

The Reign of God

Sermon based on Article 24, Mennonite Confession of Faith

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God as The Creator and Ruler of the Universe

Today's topic for the message is from the last article in our Confession of Faith: The Reign of God. The first thing that comes to me when I think about this topic is God as the creator the universe. God reigns in the universe because He created it. How God created the universe, either through Big Bang or some other means, is beside the point here. To reign also means to rule and to create the law. God did not only created the universe, but He also made its law: the law of nature. To me, the constancy and reliability of the law of nature says something about God's character and how he rules the world. Imagine if you live in a country where the laws are often changed according to the mood of the government. Would you trust the government then ? But that's not how our God rules the world. Although he is above the law, he respects it that he does not change it according to his mood. This also says that he is faithful to us, his creation. God as the creator and the lawmaker of the universe is but one example of God's reign. If the story had stopped here, then all we have is an impersonal God, who created the universe we live in, but does not have relationship with us, his creation. Fortunately, the story doesn't end.

From the article: "We believe that God, who created the universe, continues to rule over it in wisdom, patience, and justice, though sinful creation has not yet recognized God's rule." God did not just create the universe and then stop there and let it run its own course. God continues to interact and rule over it. In fact, knowing this and acknowledging the reign of God means that we can place our hope in Him. Because we know that He is a good God who continue to love us and give us providence, we can take comfort in the fact that his ruling is in our best interest.

So far I have only talked about the big picture: God as the creator and ruler of the universe. But there are things that are more practical and relevant to our daily living. The second thing that comes to me from the topic is about the Kingdom of God. A reign is usually associated with a monarch, a monarchy, and a kingdom. The kingdom of God is in fact, according to Bible scholars, the most central and comprehensive theme in the entire Bible. A quick search in the New Testament for the phrase “Kingdom of God” and “Kingdom of Heaven” yields about ninety hits of Bible passages. Jesus certainly teaches a lot about the Kingdom of God.

What is the Kingdom of God ?

So what is the Kingdom of God ? Jesus uses a lot of parables to teach us about the Kingdom of God. On the surface, some of these parables seem paradoxical, but I think that is probably because the true reality of the kingdom of God is too hard, if not impossible, to describe in our earthly existence until we can experience it. I will come back to this again.

Why using parables then ? Don't you wish sometimes that Jesus could have been more straightforward ? There is this a story I read, that I thought is pretty interesting to share, even if this is somewhat a detour in our topic.

A rabbi was once asked: "Why does the parable possess such great influence?"

To which the wise rabbi replied, "I will explain this with a parable." And he said: Truth was accustomed to walk about as naked as the day he was born. No one allowed him to enter a home, and everyone who encountered him ran away in fright. Discouraged that he could find no resting place, Truth encountered Parable, all dressed up in colorful, expensive garments. Parable asked his friend, "Why are you so dejected?"

"I am in a bad situation," replied Truth. "I am old, very old, and no one cares to have anything to do with me."

"No," replied Parable, "it is not because of your age that you are disliked by people. Look! I am as old as you are, and the older I grow, the more I seem to be loved. Let me tell you the secret of my apparent popularity. People enjoy seeing everything dressed up and somewhat disguised. Here! I will lend you my garments, and you will see that people will like you as well."

Truth followed his friend's advice and dressed himself in the garments of Parable. Ever since then, Truth and Parable walk hand in hand, and people love both of them."

The disciples also asked this same question about why Jesus speaks in parables, and Jesus answers, in Matthew 13:11, "You have been given knowledge about the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but it hasn't been given to them", and in verse 13: "That's why I speak to them in parables, because 'they look but don't see, and they listen but don't hear or understand.'"

So, back to our topic, let us look at some of the parables that Jesus uses to describe the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew prefers. Matthew 13:24-29, "Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared." And then he went on to tell the story of weeds growing up alongside good plants and cautioning us to avoid taking indiscriminate action and thereby destroying both. Jesus continues with another parable, Matthew 13:31, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and planted in his field." And another parable, in Matthew 13:33, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.". And yet in another parable Jesus likened the Kingdom of God with a hidden treasure that a man found in a field. And on and on flow stories about the Kingdom of God from Jesus' teaching that makes a repertoire of parables in the Gospel. Each parable there probably merits a whole sermon by itself so I will not talk about them in details. But these parables give us a glimpse about the reality of the Kingdom of God.

Is The Kingdom of God Here Yet ?

Is the Kingdom of God here already, or is it still in the future ? This is a topic that has provoked heated scholarly debate. The answer seems paradoxical. The Bible proclaims both. In Luke 11:20, Jesus says, “The Kingdom of God has come near you.” Jesus seems to say that the Kingdom was already present. And yet, more is still to come in the future. In Matthew 10:23, Jesus said “I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” Also in John 18:36, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over.... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." And in John 3:3, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," said Jesus. An in verse 5, "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." These verses make the Kingdom of God sounds like a concept that has no earthly dimension.

Most Bible scholars agree that the Kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching integrates both the present and future. Jesus saw the kingdom as already present in some real way here, yet not fully realized. Our confession of faith also specifically supports this position: “Faithful Israel acclaimed God as king and looked forward to the fullness of God's kingdom. We affirm that, in Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection, the time of fulfillment has begun. Jesus proclaimed both the nearness of God's reign and its future realization, its healing and its judgment.” Early Christians believe that the church gives us a good idea of what the Kingdom of God is like. In fact, some Mennonites have taken this further and virtually identified the church with God's kingdom, and assign the rest of the society and culture to the devil's rule. Yet, this is exactly what the commentaries of our article caution us against: “... The church is not identical with the kingdom, or reign, of God. Nor must the church harbor illusions that it can bring about the kingdom fully in the present age, either all at once or by gradually improving conditions in this world.” So in conclusion, the kingdom of God, in some form that to be truly realized later in the second coming, is already here, however, incomplete. What does this mean to our life now ?

The Kingdom of God Gives Us a Model of Ethics, Spiritual and Social Living

From our article: “We believe that the church is called to live now according to the model of the future reign of God. Thus, we are given a foretaste of the kingdom that God will one day establish in full. The church is to be a spiritual, social, and economic reality, demonstrating now the justice, righteousness, love, and peace of the age to come. The church does this in obedience to its Lord and in anticipation that the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord.” The church is called to live now under the rule of God as a witness to the reign of God. Our life together now is to be patterned after our life together in the age to come. This means that the reign of God is relevant to this world, and the ethics of God's rule should not be postponed to some future time.

The very practical side of this is to first let God be our personal King first. We do that by acknowledging his reign in our lives, by making him our first priority, the center of our life. We need to do this if we want to be a member of the Kingdom, but it's ultimately our choice. God loves us so much that he does not coerce his love and his reign in us. But if we want to be a member of the Kingdom of God, we are to acknowledge him as King.

If we have done this, the next step is to live our calling. Jesus' does not only teach us about spiritual things, but also about social and ethical living. In fact, we can go further and see that God does not only concern about spirituality, He acted in social form, in our human relationship, by sending Jesus. Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor, and love our enemy, just to name few examples. Jesus' teachings teach us how to live in the Kingdom of God. And we can start living the Kingdom way in our family, our neighborhood, our school, and our work. By doing that, we may start attracting people to live in and become a member of Kingdom of God too. I think it's good to emphasize this again. The Kingdom of God is not only about spiritual thing. It's also model of a social and ethical living. Jesus teachings show us that. There is a really good book that addresses these in very practical ways that I encourage you to read, if you have not. We used it in our Wednesday night study. It's called: “Love Walked among Us”,

by Paul Miller.

The Kingdom of God is very real, yet strange and different than other kingdoms. One of our scholar, Donald Kraybill, called it “the upside-down kingdom”. It is an upside-down kingdom in that it stands over against and challenges the values and standards of this world's kingdoms. According to the Sermon of the Mount, the Kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit, the meek “will inherit the earth”, and the persecuted will have the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus also says, that the first shall be the last, the least and the servant among us will be the greatest, and whoever “humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.” These few examples show how this Kingdom of God has different value system and standards than the world's kingdoms. Yet this is the only kingdom we need to seek, as written in Matthew 6:33, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

The Reign of God is Our Hope

I would like to close this message by quoting the first and last paragraphs from the article, which tell us what we should look forward for. “We place our hope in the reign of God and in its fulfillment in the day when Christ our ascended Lord will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. He will gather his church, already living under the reign of God according to the pattern of God's future. We believe in God's final victory, in the end of this present age of struggle between good and evil, in the resurrection of the dead, and in the appearance of a new heaven and a new earth. There the people of God will reign with Christ in justice, righteousness, and peace. ... We look forward to the coming of a new heaven and a new earth, and a new Jerusalem, where the people of God will no longer hunger, thirst, or cry, but will sing praises: "To the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever! Amen!"”