

“The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World”
Sermons Series: The Great Ends of the Church
Luke 11: 1 – 4
August 30, 2009

My husband and I were sitting on our porch one evening recently when we noticed a stirring in the leaves of the Redbud Tree in our front yard. We saw a bird darting in and out, and then heard some shrill and loud chirping! I said, “I think there’s a nest of baby birds in our Redbud Tree!” I went in to the house to get our binoculars, and sure enough, there was a mama mocking bird feeding three young ones in a nest in our tree.

Our front yard has proven to be full of life. At our bird feeders we’ve seen gorgeous cardinals, blue jays, finches, and titmice. I was thrilled last month when we started seeing bottle-green humming birds at our hummingbird feeder.

We have lizards happily scampering on our porch railing and more frogs and toads than we really care to have. We have a small garden pond in our yard, and Joseph put some goldfish in there; I had my doubts as to whether they would survive. They’ve not only survived, they’ve thrived, growing bigger and we now have two baby goldfish in the mix.

We never know what we’re going to find in our yard; in fact, a couple of weeks ago we even had a possum passing through!

Recently I read in the newspaper about a woman here who has had her yard certified as a Wildlife Habitat. In order to be a certified wildlife habitat, you have to provide food, water, cover, and a place for wildlife to raise their young. I think our yard definitely qualifies.

I like the idea of creating a place like that, a green place where plants grow, birds sing, lizards scamper, and fish splash. A place where life can grow and flourish.

One of my favorite quotes by Frederick Buechner is about green places. Buechner said, “We cannot make the Kingdom of God happen, but we can put out leaves as it draws near. We can be kind to each other. We can be kind to ourselves. We can drive back the darkness a little. We can make green places within ourselves and among ourselves where God can make his Kingdom happen.”

Today is the sixth and final sermon in our series on the Great Ends of the Church, and it is about the Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World. If you’ve been present for the other 5 sermons in the series, you know that the Great Ends are the mission statement of the church, found in our Presbyterian Book of Order. There is a list of all six on your bulletin insert this morning. The Great Ends involve things that we do both within and without the church. Preserving the truth, maintaining divine worship, providing hospitality and nurture often are things that we do within these walls. But providing shelter for God’s children, promoting social righteousness, and proclaiming the gospel for the salvation of humanity are things that we do out in our community and in our world.

Today’s great end, the Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World, is the total package: all that we do, within and without, for one another and for the world, to exhibit the kingdom of heaven. We could say that all of the other great ends are ways that we fulfill this great end; all of the others are ways that we exhibit the kingdom of heaven.

Every Sunday morning, we pray the Lord’s prayer. As part of our worship together, we in this church, and Christians in other churches all across the land pray the prayer that Jesus taught us: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Every Sunday we pray for God’s kingdom to come.

What do we mean when we pray that? What exactly is the kingdom of heaven? Are we talking about some other-worldly state, a future time when Jesus has come again and the new heavens and new earth are here? Yes and no. Theologians say that the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God—they are used interchangeably in the New Testament—has two dimensions. It is both now and not yet. Both now and not yet. We know that there is a day coming when the end of this world has come and a new world has begun. That is the future aspect of the kingdom, the not yet.

But the kingdom also is now. The kingdom is present wherever God rules, in the lives and hearts of God's people. As Buechner said, we don't create the kingdom—only God can do that. But we who are God's people exhibit the kingdom when we allow God to live in us and to work through us.

Did you know that in the New Testament, the Kingdom is mentioned well over 100 times? Jesus talks about the kingdom over and over. It is the dominant theme of his teachings. In Matthew alone, there are 42 sayings about the kingdom.

Again and again, Jesus says, the Kingdom of heaven is near, the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are poor in spirit. Who is greatest in the kingdom? Those who are least. Those who are humble. The greatest in the kingdom is like a child, and those who will not receive it like children will not enter it.

Jesus tells parable after parable telling what the kingdom is like. It is like a man who sowed good seed in his field, and all kinds of things came up. It is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, that grows into a giant of a plant. Like a treasure hidden in a field, like a pearl of great value, like a net catching all kinds of fish. The kingdom is like a king who had a banquet and instead of inviting the rich, brought in people off the street. The kingdom is like a

landowner who hired people to work in his vineyard, and at the end of the day he paid those who had worked the least the same amount as those who had worked the most.

We see from all of these passages that the kingdom is surprising! It does not operate in the way of the world, but in the way of the Lord. The kingdom of God reflects who God is—a God of both justice and love, a God of mercy and grace, a God who welcomes sinners and gives them the very best place at the table.

So if we are to exhibit the kingdom, that means we must reflect who God is.

Did you ever have your picture taken where you put your head above the cut out frame of a muscle man, or a pirate, or frilly-dressed woman? The photos are funny because the head doesn't fit the body. In the church, Christ is our head, and we are the body. Do we the body fit Christ the head? When the world looks at us, does it see a funny picture? Or do we fit, do we reflect who God is in a way that is whole and authentic?

Exhibiting the kingdom means looking like Jesus. It means patterning our lives after his life. That doesn't mean that we have to be perfect. No one is perfect but Jesus himself. But we can follow Jesus' example in the way we live, being loving and forgiving, caring for others, meeting needs, ministering to the sick and the poor, welcoming everyone into our fellowship.

When we do those things, we are, in Buechner's words, creating green places where the kingdom can grow. We make green places that exhibit the kingdom when we teach Sunday School, when we work with our children or youth. We make green places for the kingdom when we volunteer at Manna House, or deliver groceries to someone whose cupboard is empty. We make green places when we pray for the sick, when we comfort those who are grieving, when we visit those who need encouragement. We make green places when we support the ministries of the church through giving our resources. We make green places when we treat people fairly in

our work, when we are kind to our neighbor, when we stand for justice and righteousness in our world.

In all these ways, we are creating green places, where people can see the kingdom of heaven.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of hearing former President Jimmy Carter speak at a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship meeting in Atlanta. President Carter has been very outspoken about his faith and the fact that he is a Christian. In his speech, he talked about how Jesus did not just preach, but reached people and changed their lives through his ministry to them. Carter said that we are called to do the same. As an example he told the story of a couple from his own congregation, Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, GA, who became missionaries the same year that he was elected president—1976.

The couple, Jerome and Joanne Ethridge, served in a remote location in Togo, where there were very few churches or Christians in an 80 mile area. Carter said that the Ethridges were not preachers. In fact, they had been farmers before they became missionaries. But in Togo, they worked with volunteers to build 167 wells for safe drinking water. They created 21 ponds stocked with fish for food, and they built a 230-foot concrete bridge to an area that formerly had been cut off by flood four months every year.

Carter said that a number of years later, he went to visit the Ethridges in Togo, and in that same 80-mile area where formerly there had been only a few Christians, there were 5,000 Christian converts and 81 new churches. President Carter said, “Because of the commitment of a man and woman who did things in a humble fashion, all in the name of Christ, people said, ‘If Jerome and Joanne are Christians, I want to be a Christian’” (President Jimmy Carter, 10th

General Assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Atlanta, GA, June 29, 2001. Reported by Bob Allen, Associated Baptist Press, July 2, 2001).

My friends, let it be so for us! May people look at us and say, “If the people of First Presbyterian Church are Christians, then I want to be a Christian!”

That’s exhibiting the kingdom of heaven to the world. If we live like Jesus, we are exhibiting his kingdom.

When we proclaim the gospel for the salvation of humankind, we are exhibiting the kingdom. When we provide shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship for all God’s children, we are exhibiting the kingdom. When we maintain divine worship, when we preserve the truth, when we promote social righteousness, we are exhibiting the kingdom. In all these things, we are sharing the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, and when we do that, in word or in deed, we are exhibiting the kingdom of heaven.

So let us go forth from this place to carry the love of God into our world, and may God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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