

“Kingdoms”
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
September 22, 2019

Despite the well-known saying of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount that we are to take no thought for the morrow, Americans have long engaged in a practice that has come to be known as future preference. In short, this means that we are willing, on occasion, to deny ourselves a little of something today in order to get more of something better tomorrow.

This, of course, flies in the face of all we hear these days about our weakness for Instant Gratification. It's as if we're living the old fable from Aesop about the ant and the grasshopper, with the ant working all day during the summer while the grasshopper fiddled. When winter came, the ant survived. The grasshopper, not having prepared, wasn't as lucky.

Growing up, I was a bit of an ant, or tried to be. But I had a paper route, and the money came in handy when the ice cream truck came around the corner, jingling its bells, calling out to the grasshopper part of my character that was ready to indulge my boyish whims. I don't know about you, but my personal favorite were the sky-blue popsicles - but when it came to those orange and vanilla creamsicles, well, you could have 'em. I didn't want 'em!

But a boy can only buy so many popsicles: most of my income didn't get spent, either on the Good Humor man or at the movies (I couldn't get to the movies anyway without a ride from my parents). Even the dime store was too far away, since I didn't live in the village, but out in the countryside. So my monthly income of \$5 or \$6 was safe, for the most part. My parents advised me that if I put away my savings, in no time I could have enough money for a bicycle (though I wasn't sure why I would do that, since bicycles were something that appeared under the Christmas tree), or once I got older, the money I saved up would come in handy for my college education. Being an Only Child, the thought of getting away from home for college seemed like the best possible thing

that could happen to me. My bank account grew, maybe not by leaps and bounds, but soon I was typing papers for classmates at 25 cents a page, and then I got a real job at \$1.75 an hour working in a bookstore. I was on my way!

This future preference works not just with individuals and in families, but also in society at large. Of course, we have two opposing forces at work - the ant and the grasshopper are still with us. Corporations seem to be increasingly focused on the next Quarterly Report, sometimes to the detriment of longer range planning. But all too often a better tomorrow depends on roads, rails, airports and other long-term projects. It also depends on organizations like the Lions or Rotary or Habitat for Humanity, all of which are in it for the long-haul, helping out the community at large in the belief that a better place to live and work and go to school will make us ALL better off - in the long run.

Now, to put this all in biblical language, all of us - kids, parents, families, society, businesses, unions, civic groups, the government - all of us are in the business of building kingdoms. We may not call it that, but that is what we are up to. And Jesus knew all about kingdoms - especially the Kingdom of God.

Of course, when Jesus talked about kingdoms in his day and age, He used language that the people of his day had a real handle on. And since Jesus was such a compelling speaker, a lot of His language is still part and parcel of how we talk in the early 21st century. For Jesus had a knack for drawing poetic pictures with His words, and those pictures have stuck with us through the centuries, even if Jesus is no longer the immediately vibrant figure in our lives that He might have been for some of our ancestors. So even those people who have never cracked open a Bible still understand some of it, or even talk like it. Thus, for example, we still talk about things like having a House Divided - even if we don't know that the turn of phrase is found in the Gospels at Matthew, chapter 12.

So what was Jesus trying to say about the Kingdom? What is so important about belonging to the Kingdom that Jesus needed to talk about it, over and over. What

benefits, what joys, what delights were involved? And what warnings did he caution us with? For at Matthew 12 he warned, “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation...”

There is one important, but often unspoken implication in what Jesus has to say about the Kingdom that some of us miss. Most of us think that the Kingdom is God’s doing, and we just have to show up, knock on the drawbridge gate, say the right password, and we’re in. But I’m not sure that’s going to work. After all, Jesus himself said that just intoning the words “Lord, Lord!” (Matthew 7) will not get us into God’s good graces. It’s going to take more than that.

In every one of Jesus’ images about the Kingdom, there is something for me to do and for you to do, and for everyone else to do. And whether we know it or not, whether we are conscious of it or not - every day, in every way, each one of us is at work, either hastening the coming of the Kingdom, or working at cross-purposes with the divine will.

In fact, I would suggest to you that it comes down to this: that every word we speak, every step we take, every thought we entertain, every action we engage in, every idea we express, every emotion we have - ALL these things are part of the Kingdoms WE are building.

Think about it: every feeling we express becomes part of the atmosphere of our Kingdom. Is that atmosphere clear and clean and free? Or are we venting so much negativity that the skies around us become clogged with a lot of hot air, if not mental pollution? Do you remember Joe Btfsplk, the character from Lil Abner, who always walked around with a dark cloud over his head? Wouldn’t it be better to bring sunshine to those whom we meet every day? Some people seem to enjoy the mists and the fogs of deceit that swirl around so thickly that others cannot see the truth of who they are. Wouldn’t it be better to let the fresh breezes of openness prevail so that others might have their vision clear?

What about the steps we take? They are surely building the highways, the by-ways, and the dead-ends, of our Kingdoms. Where are our steps taking us? Do we walk in the pilgrim way, bringing light and truth to others who may have lost their own way? Are we walking confidently in the valley of the shadow, or are we too timid to enjoy the company of our Lord, and end up cowering in a dead-end of fear and despair? Where are we going? Do we have a goal? Or are we aimless wanderers, uninterested in a pilgrimage of faith and hope? What kinds of roads are found in the Kingdoms that we are building?

Words we have spoken become part of our Kingdom's policies. Is our policy one of anger, or one of healing? Do our words uplift and build, or do they tear down and destroy? Do our utterances provoke and divide, or do they console and soothe? What kind of Kingdoms do our words construct?

And how about our deeds? Do we extend a helping hand, or are we too tight-fisted to be of any assistance to anyone else? Is everything we do for self, or are we known as people upon whom others can depend? Do you keep your little corner of your world attractive, or are you the kind of person who couldn't care less about the feelings and sensitivities of others? What kind of Kingdoms are we building with our actions?

To be sure, the Kingdoms we are building can never compare to the heavenly one in which God our Father reigns. But that's not the point. The point is, we can be building our Kingdoms here and now with the help of God, or we can decide that we can do it all on our own, ignoring the plan that God has in mind for every one of us. I realize that going it alone is seen as something of a virtue in our society, especially in New England. But we need to see that what we do and say and think are all in preparation for the life eternal which is to come. Let us not throw away the mustard seed of faith, or risk overlooking the treasure buried in the field. To ignore God will mean that we will certainly fail to obtain the pearl of great price, and that we will cast our fishing nets on the wrong side of the boat.

So let us live, then, that our Kingdoms will be worthy of the King of Kings, and the Lord of Lords - even Christ himself - that He might ever be enthroned in our hearts.

Let us pray: