

“Kingdom of Children”

Scripture

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 (NRSV)

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view, even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Scripture

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 (The Message)

¹⁶Because of this decision we don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore. ¹⁷Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! ¹⁸All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. ¹⁹God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing. ²⁰We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you. ²¹How? you say. In Christ. God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God.

Scripture

Matthew 5:9 (NRSV)

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

I've been thinking about Joseph and his Technicolor Dreamcoat this week, have you? You remember the story. Exiled and imprisoned in Egypt, sold out by his brothers, nevertheless, God is with him so that when King Pharaoh has nightmares about seven big heifers getting eaten alive by seven scrawny cows, and then seven big juicy ears of corn getting munched by seven blighted ears, he calls for help. Joseph comes to the rescue with a dream interpretation that surpasses Sigmund Freud. "The dreams are from God," Joseph assures the leader. "They mean the same thing but because you have had two dreams their significance is doubly sure. The seven heifers, the seven big ears of corn are

seven years of plenty. That's what's coming to your country, Pharaoh. Then they will be overtaken by seven years of lean. Put away grain now, make plenty of jerky while you are prospering, then you will have enough for the seven lean years to come. Heck fire, if you play your cards right, your government bailout will put you and your people in the driver's seat and you will make a windfall profit in the end." I've been thinking about those dreams this week, but the question I'm left with for us is: which cow, which ear of corn, go first?

Actually, I found encouragement about our present economic situation from a couple of opinion pieces in *The Washington Post*. Asking whether we have gone back in time, in his piece entitled, *Is It 1929 Again?*, Robert Samuelson wrote reassuringly that "the real culprit in causing the Depression's depth and duration was the Federal Reserve. It unwittingly transformed an ordinary, if harsh, recession into a calamity by permitting a banking collapse and a disastrous drop in the money supply." Samuelson sees our government and the governments of the world as some fat cows fed by delicious, nutritious corn on the cob steadying us for the market downturn. By article's end he convinced me: "No we haven't returned to 1929. Things are different now."

Economists, Laurence J. Kotlikoff and Perry Mehrling, respectively from Boston and Columbia Universities, had a similar take on our last week saying that there will be "no depression, because this time that Uncle Sam has got our back." Commending most of the recent actions of government leaders, Kotlikoff and Merhling also reiterated what Rev. Randy Tremba said at the Homecoming service last Saturday that while "this financial chaos may have ruined our sleep it left our physical and human capital unscathed. We have the same productive capacity today we had a year ago. And if our capital hasn't changed, we've suffered no overall capital loss." We have resources of a hard working people and of God's exuberant generosity in the resourcefulness of the earth. Our stock in human and the physical capital has seen no downturn at all.

And while I am no economist (I just play one in the pulpit), I was delighted for this encouraging news, but also because I could see how it connects with our Beatitude for the day: for the blessing of the peacemakers ends with the affirmation that they will be called the children of God. In other words, quite opposite of fear and panic, it is in the affirmative possibilities of our relationships that we will find blessing.

Of all people in recent history, Martin Luther King, Jr., is one if not the most renowned of peacemakers. He perfected the technique of peacemaking in his civil rights work – the nonviolent encounter with the enemy, whom he sought to convert into ally. Yes, there was confrontation and conflict, but the manner by which the challenge to end segregation and discrimination came in the form of a vision where all people were to be seen as children of God. As such King was an ambassador of reconciliation, true to the gospel of Jesus, whose own nonviolent action made for us a peace with God as well as also opening the way for us to a peace with one another.

At a Martin Luther King, Jr. Day dinner five years or so ago, I heard what became a dividend of that peacemaking work. Former Detroit Mayor, Dennis Archer (not to be confused with the most recent Detroit Mayor, Kwame

Kilpatrick), spoke at the dinner at first telling of how he himself had gone from being a justice on the Michigan Supreme Court to become the Mayor of the Rust Belt city, and how following all of that he came to serve on several corporate boards which were involved in global businesses. From his own story and experiences, Mayor Archer praised Martin Luther King for how he had opened the way for all of that. And he wasn't talking about how advantages came to him, an African American man, now successful in politics and business – but to global business. Because Martin Luther King showed us how to cross lines of difference which before had separated us, Americans came to have the tools to expand into the world. We could work with people from Europe, Africa, Latin America, Asia, even the Middle East. The peacemaker, Martin Luther King, Jr., had equipped Americans for a new venture that brought about a global economy.

Mission Committee chair, Ibbey Dickson, is bringing us an appeal to give priority to fight hunger in the world, today. Given our concern about markets going down, pensions and homes being at risk, it brings one back to earth to know that the first goal for fighting poverty and hunger, in the world today, is to get one fifth of the world beyond living on a dollar and a quarter per day. That's the international line for poverty. But while 20% of the world's population live at or below that line today, the number was higher twenty years ago, when 33% lived with such poverty. In the term made popular by Thomas Friedman, the world has grown "flatter" because of globalization. The great openness to diversity which was fueled by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil rights movement, has now changed the world's hunger situation.

I'm not saying that there is everything right in our world, right now. As I've said from this pulpit before, the root of the word economy comes from the Greek "oikos," which means household, and it is also the root of words like ecumenical and ecology. Oikos, eco-, same thing. If the economy is sour, the household is not holding together. And oikos includes all the diverse people of God who live around the world. And the oikos includes all nature as it sings praise to God, and if any of this are not whole, then household is not as it should be. But in the meantime, something had been going right because blessing was being extended.

My friend Tom Long was telling a group of ministers I was with that he has a place on the Chesapeake's Eastern Shore and the nearest church to them is the Antioch United Methodist Church – which he described as "the bitter end of a three-point Methodist charge. But it is the nearest church to where we live in the summer," he said "and even though we are Presbyterians we worship there. A hundred years ago Antioch was full of life and was the center of social and religious activity, but all that's gone now. In fact, they have gotten down to such a point that they only have two forms of mission left.

The first is their building. They leave it open for prayer all of the time. They have never locked it. It has been open since the church was built generations ago. But, Tom said, "he's been there for ten years and I've never seen anyone go in for prayer, actually but, the idea of it, leaving the building open is a form a ministry that's important to them, it's what they have, it's what they have to offer.

Last summer there was a consternation going on in the church because they had just gotten word from their insurance company that this policy was no longer going to be allowable. They had to lock the church. The world had changed, the insurance agency said. And they could no longer permit the church to stay unlocked.

This threw the congregation into an uproar. Somebody said let's change insurance companies. They're all the same. Then someone said let's just do without insurance. No we can't do that. So they finally caved in. They decided they would have to follow the insurance company's rules and they put a big padlock, for the first time, in 180 years on the door of Antioch Methodist Church. They took the key and they put it under a rock beside the door and they painted the word, "key," on it. That lasted until the insurance man paid a visit. They said that was clever but not exactly what State Farm had in mind. And he required that they put a security keypad on there instead of a padlock. So they did. And then they went home and called everybody they and told them the security code. If you go by there, by the way it's 1-2-2-5. It's easy to remember, 12-25, the birthday of Jesus.

The other mission that they have is the peach festival. Once a year in August, people come from hundreds of miles away to this little country church for the peach festival. The old women of the church bake peach cobblers and peach pies and peach bread. And in the little cinder block hut that is the fellowship hall they serve crab cake sandwiches and fresh peach ice cream. They put tables out in the cemetery between the church and the hut under the cottonwood trees where people can eat. And then there are booths where you can buy fresh peaches and arts and crafts.

Tom told us: "Last summer I was working there serving crab cake sandwiches and after one o'clock I decided to take a short break and I went out in the side yard and I could not believe what I saw. There under the cotton wood trees, there were whites and blacks and Hispanics and Asian. There were young and old. There were farmers and merchants. There were rich and poor and the living and the dead. If you squinted and looked, it was the Kingdom of God."

And the next day in church, our minister was in the announcements saying what a wonderful festival we had and then she said, Did anybody see under the trees. . . And then she stopped because she couldn't describe it. But I knew what she had seen. I had seen it too. And then she said that an amazing thing had happened the day before. A member of the congregation had told her that he felt called into the ministry. And a fellow blushed. He was a bulldozer operator. Got a wife and a brand new baby. And our pastor said, And we're going to help him by letting him do his first act of ministry today. He's going to read the scripture.

He took off the cowboy hat he was wearing. And he came up to the lectern and he found with some difficulty the passage he was to read. And he said: And Jesus said, "Fear not little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." At Antioch Church, even despite great discouragement and loss, they discovered what it to be called the children of God.