

THE KINGDOM COME NEAR A SERMON FOR COMMUNION SUNDAY
JULY 7, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
LUKE 10:1-11 TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

When Jesus sent the seventy out into the land, they went as missionaries, as emissaries, as ambassadors, as heralds of Christ. They went out to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God. The word that is used for what they were to proclaim as having come near, βασιλεία in the Greek, is better understood as “kingship” or “reign” or “rule” of God. We tend to think of a kingdom as a geographic place, and for the kingdom to come near, well, it is sort of like my relationship with Vermont. I’ve come near to Vermont. I’ve looked across a valley and seen Vermont. But I’ve never been in Vermont, just New York and Massachusetts, very near Vermont.

Those who heard the seventy probably understood what they were saying: The one who reigns over all the earth is very near to you. You are very close to being under the authority of the One True God.

How near can the kingdom come? As close as your next breath. If one lives under the rule of God, one is living in the kingdom of God, under the kingship of God, every day, in every way. And if one is not, then one is not.

Being a Christian, believing in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, is really an either/or proposition. Either you do, or you don’t. Either you are in the kingdom, or you are outside it. Now let me hasten to add, this isn’t the same thing as being a member of a church. There are countless thousands, millions, who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and either have no church affiliation, or never attend the church to which they nominally belong.

I have a friend who describes himself as a Catholic. He probably hasn’t been inside a Roman Catholic Church in forty years. But he was raised a Roman Catholic, baptized and confirmed one, and that is where his last formal church relationship was. He has attended Presbyterian churches and Pentecostal churches, and I don’t doubt that he’s a believer, a Christian. He just isn’t actively participating in the life of a church.

Now that’s his loss. But it is also the loss of the church he might be helping, serving, giving to, participating in. Not going to church won’t keep him out of heaven. But he’s going to have to wait until he dies to enjoy the comfort and hope and company and support that those of us who are a part of a congregation know every day of our lives.

There are a lot of Presbyterians who are like my Catholic friend. They haven't been inside a Presbyterian Church in years. But they were baptized in infancy in the Presbyterian Church, they were confirmed in the Presbyterian Church, maybe even married in the Presbyterian Church, and if you asked them what denomination they belong to, they'd say Presbyterian. Our denomination loses thousands of members a year. But in every poll or census taken, there are about twice as many people who claim to be Presbyterian as there are members of all of the Presbyterian Churches combined.

In the 26 years I served the Arcadia church, I buried several folks who had lived there for years, and claimed to be Presbyterian, but never attended the church. They had started out as Presbyterians, been raised in Presbyterian churches, baptized and confirmed there, but had quit attending for whatever reason. As inactive members, they were dropped from their church rolls. But they still believe, they are still Christians, they are still Presbyterians. They just aren't active members. Again, that won't keep them out of heaven. But it denies them the participation in the colony of heaven that is the church.

The church, in a very real sense, is the kingdom come near. It is as near as we can come to the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, on earth. But, God help us, it isn't perfect. Heaven will be. The church isn't.

The church, in addition to being a colony of heaven, is a company of sinners, and we bring our sinful natures, our prides and prejudices, our shortcomings, our failings, with us, when we gather together to form a church. In spite of that, in the church the kingdom is come near.

John Knox, the twentieth century New Testament scholar, not the sixteenth century reformer, said in his commentary on this passage that the major point of this text is the supreme importance of the kingdom of God, with special emphasis upon the terrible urgency of preaching it. He says, "The final...salvation in Christ is present and available wherever the gospel is preached. (People) always stand in a crisis of judgment, and are faced now as certainly as...then with the necessity of choosing either life or death, either heaven or hell. The church's principal task as preacher is to confront (them) with these alternatives." (*The Interpreter's Bible, Volume 8, pages 185-186*)

We are called as a church to proclaim the kingdom of God. But the question is asked, "How can they hear without a preacher?"(Romans 10:14)

Another concern of our denomination is a lack of preachers, of pastors.

As our elected pulpit nominating committee begins its work, we must be acutely aware of this. And we need to pray for them in their work.

Many of our churches across America are served by part-time ministers, or by commissioned ruling elders. Jack Homoney is serving the Chipley church most every Sunday, which is why you don't see him in church with his wife and daughter. He is one of hundreds like that across our country. Part of this is due to the fact that there are many small, struggling churches, not able to pay a living salary to a full-time pastor.

But there is a tremendous dearth of candidates for the pulpits that are vacant where funds are available to pay a pastor. Part of this is due to the fact that many churches will not yet accept women in the pulpit, and almost half of our seminary graduates over the last three decades are women. Part of this is due to the fact that many ministers don't want to locate in small towns, in rural areas, or in downtown inner cities.

Most teaching elders, from the seminary graduate seeking a first call, to the seasoned veteran seeking that last charge before retirement, are looking for the church in the suburbs, what we used to call "St. Andrews by the Mall."

The kingdom of God is everywhere to be proclaimed, not just in the posh suburbs or the pleasant neighborhoods.

I've been blessed, in forty odd years of ministry. I've always served churches that paid me a living salary, and that housed me in beautiful, comfortable, well-maintained manses. That they were all small town churches has been a blessing to me. Others don't always see it like that. When I talk of my years of service in Mississippi and West Virginia, I often feel that people think that was a hardship, because those are poor states considered backwards. There are some of my peers who have questioned why and how I could have stayed in Arcadia so long. They consider that a poor and backwards area, and they told me I could have made a whole lot more money and lived in a whole lot better place.

Perhaps I could have, but that wouldn't have been where God called me to be, or what God called me to do. I'm here in Marianna now, in another small town, in another church considered smaller by the tall steeple preachers, in another county considered poor, and I know I'm where God called me to come and where God wants me to be.

God calls us all to be witnesses to the kingdom. We who live in the kingdom of God are to display what it means to have a King who is not of this world. We who live in the kingdom of God are called to display the kingdom in such a way that others might want to become a part of it. We who live in the kingdom of God are to invite those outside in.

Today, we are all invited to come to the table, to share the sacrament that makes us one in Jesus Christ, to share the bread that reminds us of His body broken upon the Cross, to share the cup that reminds us of His blood shed for our sins.

This is a place where the kingdom is come near. As we approach the table, the king is as real as the bread and the wine, as real as what we touch and taste and see. O taste and see that the Lord is good, and His mercy, and His kingdom, endures forever. Amen.