

August 7, 2022

This Is Not the Kingdom You're Thinking Of

Jeremiah 23:1-4; Matthew 7:13-23

Today our scripture comes from the prophet Jeremiah, but the reading refers to a theme found in many prophetic books: that even when the nation turns from God, there is a righteous remnant. We read Jeremiah 23, verses 1-4.

23 Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! Says the Lord.

²Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. ³Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

As we've worked through the themes of the Sermon on the Mount over the past few weeks, one phrase in particular has kept recurring: "the Kingdom of Heaven." In the other gospels, Jesus says Kingdom of God, which is how I'll refer to it, but whatever we call it, what is this kingdom? In one key verse, Jesus says to "seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness," but how is righteousness a kingdom? Well, as we arrive at chapter 7, we find several more kingdom references. Let's work backwards in this chapter, beginning with a startling saying in verses 21-23. *Not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord," will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. In that day, many will come to me saying, "Lord, Lord! Did we not prophecy in your name? And cast out demons in your name? And do many mighty works in your name?" And I will declare to them, "I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers!"*

It would appear that whatever the Kingdom of God is, at least for now it doesn't include everyone who *thinks* they're part of it. I know of no way to read this passage except to say that not everyone who claims the name of Jesus is part of the kingdom. Jesus says only "the one who does the will of the Father" is welcome. But that's weird: the people in the parable aren't exactly slackers. These are preachers and healers and miracle-workers who are calling out for Jesus and not being recognized. Today, people like this would be considered the top Christians in the business. What's wrong with them?

Well, maybe one answer to that question comes from the preceding saying, from 7:15-17: *Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, and every evil tree bears bad fruit.* Jesus is warning his disciples that there will be frauds in their group, people using the community for their own ends. *You will know them by their fruits.* Okay, but what fruits? We've already determined that being a preacher or a healer or a miraculously successful leader doesn't count. So what "fruits" is Jesus talking about? Well, looking back at the earlier chapters of the Sermon on the Mount, at the sorts of things Jesus encourages, we would have to say that what he would want to see is forgiveness, non-violence, deeply personal faith humbly expressed in private generosity and prayer and discipline, indifference to fame or riches, and faith in God that overcomes all worldly anxieties.

Now let's add to that some further qualifications, from this chapter: 7:1-3: *Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not see the log that is in your own?* (7:1-3). So, not judgmental, and not self-righteous. Or how about one more, from 7:12: *So, whatever you would have others do to you, do that to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.* If you put all this together, then the "fruits" that Jesus appears to be looking for are evidences of transformed individual lives, lives of humility and compassion and forgiveness and empathy. These things are not achievements: these are things that flow naturally from character. *A sound tree bears good fruit.*

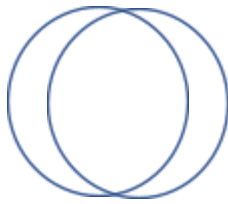
This, I believe, is what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God: it is the community of all those who are living and growing into that kind of life. It is the fellowship of those who are being transformed day after day by the renewing of their minds until they take on the image of Christ. Now, it's possible that some of you hearing that list of the "fruits" that Jesus is looking for, are thinking, "But that's really hard. I'm surprised anybody makes the cut." Well, Jesus doesn't disagree with you. Matthew 7:13-14: *Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and few are those who find it.* Jesus doesn't expect the Kingdom of God to be popular.

This is not a new concept in scripture. The story of God's dealings with humanity that is told in the Bible is a story of a God who created all humanity and loves all humanity, but who never is able to persuade more than a tiny minority to return his love and become the people they were created to be. Just Noah. Just Abraham. Just a few leaders, a few faithful prophets, just a righteous remnant who do not bow down to other gods. At no time in the Bible do faithful, dedicated worshipers of God make up a majority, and Jesus apparently does not expect that to change. The Kingdom of God he describes is a small but faithful few who continue to quietly represent God to an ungodly world. Now, this does not mean that God only loves that select few and has given up on everyone else, as some Christians have taught. All it means is that God knows that the way to life is difficult and will be hard to take at first. God's in it for the long haul, and in the meantime this small kingdom collective of transformed lives is to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world."

Finally, just in case it's not already clear, I need to say one thing. The Kingdom of God is not the same thing as the Church. The Kingdom of God is a small group that measures itself by its faithfulness. The Church is a worldwide institution that measures itself by baptisms and membership. The Kingdom of God is focused on the transformation of lives; the Church, like every institution, is focused on expansion and self-preservation. The Kingdom of God is in constant tension with the values of culture; the Church adapts to culture in order to attract more people. And one more important distinction: the Church comes and goes, taking a new form every generation, and every form it takes will one day pass away. The Kingdom of God never changes. It is forever.

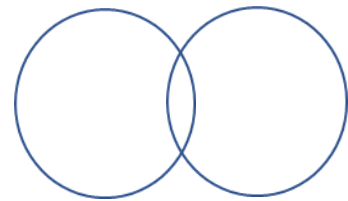
Now, hear this: I am *not* saying that the Church is a bad thing. I'm just saying it's not what some people think it is; it's not itself the Kingdom of God. What it is, though, is the primary earthly support for the Kingdom of God. If you're seeking the Kingdom of God, the Church is still the best place to start, because historically, you're more likely to find that dedicated community of transformed lives within the Church than outside the Church. The two

support each other. The Church provides a safe place for the Kingdom of God to flourish, and the Kingdom of God is a prophetic voice reminding the Church why it exists.



But it *is* important to recognize that the two are not the same thing. They overlap, but they are different. Think of it as a Venn diagram, with one circle being the Kingdom of God, and the other being the Church. Sometimes, when the Church is genuinely focused on serving Christ, there is a lot of overlap. But they are never the same: there are always some things that the Church does for its own institutional survival that have nothing to do with the kingdom, and God is always moving outside beyond the church walls, touching lives where we don't see.

But the reason we need to keep the two separate in our minds is because there are other times when there is less overlap, times when the Church forgets its purpose and aligns itself too closely with its culture. The pre-Civil War Methodist Church in the South comes to mind, when our theology and practice were all subverted and turned to the task of defending chattel slavery. As Fredrick Douglass noted, you were more likely to find the Kingdom of God outside the Church than in. Or take the current Russian Orthodox Church, throwing itself enthusiastically behind the invasion of Ukraine in exchange for power and privilege and wealth. There are times when we have to be crystal clear that the Church is not the Kingdom of God.



Jesus did not come to begin a Church. I don't imagine he's opposed to the idea in principle, but that wasn't his purpose. He came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God; it's all he ever talked about. And although some of what I've said today about the Church might have sounded, oh, maybe a tad discouraging, this distinction is actually good news. This means that we are here today to serve something eternal. Others can wring their hands about the latest survey data on the state of the Church, but the Kingdom of God is not in decline. The very idea is laughable. Our task, as individuals, is to seek God and become a part of that transformed and transformational community, and our task as a Church is to become a fertile place for the Kingdom to take root. Everything else is God. And *that's* good news.

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Final Word: This was a personal sermon for me today, because I live in that Venn diagram. I work for the Church. The Church pays my salary. But my calling is to the Kingdom of God. Now, I'm really fortunate in that I'm in a place where there's a lot of overlap between the two, so that I sometimes get paid to do what I'm called to do. It doesn't always feel that way, mind you. Sometimes I spend whole days on spreadsheets and reports and administrative things that are all good things, but they're about maintaining the institution and are harder to connect directly to the kingdom.

But sometimes, because I'm in this job, I get to do things like I did last week: exchange emails with a young man who is committed to Christ but whose church is telling him that he can't be a Christian and gay at the same time. I got a chance to try to describe the depths of God's love, bigger than all our theologies, stronger than every puny barrier we humans think to erect. And that's not church work anymore; that's kingdom work. It was a good day.