

Sermon *The Kingdom of Heaven*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 2.1.26

Micah 6:1-8
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-12
Psalm 15

Last Sunday, after services, a parishioner asked me about Matthew's (the Gospel writer) view of the Kingdom of Heaven. He asked if it was the same as the "Kingdom of God". As we talked about it, he said that he'd like me to preach on it. So, here it is, a sermon about the Kingdom of Heaven.

First things first – Kingdom of Heaven or Kingdom of God, I think they are interchangeable. Matthew wrote Kingdom of Heaven 32 times and Kingdom of God 4 times. He's the only Gospel writer to use *Kingdom of Heaven*. Why? I think it has to do with his religious preferences. There were Jewish believers in the 1st Century that shied away from writing, or saying, "God". I think Matthew was a part of that community. When he writes "Kingdom of Heaven" we can interchange it with Kingdom of God. And, since we're on the subject, the Gospel writer John uses the phrase twice but, similar to the Kingdom of Heaven, John writes about "eternal life" in a way that the other three Gospel writers mention the Kingdom.

What does the Kingdom of Heaven/God mean? When I have a question about the Christian Church, I often go to the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. It has the orthodox, most agreed upon, definitions and explanations of our faith tradition. Here is what the Dictionary says about the Kingdom of Heaven:

The conception of the kingdom of God (or in Matthew, the kingdom of heaven) is a central element in the teaching of Jesus Christ. It has formed the core attempts of reconstructing what Jesus originally taught. The origins of the kingdom of God lie in the Hebrew scriptures where the kingship of God is acknowledged. God's reign was expected to bring with it order and justice, thereby manifesting God's purpose for creation.

It goes on for another page, but, for the purposes of this sermon, let's focus on the introductory statement. The concept starts in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) where there was order and justice. But, when humans showed up, things went wrong with God's order and with justice. The central theme of the Kingdom, then, is for the world to be restored to God's order.

One view of the Kingdom is that the Messiah will put the government on his shoulders and put order and justice in line with God's creation. For Christians, the Messiah placed the entrance to God's heavenly kingdom within our reach and asks us to follow him. Nevertheless, injustice and disorder still happen on earth. The Big Question is what happens at The End of Time. Will Christ return and place everything in order; or will his followers eventually work toward order and justice? I'm a parish priest so I'll answer it this way – we have the invitation, the power and the ability to participate in God's order and justice today. We can see and participate in the Kingdom in our own life and in the lives of those around us.

I have seen the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Jesus said: *blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. I've seen that happen. I have sat with people who have tried other things to be in connection with God and failed. I've seen them, in humility, surrender to God and suddenly find themselves full of joy and peace. I have seen it and I've been a part of it.

Jesus said: *blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted*. I've seen that happen, time and time again. It's not immediate but it happens.

Jesus said the Kingdom is around us, it is at hand, it is near, it is in us. Within the first couple hundred years of the Christian church, it was understood that the Kingdom is above us, below us, in front and behind us and it is in us. There is the kingdom of earth and there is a Kingdom of Heaven right around us.

On Saturday, my fifteen-year-old son, Elijah, and I took an all-day boating safety course. For all boaters in Florida born after 1988 it is mandatory to take this class. At the end of the course, once we aced our tests, the instructor gave us a tour of the Coast Guard facility just south of the Cortez Bridge. We spent over two hours talking with three Guardsmen about life in the CG. They highlighted three things they do: water rescue, fire suppression, law enforcement. When I woke up this morning (when it was windy and about 36 degrees – rare for Florida), I thought about the Coast Guard and that there are men and women standing at the ready for water rescue, fire suppression and law enforcement. In their “kingdom” those three things are a reality. They are not reality in my daily kingdom. But yesterday my kingdom met their kingdom. I am appreciative that they stand at the ready for rescue and law enforcement – in any weather or location. When they go off duty, they leave the station and go into their personal lives. But being a Guardsman stays with them when they are off duty.

Here's another way to look at kingdoms: a friend of mine I grew up with in my hometown of Tacoma had two kingdoms. His mother was Korean. When her family immigrated to the US they moved into an apartment building in south Tacoma with four other Korean families. Nowadays, there is a full-on Korea Town in south Tacoma. She made her son, my friend, go there like every Monday evening to learn the language – both spoken and written – and learn Korean culture. He didn't want to go but he did because his mom said it was important. When she'd get lonely for home culture, she'd go to that area in south Tacoma and would come back feeling more centered. He knew of the kingdom – the reality – of his mother's life, of his own, and of his friends who were not descendants from Korea.

When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, he wasn't talking about the Kingdom of Coast Guardsmen, or of Americans of Korean descent, but we can get a sense in our life that there are many kingdoms around. And, thanks be to God, we have access to the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom of Heaven is here, in this church, on our campus at All Angels. It is here. I've had visitors – especially for weddings and funerals – that will walk up to the altar with their phone, snap a picture, look at their phone, look up at the altar, and try it again. They do this because they're seeing something with their eyes that their camera is not capturing. I've had a professional wedding photographer ask me about how we do the lighting because it looks

different in her camera than it does in real life. She asked if we could add lights, or take away something, and I told her, "No, you are seeing something beyond what can be captured with a camera." I think they are all seeing the Kingdom. They are getting a slice, an image, of heaven here at All Angels. It's no wonder, really; we pray here, we give thanks to God, it is a set-aside place for the sacraments. Of course, the kingdom is here; and the kingdom remains hidden to our 21st century technology; but we can still see it with our eyes because the Kingdom of Heaven is near.

In seminary I read an impactful book simply titled African American Spirituality (I think it's out of print because I have looked for it since graduation and cannot find it). African-American spirituality and the kingdom of heaven are tied very closely together. African-American spirituality says God has created order. God has created all people to be good. And when we run into people in society that make disorder, and are not good, it is further proof of God's kingdom. The dissonance of their disorder against God's order of all people being created for good, reminds the inner child of God that there is an order, in God's kingdom, where all are respected, cherished and love. *Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

African-American spirituality notes that the more that we are oppressed, the more that we celebrate because of the joy of knowing what heaven is. In other words, our proof of the Kingdom of Heaven is in the reality of not living there now. But one day, not today, but one day, all people will feel that joy on this earth, in our present reality. *Rejoice and be glad.*

The more that we're oppressed, the more that we rejoice, the more that we celebrate because the Kingdom of Heaven is coming.

Blessed are you who thirst and hunger for righteousness, for you will be filled. Not today, but one day you will be filled. *Blessed are you who mourn now, for you will laugh.* Not today, but on day you will because God's kingdom is a coming and there's nothing you can do to hold it back.

And so when I think of the kingdom of heaven, I align myself with those ideas. Look, I don't understand macular degeneration. I don't like it. I have friends that are going through it. But African-American spirituality about the kingdom of God says it's all right; it's all right because as they start to lose eyesight here, they start to gain eyesight in the Kingdom of Heaven.

I don't like Alzheimer's disease; I also don't like it when knees and hips start to break down. I don't like any of that. But African-American spirituality will tell me, "The more that we break down on this side, the stronger we are on that side." The more that these things start to fall apart, the more that we are convinced that the kingdom of heaven is present and at hand.

Blessed are they who are peacemakers. Peacemakers. In this world, peacemakers are in real danger. But, in the Kingdom of Heaven, *blessed are the peacemakers because they will be called children of God.* Children of God.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Jesus didn't say that some people are pure in heart, others are not, or cannot; no, that's not what he said. *Blessed are* is the phrase. For those that look to All Angels and can see the kingdom, that doesn't show up on photographic equipment, our inner child of God is reminded of how we are pure in heart.

The Kingdom of Heaven is a reminder that we have a role to play in the Kingdom. We have power to bring about a small part of that Heaven to the present reality. In God's kingdom, people donate art and they sell it so that others can have a place to live. Blessed are they, who donate and buy art. In God's kingdom, there are people who donate their shoes and give them to people who need them because there are people in our community who need shoes. The Kingdom is theirs and ours. We have a role to play in it.

What I am seeing here is that the kingdom of heaven is a place where people like us, diverse backgrounds, different ideologies, and some with different countries of origin, that with Christ we are linked and brought together with God's mercy and joy. In this slice of the Kingdom of Heaven, we do not all need to think the same thing, but rather to be bound together as agents of this kingdom so that we can show the world that divisions can end, unity will win, and that peace and love will reign on the earth. Not today, but someday with us in the Kingdom of Heaven.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.