

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: Peace to This House!
Reverend Dr. Alan Baughcum
Grace UCC, Lancaster, Ohio
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Isaiah 66:10-14, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Sometime in reading Scripture, I am struck by the number of times certain words are repeated. In our readings this morning, the words “joy” and “rejoice” appear seven times, four in the Old Testament and three in the New Testament.

They appear because both readings are describing, in one form or another, communities that point to the coming Kingdom of God. Isaiah is encouraging the former exiles who have returned to Jerusalem. He promises a community where illness and poverty and hunger shall disappear. That is the Kingdom of God. That is a beloved and joyful community, and the people should rejoice at its coming. It may not have arrived in full yet, but we can rejoice in the existing community of returned exiles as a promise of what will be.

In our reading from the Gospel of Luke the seventy missionaries are instructed to go from village to village to announce explicitly that the Kingdom of God has come near to them. That is the same Kingdom promised to the people of Jerusalem. In that Kingdom evil will be defeated and demonic powers vanquished. The people will experience life rightly ordered in God’s fellowship. And surely the appropriate response to the coming of that Kingdom is joy. In fact, the disciples returned from their journeys filled with joy. They had a taste of God’s Kingdom on their journey, and they rejoiced.

The Kingdom of God has come near to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we hail as Messiah, the Christ. Living as Jesus would have us live gives us a taste of life in the Kingdom now. We look forward and we work to prepare for the fulfillment of that Kingdom when Jesus returns to a new heaven and a new and restored earth.

What does it mean to talk about the Kingdom of God? Well, it means a lot of things ... but I only have time for one short sermon on Communion Sunday so I will not keep you here for the months it would take to cover the entire topic!

Let’s try it this way. I am a fan of the work of New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright. Wright teaches that the lesson of the Bible is that God is looking for a good place for a pleasant walk among his Creation in the cool of the early evening. That is what God was trying to do when he discovered Adam and Eve trying to cover their nakedness in the Garden of Eden. That was a good walk spoiled!!

That willfulness of human beings, that willingness to elevate their own desires above the commandments of God, that idolatry that elevated the created person above the Creator ... that

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caused a great divide between God and God's Creation that finally required God to take on flesh in the person of Jesus to bridge and heal.

Prior to the coming of Jesus, God tried hard to overcome that divide. God sent judges, teachers, sages, prophets, scribes and kings to his people to teach them God's ways. He sent instructions on how to prepare a tabernacle and then a Temple in which he could reside among the people. It didn't work. God even punished the people with defeat at the hands of large empires, dispersal of the people, destruction of Jerusalem and exile. God in God's grace brought the people back to Jerusalem where they could restore the Temple, God's home on earth.

The people kept repeating the mistake that Adam and Eve made. It is the great sin denounced by both the Old and New Testaments, the sin of idolatry. We insist on resisting the will of God by putting our own desires and judgments above God's.

God is still looking for that pleasant walk midst Creation and among God's people. God has come near in the person of Jesus who walked the hills of Galilee and the road to Jerusalem. God will take that walk in the Kingdom of God when it comes in full ... after Jesus' return, the general resurrection of the dead, and Jesus' judgment.

The Kingdom of God is an important focus for us because it reminds us that our judgments will be flawed if they run counter to Jesus' teachings ... Jesus being our best picture of who God is and what God wants for us.

The need to stay focused, the need for Christians to stay focused on proclaiming the kingdom of God is important for individual Christians. It is also important for the Christian church and for individual congregations.

Let me give you an example from the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German Christian who was hung for being part of a plot to kill Hitler.

Bonhoeffer visited a church in New York City while he was a seminary student. It was a church that did not embrace what Bonhoeffer called the cost of discipleship. That is, it did not focus on entering and receiving the Kingdom of God. Here is what Bonhoeffer wrote nearly 100 years ago:

In New York, they preach about virtually everything; only one thing is not addressed or is addressed so rarely that I have yet been unable to hear it, namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ.... So, what stands in place of the Christian message? An ethical and social idealism borne by a faith in progress that — who knows how? — claims the right to call itself 'Christian'. And in the place of the church as the congregation of believers in Christ there stands the church as a social corporation. Anyone who has seen the weekly program of one of the large New York churches, with their daily, indeed almost hourly events, teas, lectures, concerts, charity events, opportunities for sports, games, bowling, dancing for every age group, [Bonhoeffer continues] anyone who has become acquainted with the embarrassing nervousness with which the pastor

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lobbies for membership--that person can well assess the character of such a church.... to balance out the feeling of inner emptiness that arises now and then (and partly also to refill the church's treasury), some congregations will, if possible, engage an evangelist for a 'revival' once a year. The church is no longer the place where the congregation hears and preaches God's word, but rather the place where one acquires secondary significance as a social entity for this or that purpose. [Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*. Vol. 10. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008. 313-17.]

Many urban churches in Western Europe and in America have seen their membership decline and attendance dwindle. They have lost their way.

Bonhoeffer's church in Germany in the 1930s lost its way by buying into the myth of Aryan racial superiority, even to the point of making Adolf Hitler their special messiah. They lost their way.

I had my own experience of this misplaced focus when a friend of mine and I visited a very large so-named Bible church in the Washington, DC area. It had ten thousand members and 300 small groups that met each week ... a small group for every purpose that one can imagine. Unlike Bonhoeffer's NYC church that lifted up ethical and social idealism, this church lifted up the Bible, or rather a fundamentalist and unthinking interpretation of the Bible that was unforgivingly judgmental. The Kingdom of God had been replaced by a form of idolatry, worship of the Bible ... bibliolatry.

How shall we keep our focus? As individuals, as well as a congregation and as a church? Jesus provides the answer in the Gospel of Mark 12:28-31: 12:28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" 29 Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

And that is the point of this sermon. If we lose our focus on that first commandment, on the Kingdom of God, we will lose our direction and move off into all sorts of activities and worship that ultimately will prove contrary to God's will.

I am not saying that all we need to do is come to church and worship and sing and pray and preach and shout for Jesus. Churches need to be involved in all sorts of activities in addition to Sunday morning worship and Wednesday night prayer meetings.

Yes, we need to work with food pantries, with social service agencies, with educational institutions, and with cultural organizations that help to build community and fight prejudice and violence. I have twice been a part of church leadership that led their congregations to becoming Open and Affirming Churches, once as lay leader and once as an ordained minister. I congratulate Grace UCC for being part of that fellowship. And there is so much more to do.

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But, important as those activities are, our involvement in them is not the essence of what it means to be a Christian or a Christian church. Those specific and important activities come out of our overall efforts to proclaim the Kingdom of God, a renewed world where Creation is properly stewarded and where all of God's human creatures are treated with love and grace and peace and justice.

We must keep the Kingdom of God, God as best revealed in our Savior, Jesus the Christ, at the center.

In today's hyper-political American culture, the church needs especially to be careful about its involvement in narrowly secular politics. Sometimes it cannot be helped. African American churches took the Exodus story to heart as a way of sustaining its people during the time of Jim Crow and were integral to helping this country take down that those statutes and regulations in favor of extending equality and civil rights to all. Quakers and others take the Biblical message of peace and non-violence to heart and have been ferocious witnesses for solutions to our problems that do not involve war and aggression. There are other examples.

We must keep the Kingdom of God, God as best revealed in our Savior, Jesus the Christ, at the center.

At its core, Christianity is not a vehicle for lifting up political causes. It is not a social welfare agency. Christianity is not a means of promoting particular cultural, ideals. I happen to be a radical, advocating for the economics of the free market and for libertarian ideas that I see at the heart of the best of American history. But I do not preach those ideas as part of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is bigger than that.

We must keep the Kingdom of God, God as best revealed in our Savior, Jesus the Christ, at the center.

Remember what Jesus said, "'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'

Jesus was rejected by his culture. At its heart Christianity is, like Jesus, finally counter-cultural, no matter what culture the church inhabits. We are to proclaim and lift up the Kingdom of God higher than any other value or ideal or custom or political cause. Why? Because, if we do not, we will lose our way ... like Bonhoeffer's NYC churches, like the German Protestant church of 100 years ago, like those fundamentalist Bible churches. We will be drawn away from God's purposes to activities that will ultimately drain away our energy and cause us to move away from the discipleship to which Jesus calls us.

And if we do proclaim the Kingdom of God come near in Jesus, we will share in the Kingdom joy experienced by those first missionaries. With them, we can greet those we meet by saying with all our heart, "Peace be with this house."

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Let us pray: Sweet friend, Jesus, help us to heed your words. Help us to pay attention to our allegiances and our obligations. Focus us on the Kingdom of God and strengthen us to declare that God's Kingdom has come near in you. Make us your disciples and move us to prepare for the coming of God's Kingdom in full.

In your name we pray, amen.