

“WHERE IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD?”

A Sermon for the 21st Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, October 9, 2016

Text: Luke 17:11-19

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." (Luke 17:20-21)—these are the two verses which follow our gospel reading in Luke.

I would love to preach a sermon about thanksgiving based on today's Gospel. This is the appointed text in our calendar for a National Day of Thanksgiving. But you already know you should give thanks to God for all his benefits to you, right? Let's look at another theme in this text: Where is the kingdom of God?

Jesus says in Luke 17:21: "the kingdom of God is among you." You could doubt that. Isn't the kingdom of God an ideal place, a place of grace and beauty and perfect justice? Isn't the kingdom of God where God's will is always done?

Yes. God's kingdom is, by definition, where God rules. But we seem to live in a world in which people hand themselves over to the service of almost anything, rather than God.

So, where is the kingdom of God?

Jesus said to the Pharisees "in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

How so?

Well, to get his point we need to look at the two stories about lepers being healed. A total of eleven lepers were healed. Naaman the Syrian general, and, hundreds of years later, ten lepers living in the region between Samaria and Galilee.

When Jesus healed his ten lepers, you know he was conscious about the story he had heard ever since

he was a child about Naaman the Syrian general being healed.

The children of Israel were proud of that story. It demonstrated that the power to heal was given not to people in other lands but only to the true prophet of the true God in the land of God's people. Naaman went to Elisha the prophet, who exacerbated the humiliation of Naaman by making him take a dip in the humble Jordan River. Really humble, compared to the rivers back in Damascus. I guess Elisha showed him where the kingdom of God really was!

And the general was so convinced—the ending of the story is omitted in our pericope—that he took a bushel of dirt from the kingdom of Israel back home with him, and worshiped the Lord God of Israel kneeling on that dirt as though it was the embassy of the true God—property of God on high. The kingdom of God, delivered on the back of a donkey to a foreign place so a foreigner could worship God.

You see how that story, if we heard the whole of it, is about where the kingdom of God is? Among whom the Lord is present for salvation? It's not just a miracle story. It's a where-is-God story. God is present where God saves!

So too in the story in Luke. But Jesus, knowing that his audience was familiar with the story of Naaman, went beyond what Elisha did. First off, he healed all ten of them when they cried out. "When he saw them, he [simply] said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.'" Note: he sent them to the holy place, where the Lord God was accustomed to receiving his people and communicating with them through the priests who belonged in that place. (This is all about place!)

But one of the ten, who sensed God's presence in the person and work of Jesus Christ, turned and went back to Jesus and threw himself down on the ground at Jesus' feet, as though that was the "thin place" to which he ought to resort with his worship. He found a little patch of dirt right there and turned it into a place of worship and praise and thanksgiving. Right there where Jesus was.

No wonder this story is followed, in Luke, by verses 20-21:

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming [they had been following Jesus around, and hadn't noticed any sign of the kingdom of God coming, you see], and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." (Luke 17:20-21)

Where is the kingdom of God? "It is among you." They knew what Jesus meant. The kingdom of God, the reign of God, the sphere of God, the otherworld of God, was present there at that moment, in the person of Jesus, in the actions of Jesus, in the love of Jesus, in the fellowship of Jesus, in Jesus' receiving sinners, in Jesus' healing lepers . . . the kingdom of God was abundantly present.

The kingdom of God is abundantly present in our midst as well. Remember that Jesus said not with things that can be observed. It is not obvious, in other words. There will not be compelling evidence. People will not be able to point to any accomplishment, any achievement, any happening, any state of affairs, and say "there is the kingdom of God!"

For example, you cannot say whenever things are going swimmingly in your life, not necessarily. Not whenever there is a healing, not necessarily.

Because, if that was the case, if the presence of God's kingdom was tied firmly to the visible evidence of things being right, then the kingdom of

God would not be present where things were going wrong. Whereas Jesus used to say "Blessed are those who mourn; blessed are those who are poor;" etc.

There is simply not a one-to-one correspondence between things being "just right," and the kingdom of God being present.

So, where is the kingdom present? Where is the kingdom of God?

If I know, that is where I want to be. Because God loves me, and God will take care of me. God loves the world, and God will take care of the world. So, one last time, just where is the kingdom of God?

The kingdom of God is "among you" where Jesus is present among you.

To comprehend that mysterious saying, we need to know Jesus well. To know Jesus well, we need to abide in Jesus' word. And when we abide in his word, we will recognize that the kingdom of God is present where people call out to Jesus "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Or, "Kyrie eleison." "Lord, have mercy." Jesus hears, and Jesus loves and heals, binds and unites, liberates and restores us.

There goes the kingdom of God.

It cannot be packaged. It cannot be bought and sold. It cannot be diverted into other channels. It cannot be co-opted, for Jesus will slip away where he is made to serve human purpose. The kingdom of God is simply here, among us, where grace meets faith. Where his promises are believed and his gifts are received with thanksgiving.

The kingdom of God exists on the border between Samaria and Galilee. Not in either place, but in both places. Mysteriously. Neither here nor there, neither up high nor down low, but wherever the people of God call upon God in the name of our Savior.

Ergo, the kingdom of God is among us.

Amen.