blue, and a striking African headdress, she walked with us with a dignity that stands out to me even to this day.

In contrast, I was walking in my work boots, cargo shorts and a T shirt. I am tall and felt very conspicuous in race, dress, and size. As we were walking, I said (I thought) softly to one of my colleagues, "I feel so...white." She laughed at me, but not as hard as our royal guide who overheard me. She was doubled over in laughter that hot afternoon in the crowded marketplace.

The point is that it is always good to be humbled when it comes to diversity. It is a powerful thing to embrace the reality that my race and culture is not definitive. There is power when we recognize in this life, that in eternity, in God's kingdom, my race is not the majority. God loves me, but God loves a lot of other people.

Something else happens when we embrace this kingdom narrative and are humbled. At our best, we begin to listen to the other's perspective. For the last several years, our congregation in Richmond has been a part of a partnership with two African American churches located near us. That relationship has been extraordinarily helpful, especially following the racial tension in our nation following the murder of George Floyd and other racially motivated killings. That season was a time of isolation due to COVID, but we still gathered, by zoom, with our partner churches. We listened to their accounts of the racial tension, their stories of policing, and their understanding of how things had come to be. In eternity, we will be worshipping the lamb right next to those who were on the zoom screen. The kingdom will not be a gathering of white people but of all nations. That narrative enables me to, in humility, be silent and listen to another's perspective right now. In so doing, there is healing. Gently, through their voices I came to understand how much easier my life has been because of my majority race and how their life has been comparatively hard. Their stories humbled me. I still remember one of the pastors as he addressed the issue of boots. He spoke of the common phrase of picking ourselves up by our own bootstraps. He, with kindness, reminded us that you can't pick yourself up by your own bootstraps when you don't have any boots.

The soft learnings across that screen continued, but that screen was enabled because we embraced the kingdom truth. God's kingdom is and will be multi-cultured, multi-national, and ethnically diverse. Embracing that narrative now enables life together that stands in contrast to the racial enmity that is so prevalent today.

The list could go on. How does this kingdom diversity narrative shape an understanding on immigration? How does it change our perspective on a host of other political and church issues that so easily become inflammatory? Can they be tempered by seeking the kingdom first?

### **Seeking the Kingdom First in My Church**

There are multiple ways a congregation can seek first this kingdom diversity. As we do, perhaps renewal, in a smaller way, is near.

The most obvious is simply to join together in a multicultural service with another congregation. The beauty of another style of worship is often inspiring and encouraging. It is also humbling to recognize that others don't worship the way we do and sometimes their style encourages and inspires in ways our style does not. And, as has been said multiple times, when we are humbled, there is an enhanced opportunity for renewal.

That multicultural worship inspiration doesn't always happen because of a different style of music or preaching. It has likely been your experience, as it has been mine, that when you worship with another tradition, the worship points you to Jesus, or to the Spirit, in a direct and immediate way, that is lacking in our own weekly services. When you travel to developing countries, whether it be in Latin America or Africa, the services name the name of Jesus with much more candor. The prayers are offered directly to the Spirit in ways our traditional worship at home does not. The worship in a different culture point to the lamb at the center of the Revelation 7 image in direct fashion while our traditional weekly worship tends to be more subtle. There is a spiritual refreshment in the Trinitarian candor.

As a church, we can also revision the ways that we do celebrate our regular multicultural worship. In my United Methodist tradition, we put the pedal down on what we call "World Communion Sunday". It is a Sunday in October, where we recognize the worldwide nature of the church. We read the Scriptures in different languages, tell stories of the international church, and celebrate the diversity of Jesus followers all over the world. We also exercise caution. We are not celebrating diversity for diversity's sake.

Many may be old enough to remember the singer Michael Jackson and his collective song, "We Are the World". Forty years ago, he gathered many of the great musicians of the 1980's. He basically locked them in the room for an all-night session as they sang and

recorded the song. It became a best seller. A movie was made of the recording. It was a great celebration of the diversity and multi-ethnic nature of the world around us.

World Communion Sunday, but more importantly, our church wide efforts toward diversity, if we are not careful, can become a “We Are the World” song, sprinkled with a bit of spiritual fairy dust. The gift of the church of Jesus Christ is that indeed we are (or will be) the multi-cultural gathering of which the singers, complete with mullets and shoulder pads sang forty years ago. That group, as good as they were, lacked the why and the so that. We don’t. The why and the so that are simply the kingdom of God. We can describe it, explain it, and unpack it. We don’t pursue diversity for diversity’s sake. We do it for the kingdom’s sake.

The distinction is critical. A few years back, our nation was engaged in a Presidential election. It was (and continues to be) a divided season in our country. Kamala Harris was of course, the Democratic candidate. One of her most famous, or perhaps infamous, political signs, slogans, and T-shirts read, “Kamala...Obviously”.

The problem with the slogan was not only its arrogance, but even more, the way it turned out not to be true. Her reason for being elected was simply not so obvious to the majority of the nation who failed to elect her.

Unfortunately, the church can do the same things. In many ways, with diversity, we can put up a sign that says, “Diversity...obviously”. We don’t convince people by saying the word multiple times and dropping the microphone. The same is true with the word justice, but more on that in a bit.

The point is that the church needs to unpack the word. The kingdom of God gives us the means to do it and do it well. That will require the church to preach more on the kingdom and its subsequent diversity. We can’t just presume diversity. It isn’t obvious and our people, both within and outside the church, really do need to know about the why and so that.

Finally, never forget the power of staffing with multiple ethnicities. It really does have the capability of changing the way people attend, stay, and join your congregations.

A few years ago, our congregation hired several staff persons of differing ethnicities. To be honest, we didn’t do it intentionally. It just worked out that way. In three years, we brought on a young male African American Associate Pastor, an African American Children’s Director, and a Youth Director of Asian descent. It changed the people who joined our church, and they didn’t hesitate to tell us that the ethnicity of our staff was a key reason they stayed. I will never forget one Sunday when we had an African American family visit our church for worship. I greeted them before the service. The conversation was kind and cordial but brief. I was humbled when I watched our twenty-six-year-old African American

pastor speak with that same family after the service. Their conversation was long, familiar, and laughter filled the space. Having multi-ethnic staff, leaders, and laity in the room in the conversation really does make a difference.

Sometimes we simply overlook the beauty, the power, and the gift of the kingdom of God. Go ahead. Imagine yourself in that auditorium on that dark night in Prince Edward County in 1955. Imagine the difference if you had been there to represent the picture of the kingdom which we see in Revelation 7. Embrace the power of fearing God, of taking hold of the kingdom narrative, and living it into all the darkness of that night with courage born of the fear of God. Had you been there, armed with the power of seeking the kingdom first, history might have been different. Perhaps a bold claim, but also true. The kingdom of God does that. It gives us courage and hope as we pursue that ultimate picture of all nations, tribes, and ethnicities gathered around the throne of the Lamb.

**Chapter Four**  
**Kingdom Diversity**  
**Study Questions**

1. The chapter opened and closed with reference to the gathering over desegregation in Farmville in 1955. Imagine yourself in that crowd. What would you have done? Would this conversation about the kingdom of God and diversity been helpful?
2. Read Revelation 7:9-17. Take note of the multi-ethnic imagery. Does this change the way you see heaven?
3. The chapter described racism as the demon we have not been able to cast out in this country. Is the language too extreme? Discuss the places we have failed and the places we have done well.
4. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had modest success where others struggled in the battle against racism. Why do you think that is?
5. The chapter posited that it is fear that keeps us from moving forward to embracing different cultures and ethnicities. Name those fears that hold you back.
6. Have you ever had a situation where you were the ethnic minority in the crowd? How did that feel?
7. Do you agree that holding a “fear of God” is a good thing? Why or why not?
8. Is there anything you fear when we speak to this multi-ethnic kingdom and world?
9. How does it feel to say that your primary citizenship is not to your earthly nation of origin but instead to the kingdom of God? Does that sound a bit grandiose or is it empowering and freeing?
10. Do you remember Michael Jackson’s “We Are the World? How do you believe the Kingdom of God can supply the missing refrain to the song and to our world today?

## Chapter 5

### What About Justice?

*“Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you” (Psalm 89:14).*

*“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations” (Isaiah 42:1).*

Justice....justice... What images come to your mind when you hear that word? How do you respond when you sit in the pew, open your bulletin, and see a sermon coming entitled, “Social Justice Today”? Is it a lean-in moment? Or is it a cringe moment, as you anticipate the tension and diverse reactions of those neighbors sitting around you?

The tension is understandable. The term “justice” is not neutral. As we shall see, biblically, it should not be. To be sure, justice is a thing of beauty. The problem is, dealing with justice often feels a bit like picking up a cactus. If we are careful, we can grasp it and work with it, but all of us have also experienced the thorny nature of this term as we try to work it out in our local churches.

Every church and pastor can tell a stories like mine. At one of the churches I served, a new member asked to meet. She had jumped into our outreach activities and small groups. She was working with our homeless ministries and seemed to be settling in well. Yet as we spoke together, it became clear that things were *not* going well. She was leaving the church. Our bishop had just sent a letter to all the Virginia United Methodists, speaking out against the current political administration and its policies. Although the bishop did not use the word, the term justice was implicit throughout. Our bishop believed that what the administration in Washington D.C was doing was unjust. The person sitting across from me adamantly disagreed and thought the bishop’s letter was one- sided and unfair.

Secular media and news conversations often pour fuel on the fire. Years ago, a well-known political commentator addressed the issues of social justice. He said:

“I beg you look for the words social justice or economic justice on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words. ... Am I advising people to leave their church? Yes!

Then, the commentator held up a picture of a swastika and one of a hammer and sickle. He described social justice as being based on the same philosophy as the Nazis and

communists. He claimed the phrase is a code word for both.<sup>24</sup> The commentator later worked to clarify what was meant by his caustic references, but the controversy was out of the gate.

The problem is that our conversation about justice typically is encumbered with political baggage, anger, and guilt-inducing calls to do justice. The call for justice is of course correct and in keeping with the Scriptures but often, instead of doing the actual work of justice, we spend our precious ministry time pulling out thorns.

Hopefully, all parties can agree that the term justice is a big deal biblically. A cursory reading of the Scriptures finds the term repeatedly highlighted. Even where the word is not used specifically, the theme casts its net throughout. Justice describes who God is and what God intends to do. It paints a picture of God's kingdom. You cannot get to heaven without it. So, for all the fussing over the term, it is critical to recognize that those bishops as they write their letters, and even those social justice sermons that make people uncomfortable are on a clear biblical track, even if we disagree with their style or conclusions.

Earlier we referenced John Keats, in his long poem *Lamia*. His image describes our contemporary struggle around justice. He was not addressing our topic, but again, he was lamenting the coming of modernity, with its philosophy and the advances of natural science. All this rational thought, all this detached dissection of wonder resulted in, as he poignantly put it, "unweaving the rainbow." If we are honest, many of our conversations work towards social justice have done a similar thing.

Years ago, I attended a church seminar. One of the speakers was adamant in her depiction of justice. Her words were powerful and engaging, but caustic. She took it one step too far as she voiced her frustrations with the words of 1 Corinthians 13 and its call to bear all things with kindness and patience. The harsh nature of her words beat hard upon and mildly mocked this foundational description of love. In a word, she was unweaving the rainbow. Justice was detached from love and multiple other critical biblical colors.

The good news (literally) is that we can do better. Could it be that our embattled and poorly defined calls to do social justice have not done justice to justice? Seeking the kingdom of God first can move us beyond becoming adept cactus handlers. With a bit of investigation, we will see that our images of justice, when viewed through the lens of the kingdom, can potentially move us beyond the battles, the arguments, the departing church members, and a moderate but immobile middle.

When we seek justice through the kingdom first, there is beauty and style. Even the harsh words of the Old Testament prophets, as they cried out to the leadership and people of Israel for justice, offered poignant and endearing pictures that included justice rolling

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<sup>24</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/WN/glenn-beck-social-justice-christians-rage-back-nazism/story?id=10085008>

down like waters, doing kindness, loving mercy, and the searching for the Balm of Gilead. Martin Luther King, quoting Theodore Parker, captured it with that eloquent and evocative phrase characterizing God's kingdom and justice: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice..."

Kingdom justice is beautiful, and beauty draws us in. This view becomes clear in one of the last pictures in the Bible, as God's kingdom and this consummated justice is described:

*'Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like louds peals of thunder, shouting:*

*Hallelujah!*

*For our Lord Almighty reigns.*

*Let us rejoice and give him glory!*

*For the wedding of the Lamb has come,*

*And the bride has made herself ready.*

*Fine linen, bright and clean,*

*was given her to wear"*

*(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people)*

*Then the angel said to me, "Write this: blessed are those who are invited to wedding supper of the lamb" (Revelation 19:6-8)*

Here is an ultimate picture of the kingdom, as "our Lord Almighty reigns..." Intentionally, it evokes the beauty of a wedding. The redeemed saints are given bright and clean garments which represent their acts of justice offered throughout their lives. They are wrapped in the beauty of that servant-oriented justice. There is a bounteous feast, the supper of the Lamb.

It is important to be aware of the chapter that precedes this kingdom image. Chapter 18 is a lengthy and scathing depiction of Babylon. Some interpretations say that Babylon stood for Rome. Others describe it as a future mercantile city that will rise as history concludes. Still others highlight how it is a timeless representation of our unjust cultures. All are likely true. In any case, in lurid detail, the chapter describes her (Babylon's) wealth, luxury, and adultery. It describes Babylon as the great city that is "dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls..." (Rev. 18:16). It describes lucrative commerce and slave trading. The city is built on the blood of the prophets, and of "all who have been slaughtered on the earth."

This is a picture of wealth, founded on injustice, built on the backs of the prophets, and by implication, on the poor of the earth. The city is abruptly destroyed, and the world grieves her loss. The scene is now set for Chapter 19 as “our Lord Almighty reigns”. In contrast to the cheap, shallow, and tacky images of beauty of Chapter 18, God reigns over a beautiful picture of eternal justice. The redeemed are not clothed in the rags of gaudy clothing purchased with earthly wealth, but in their acts of service. They partake not of the earthly road kill, but of the wedding supper of the Lamb.

What would happen if we pursued the image of Revelation 19 and sought justice first through kingdom beauty? Could we do this without compromising justice’s urgency? What would it look like to pursue justice through the lens of the kingdom of God?

Harvard professor and author Ellen Scarry offers help here. In her book “On Beauty and Being Just” she speaks of the remarkable relationship between these seemingly disparate concepts. Her work is a bit complex, but she highlights the ways that despite all the arguments to the contrary, justice is beautiful and beauty points toward justice.

She does not reference the Scriptures or the faith, but it is hard not to see a picture of Biblical justice and beauty in her characterization. First, she reminds us that beauty is symmetrical, and justice is all about symmetry, or as she highlights, fairness. As she says: “beautiful things give rise to the notion of distribution, to a lifesaving reciprocity, to fairness not just in the sense of loveliness of aspect but in the sense of a “symmetry of everyone’s relation to one another.”<sup>25</sup> As we look at a symmetrical picture or a child’s face, we see innate beauty. When we listen to the rhythm and harmony of moving music, we can be transfixed. There is an inherent symmetry to beauty. The beauty presses to be extended into the world. And when that happens, there is a fairness that the Bible calls justice. In other words, when there is “fairness” in the world, the world, like a beautiful woman’s face, becomes “fair”. That is the beauty of justice.

The kingdom of God is a place where fairness, or now more accurately, justice reigns. Reality is right, and true, as things should be. Everyone has more than enough and not more than. Every citizen of the kingdom has immortal worth and that worth is clear and evident. There is a symmetrical alignment among all the diversity. The consummated kingdom is a picture of justice firmly aligned with symmetry, the symmetry points to beauty, and the beauty inspires.

There is another feature that aligns beauty and justice. Beauty is contagious. Again, Scarry is not speaking of the Scriptures but as she speaks of beauty she says, “Beauty brings copies of itself into being”<sup>26</sup> Beauty drives us to duplicate it.

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<sup>25</sup> Ellen Scarry, “On Beauty and Being Just”, (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1999) 95

<sup>26</sup> Scarry, Pg.2

God's kingdom of justice is also contagious, and its beauty makes it so. Kingdom justice draws us in, but it also sends us out. When we encounter beauty, we want to tell someone, we have an inner need to share it. When we see the way the world will be, when we see the goodness, the righteousness, and the availability of our God who will make all things right and new in this just kingdom, in the words of Bonnie Raitt, we want to "give them something to talk about."

But Scarry keeps going. She reminds us that, when we experience beauty, we go through a "radical decentering".<sup>27</sup> That is the beautiful thing about beauty. When we see beauty, the personal pronoun has a way of dissolving. We are less and the beauty is more. Injustice has to do with selfishness. Beauty and justice turn us inside out. When we see that beautiful painting, that sunset, or our loved one, we lose ourselves in the other. We become observers instead of the center. That is what justice does. It puts us in relationship with one another. Beauty, as seen in the kingdom, greases the skids for those relationships.

Seeing justice through the lens of this kingdom beauty gives us a refreshing option and the thorny complexity of justice conversations. It transforms the discussion and pushes us out to do justice by inspiration instead of guilt. And yet, as good as the picture is, we are not done. Beauty is seen by what is there in the kingdom and its justice, but it is also evidenced by what is not there. In the kingdom of God, there is no injustice. A key element of beauty is also purity. The Scriptures call this holiness. In the fullness of the kingdom, injustice has been resolutely addressed and dismissed.

Many of the parables address judgment, often in the name of justice: The Parable of the Talents, the Parable of the Sheep and Goats, The Ten Virgins, The Wheat and the Tares, The Wedding Banquet, and more. Judgment occurs. Some people are in and some are out. In our modern society where everyone gets a trophy, this kingdom judgment gives us pause.

We moderns may need a reminder: for God to be just, injustice must be addressed. Am I really loving my child if someone harms her and I just say to the perpetrator that's ok? If God really loves us and this world, won't he deal with the bullies on the playground of his creation? What kind of god would let six million Jews die and not address it with clarity and absolute resolution? This is to say nothing of the struggles over millennia of the poor, the outcast, the many who struggle for life, often under the oppression of the powerful and the wealthy. They have cried out and continue to cry out for justice. We need to see and take in the picture of the kingdom in Revelation, as the bullies and the unjust are dismissed.

Miroslav Volf, professor of theology at Yale University, grew up in Croatia. He witnessed and experienced the violence and cruelty that were such a part of life there

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<sup>27</sup> Scarry, Pg. 109

throughout the 1990's. In his book, "Exclusion and Embrace, he speaks most particularly to us in the Western World in our reticence to embrace a God of judgment:

"My thesis . . . will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West. . . . I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone. . . . Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. . . . The thesis: we should not retaliate since God is perfect non-coercive love. Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die. And as one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind. If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end of violence, that God would not be worthy of our worship.<sup>28</sup>

His hopefully obvious point is that it is easy to affirm a God of love in the suburban west. But a God of love must also be a God of judgment for love to be love. There is no kingdom justice without kingdom judgment and a God who does not oppose injustice is not "worthy of our worship".

Here, a pause is in order. Injustice is not just "out there". It is also in us; it *is* us. We are perpetrators of injustice and must address the log in our own eye. The cross is therefore central to our conversation about justice. We are unjust. We do not belong in the beauty and purity of the kingdom. We are and have been an instrumental part of the problem. Our innate sin and injustice should render our kingdom citizenship null and void. But God is just, and God is love and grace. Yes, we were there when they crucified our Lord, but God made a way for us: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God deals with our injustice and sin on a cross at Calvary. We are made citizens of this kingdom. We have received generous grace. We who are unjust have been justified. By grace we have been given those righteous robes to wear. Now, in beauty and not anger, we can extend this same grace even to those perpetrators of injustice around us. Grace healed us. It can also heal the unjust and the unjust systems around us.

If we are to do justice, we live in tension. We extend grace to those who do evil and at the same time resist evil. It is hard but not impossible. Jesus did it. Martin Luther King did it. As they did, this holy and contagious beauty has arisen to draw us in and empower us "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with (our) God (Micah 6:8).

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<sup>28</sup> Miroslav Volf, "Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation" (Abingdon, Nashville, 1996) 301-302

Perhaps a review is in order around the point of this chapter. In our churches and in our culture, we struggle in speaking and hearing about justice. The message seems encumbered with baggage and has been commonly presented with sharp edges. The kingdom of God gives us a viable alternative. The kingdom offers a prevailing image of beauty, without compromising the intensity and requisite judgment. Kingdom justice is a thing of beauty, and beauty draws us in instead of sending us away angry. With that narrative, there is hope for renewal.

### **Serving as the Means of Dispensing Kingdom Justice**

The beauty of kingdom justice lies not just in its nature, but also in its style. This style comes to life in one of the “servant songs” from Isaiah:

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen one in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him,  
and he will bring justice to the nations.  
  
He will not shout or cry out,  
or raise his voice in the streets.  
A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.  
  
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;  
he will not falter or be discouraged  
till he establishes justice on the earth.  
  
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.*

*(Isaiah 42:1-4)*

Like Revelation 19, these verses describe the kingdom of God and its justice. Each verse breathes beauty and style. The wonder, however, may not be immediately apparent. The word kingdom is absent. Jesus is not named. But, with just a modest amount of pondering, both rise up from the verses. This servant will bring justice to the nations. He

will establish justice on the earth. The rest of the chapter speaks to the global reach of this justice.

And the servant? Certainly the writer has the nation of Israel in view. Multiple Scriptures, along with this chapter, testify to Israel's role to be a light to the nations. The same chapters also testify to Israel's failure to do it. Here, the writer also envisions the Messiah who is the chosen one, the servant. We now know him to be Jesus.

As such, Jesus is the servant who administers the justice of the kingdom of God. Note how he does it. Jesus serves gently. He doesn't put out smoldering wicks. He doesn't trample the bruised and the battered. He doesn't cry out in the streets. The world puts its hope in his teaching. Here is another instance of kingdom justice beauty. Jesus is the Servant of the servant songs. *Servanthood is the means through which kingdom justice comes.* In the classic verse of Micah 6:8, we are commanded to do justice. Now, Jesus' style of administering justice reminds us that Micah really meant the associated words about kindness and loving mercy. As we do justice, we do justice as servants.

I have been beautifully intrigued by what I have noticed as a modest trend in weddings today. Over the course of my ministry, I have presided over hundreds of weddings. They are of course joyous and beautiful occasions. Like most pastors, I meet several times with the couple prior to the ceremony, and we speak together about marriage, relationship, and the wedding itself. Of late, multiple couples have spoken about the priority of serving as a part of their marriage and their future ministry. They see their marriage as a means of serving the community and serving one another. Consequently, they often choose to have communion at the wedding ceremony. The first meal they share together is the Lord's Supper. The very first thing they do as a couple is to serve one another.

Then, they turn and face the congregation and carry the elements down to their guests. The two of them, dressed in wedding finery, serve each guest the bread and the cup. Suddenly, the wedding is not about them, it is about their guests.

I always appreciate speaking with the guests after the wedding. The couple serving them is often the first item of conversation. Many are unchurched and that moment rises to the top for them. Weddings are supposed to be all about the bride, and perhaps the groom. But this bride and groom, they note, they came down and made it about us.

Serving is the way of dispensing kingdom justice. A bride and groom serving the guests highlights the beauty of it all. When we serve, when we deny ourselves and place others first, we follow the One who "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

As the conversation turns to Jesus, we are reminded that serving is substitutionary. Serving requires that we deny ourselves for the purpose of lifting the other. In one sense, like Jesus, we take the needs of the other upon ourselves. When we serve the homeless, we take on some of their burden. When we serve in a food pantry, we take on a modest portion of the shortage - dare we say the injustice. To put it simply, we take our food and give it to them. We give our time for them.

A similar thing happens when we forgive. It is substitutionary. Someone harms us, and we choose to take on the harm they have done us. We absorb what they did to us. In our taking on the burden, the offender is offered a sense of freedom.

This is the way of the Servant Isaiah describes. He substitutes for us. The obvious place this happens is the cross. Jesus kneels down, and not only washes our feet, but willingly takes on our burden at the cross. We are there at the trial. We are Barabbas. We are the guilty ones. Jesus is the innocent one who takes on our sin and enables us to go free. He executes justice by taking on our injustice. As he stated in Mark, he gives his life as a ransom for ours.

### **Doing Justice as Servants with Humility**

Kingdom justice is disbursed through servants and servanthood goes hand in hand with humility. As we seek to move from handling the thorny cactus to embrace more accurate images of kingdom beauty, we must remember that humility paves the way.

Servant humility offers a healthy guard rail for our preaching, conversation, and ministry. I might be standing in the pulpit in a church, or I might be suddenly engaged in an unrehearsed political conversation around the Thanksgiving table with a loved one. In both places, I am reminded that my purpose is not to win the argument. I am a servant. If I am clergy, I am a shepherd. As I address issues that I perceive as injustice, my role is not to win. My role is to serve, convince, and all the while, as much as it is in my power, to maintain the relationship with the people I'm talking to.

There is an old story about a Baptist preacher in a small town. He had been at the church for a while, but every Sunday, the people in the pews heard the same message: "You all are going to hell..." Sunday after Sunday, month after month, it was the same.

Finally, the people had enough. The committee met, the church voted, and they decided it was time for a new preacher. The new preacher came and had been there for a couple of months when all the church folks in the town were at a local restaurant for lunch following Sunday services. The Methodists were there. One of them said to a Baptist

parishioner: "Hey I heard you got a new preacher." "Yup" the Baptist replied. The Methodist couldn't resist asking; "Is he still telling you every week that you are going to hell?" The grizzly veteran Baptist, between sips of his tea, replied, "Yeah". The Methodist responded with surprise: "You like him?" "Yeah," the Baptist replied, "he is still telling us we are going to hell every week.... but he doesn't seem to like it as much..."

That is the good news for us as humble servants in dispensing kingdom justice amid injustice. We love the people and serve them, and that keeps us from "liking" the prophetic justice messages too much.

Individual conversations are one thing. But as we have noted, churches often find themselves immersed in wider questions about justice and drawn into the controversies of our increasingly political culture. Servanthood as a means of dispensing kingdom justice helps us cling to beauty, even in the beauty-challenged arena of political discourse.

## **Politics and Church**

How does the church deal with political issues? Colleagues I know and respect will say that we need to address political issues frequently. Most national issues are "justice issues", they say, and need be addressed by the church. Others say that it is best to just stay out of it all, with minimum reference to national political issues. We may mention current events in the prayer time, but we don't speak to the controversial issues of the day. Our people come to church to get away from all that.

There are very few pastors who are eager to take on political issues from the pulpit. The stakes are simply too high. People will leave. I fall into that category.

And yet, it is hard to read the Bible and conclude that the church simply needs to be silent when it comes to justice and politics. It is especially hard when we look at ourselves and our world through the lens of the kingdom of God, as we are striving to do throughout these pages. The Bible is full of battles and clashes between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world.

It starts right out of the gate for Jesus and the temptation in the wilderness. There are three temptations and they are thematically related. In each of them, Satan calls on Jesus to follow the way and kingdom of the world instead of the being the suffering servant. Later, just before his crucifixion, Jesus is brought before Pilate. On one level, this is simply a trial. On a cosmic level, it is a confrontation between the King of the kingdom, and the "king" who rules Jerusalem. Jesus ultimately wins that battle, but he does so by being a servant. Still later, Paul speaks of the reality of the powers and principalities of the world

and their inability to separate us from the love of Christ. The book of Revelation, including our theme text from Chapter 19, depicts the battles between the world and the kingdom.

The point is clear. It is an empowering and renewing thing to look at life through the lens of the kingdom of God as Jesus did. But in so doing, we are also brought face to face with the inherent Biblical battles between kingdoms. In the Scriptures, the kingdom of God comes up against the economic and political forces of the world. The word justice is in the middle of it all.

And so, it is challenging for the church to avoid political conversations and issues, as much as we would like to do so. Archbishop Desmond Tutu framed much more starkly when he would say “When people say that religion and politics don’t mix, I wonder which Bible it is they are reading.” Many of us can stay comfortably in the background, but humility requires that we recognize the others in history who have not availed themselves of that luxury, people like the British antislavery leader William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu, Mother Theresa, and multiple popes, to name a few. If they had not taken on politics from their pulpits and in their conversations about justice, the world would be a different place today, and certainly not a better one, at least in kingdom terms.

And so perhaps the question is not whether the church should deal with politics, but how. The Scriptures push us into the battle lines of the biblical and cosmic war between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. Many military leaders over the years can testify that all too often, they did not get to choose the battleground. They had to fight on the ground they were given. It is like that with us. We would rather choose friendlier ground. Unfortunately, our battle map is drawn with terrain features that include politics and justice. We can ignore those features, but only at our peril. Granted, the outcome of the war is a given, but if we ignore the terrain, we will likely yield a lot of ground to the enemy in the interim. Perhaps the wiser course is to acknowledge the reality of that challenging ground named politics and justice, choose our strategy and plan accordingly. Thankfully, the church gives us some tools to do this well.

### **Claiming the Benefits of Community**

Ideally, our church community gives us the opportunity to speak about these things in ways that are not as readily available outside the fellowship. We live in community. That means that ideally, we love one another independent of our agreement with one another.

Some things are the same in every church I have ever served. Each congregation has particular personalities: unique people who say inappropriate things, who speak out at the wrong time, and who have no situational awareness. They stand up at the prayer time in a

service, and speak far too long. They interrupt a sensitive conversation in the hallway. But, as the church veterans say, they have been that way for years. In time, as it happens with consistency, all the church people just say, that is just the way she is...that is just the way he is...that is just..(you fill in the name). The unspoken conclusion is that they may be unique in their social graces, but they are still ours.

That is the gift of community. We understand people, we have relationships with people, and we can fall back on familiarity, and trust. That is also why it is not outside the realm of possibility for the church to take on political issues instead of maintaining silence. We can speak to hard things because we are a community. Sure, some might get mad and take their ball and go home, but many won't do that. We understand the people around us.

That is why sometimes, the best way to address hard issues is not from the pulpit. There are occasions for that and Martin Luther King did it extraordinarily well, but most of us are not as good as he was. Some of us need to not have a one-way conversation from the pulpit, but instead, a round table discussion that offers feedback, clarifying commentary, and prayer time together.

Community, with various viewpoints, also helps us to be fair. That is one of the struggles in conversations around justice. We almost always presume that justice is on our side of the argument. As a conversation about abortion unfolds, one side speaks of justice for the mother and speaks with passion. The other side asks what about justice for the unborn? The gift of loving community is that it humbles us, reminds us that there are other loving and believing people in the room, and enables a fuller conversation.

And the Isaiah 42/Jesus model of servant justice also applies. Jesus' style of dispensing justice was gentle. It was sacrificial. He didn't cry out in the streets. He didn't quench a smoldering wick. Servant and sacrificial justice is robust enough to take on the powers and principalities of the kingdoms of the world. But it is also gentle. That way worked for Jesus, and it can work for us.

There is one more benefit to speaking to justice and politics in our community. We can differentiate. That is a fancy psychology term for saying that because of Jesus and his kingdom, we have a thick skin.

Pastors, leaders, and counselors are taught to "differentiate" in crucial conversations. That means recognizing we all have "buttons". If those buttons are pushed, we engage emotionally, typically not for the better. Differentiating means that we train ourselves to cut off the power to those buttons. We recognize them and do our best (though not always perfectly) to switch them off, so that we don't take it personally, and move forward in the conversation. This isn't about me, I will let that go and stay engaged.

One of the gifts of knowing Jesus and living in his kingdom is the ability to differentiate. In a word, I know I am good. I am home in his kingdom, even if people don't agree with me, or if they don't treat me well. I am a citizen of the kingdom, and I can have a conversation about justice with someone in my congregation. I can even disagree with them. But I can also promise to love and serve them, even if we disagree. It is the gift of life in the kingdom of God. It doesn't mean I am indifferent to people and their thoughts; it just means that my steps are firmly on in the kingdom foundation, and not sinking in the sands of the world.

Many years ago, I was serving a congregation as a young pastor and was a bit flustered. I had just started at the church when we ran into a justice crisis, and I had caused it. Representatives of the local "Head Start" organization, a group that worked to offer care to poor children in the community, approached me and asked if they could hold mid-week meetings for schooling and other needs in my church. The church was large and though it was very full on Sundays, the classrooms were empty during the week. I thought this was a no-brainer.

I set up an agenda item for our next Church Council meeting: we would discuss a proposal to open our church to these children who needed a place to go after school. Unbeknownst to me, word got out to our congregation that we were speaking about this issue at the meeting. When I walked in, I was expecting our usual gathering of ten to twelve. Sixty people were there, all waiting for a discussion of this issue, and none supported my proposal. They cited the usual deflections about insurance, liability, and costs of maintaining and powering the building for extra use.

I was faced with the question every clergy and lay leader faces when dealing with a justice issue in the face of congregational opposition. I found comfort in my role as a shepherd of my people. I don't always agree with them, but when I was ordained, I promised to love and serve my people. I found that calling helpful as I spoke to them that night. I told them of my disagreement, but also of my pledge to them that as their pastor, I would love and serve them even if I disagreed with them.

That didn't solve all the problems. It did, however, take the volume and the adrenaline down that night and enabled a reasoned conversation. That is the gift of love, the gift of humility, and the gift of servant justice. The folks who approached me seeking a place to serve the children ultimately had to go to a different location because of unrelated circumstances, but I would also like to believe that the gifts of community, humility, kingdom justice, and servanthood, as we received them that night would have enabled us to move forward together towards that place of beauty we call kingdom justice. I served that church for five years. I believe if that request had come in again, it would have moved forward.

## **Seek First the Kingdom of God**

What would it look like for you, individually, to seek first the kingdom of God and the beauty of the kingdom's justice?

Could it be that for too long, you have taken your justice narrative from a favorite news network instead of the images of Scripture? Are you a bit weary of even thinking about picking up this seeming cactus? A new narrative may be in order. Justice certainly has edges. By necessity it must. But kingdom justice is beautiful before it is prickly.

And for those who are clergy, perhaps it is time to think about how you lead. Jesus reminds us to seek first the kingdom of God. Perhaps leading with the kingdom, or even better, with Jesus himself is in order. We have maintained that the kingdom is beautiful. Perhaps that is your first shot from the tee, holding justice in reserve for the green.

All of us are reminded that justice is not just about being. Justice is not simply saying the right thing, believing the right thing, or even standing for the right thing. Justice, as Micah reminds us, is about doing. How are you doing in your doing? Are you engaged in the justice ministries of the church? Are you serving with the poor, the underserved? A pastor I know used to say, "The rising tide of missions lifts all boats." He was right. As you serve in mission, the rising tide has a way of raising up and renewing your faith.

When it comes to justice, how are you doing as a congregation is seeking the kingdom first? Do you, as a church, ignore the issue? Your members encounter these battles in the media every day. Can your church offer a helpful word? Are there ways that you can leverage, in the best sense, the community tools of which we have spoken?

It is all too true. We can be guilty of overlooking the beauty that is the kingdom of God. In contrast to what we see today in the world and even in our churches, kingdom justice is a beautiful thing. It is beautiful because it is who our God is and it is beautiful because it is dispensed in the style of Jesus, the one who came not to be served but to serve. We truly do live in a battle between kingdoms, and justice is on the front lines. But the beauty of the kingdom is always there to draw us forward, as we seek God's kingdom first.

## **Chapter Five**

### **What About Justice?**

#### **Study Questions**

1. How do you respond when your church deals with justice and political issues publicly? Is it a lean in moment where you engage well, or is it a cringe moment as you absorb the tension that is or will be in the air?
2. Two images of justice were offered in the chapter: a thorny cactus and a thing of beauty. Which one best describes justice for you?
3. Do you know people in your church who have left because of justice conversations there? Could those have been handled better?
4. The thesis of the chapter is that the kingdom of God offers the opportunity to see justice through the lens of beauty. Can you see the beauty of justice? Describe it.
5. Beauty was described through the words “fairness”, “duplication”, and “decentering”. All those were taken from Ellen Scarry’s book. Have you experienced these things when you saw something beautiful? Did you want to duplicate it the beauty you saw? Did it take your eyes off yourself?
6. Recall a time when you witnessed something unjust. What words would you use describe this experience? Why?
7. The chapter argued that justice in the kingdom is beautiful because injustice is not there. God ultimately dismisses it. Does this seem unfair to those who are dismissed? Would you agree that for God to be love, justice must be addressed?
8. We are unjust. That is why Jesus had to go to the cross. Talk about how owning our own injustice is necessary.
9. Another key point was that serving is the means of dispensing this kingdom justice and that is a thing of beauty. Speak to a time where you recently served and how there was beauty in it all.
10. It is difficult to read the Bible and ignore the ongoing conflict between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God. That pushes us into the world of politics, and justice is in the middle of it all. How does your church handle (or not handle) this battle between these two kingdoms? How does your church handle politics if it handles it at all? Do you wish your church spoke more often about it? Spoke less about it?
11. Justice is beautiful and so is community. Community gives us the ability to address hard things. Have you found that to be true in your community?

