

## **Our Next Faithful Step: Kin-dom Work**

**Luke 17:20-21**

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What an incredible joy it is to finally be able to sing and pray, laugh and learn together again! I can hardly wait until next week, when we begin gathering for worship downtown. But, this isn't the only big thing that has happened this week. On Tuesday, Shonagh Taruza was commissioned as a deacon in the United Methodist Church in the annual conference's service of recognition, commissioning, and ordination. Plus, tomorrow, we also will be confirming eight eighth graders and, if you happen to watch the recorded worship service, we will share with you the baptism of Theo Sterken, representing the third generation of his family to find a home here in our church family.

These are all wonderful signs of hope - tangible expressions of a new beginning after a long period of fear, anxiety, and isolation. Our church is alive and healthy and ready to be together in growing, learning, and serving again! Yet, even as we embrace a new start, even as we reclaim these rites that are so important to who we are, we are returning to a whole different landscape than where we were before the pandemic. Our country and communities have changed. We have been through a time of shared trauma, and we are only beginning to understand what that will mean financially, physically, emotionally, and spiritually for us and others in the coming years.

In these last fifteen months, we have lived through things we never would have imagined happening - not only the pandemic, but the assault on our nation's capitol and the killing of an unarmed black man from a police officer's knee pushed against his neck for nearly nine minutes. We've recognized the need for honest conversation and education about racism. And, hovering in the background is the ever-present question of what will happen with our denomination. Will we be United Methodists two years from now?

This is not the same world we left when we locked the doors of our church buildings and went home to wait out the pandemic. And so, I don't think we can be the same church as we return. For that reason, I've asked the Leadership Council to spend this summer listening to our congregation and our community about what kind of church we need to be to be relevant and impactful in our worship, service, and outreach in the coming years. At the end of the summer, I hope they will have created a new purpose statement for our church and a picture of what I've been calling our next faithful step. This is a time for us to ask what God is calling us, our church, to do to make a difference in the world.

To kick off this process, today I'm starting a three-part sermon series to help us recommit to the fundamentals of who we are. In the coming weeks, we'll explore who we are as Methodists and who we are as First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor. But, I am going to start today with who we are as God's church. Why did God create the church anyway? What is the purpose of the church in God's eyes?

Before I go any further, though, I'd like you to take a minute and imagine what the world would look like if it were the world you wish it could be. What would be the ideal world for your

children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren to grow up in? How would it feel to live in this ideal world? What would need to change to get us to that place?

I asked this question as an informal poll on my personal Facebook page as well as on the church's Facebook page. Here are some of the answers you gave me. Each of these comes from someone in our congregation.

If the world were what I wish it could be,...(there would be) Plenty of food and housing for everyone. Everyone would be trustworthy. We would be fascinated by the idea of being different instead of intimidated or afraid. There would be ...Freedom to be my authentic self. Equal access to nutritious food, education (daycare through community college), healthcare, and childcare. No poverty, wars, racism, sexism, homophobia, or any other kind of phobias or isms. People (would be) truly caring about the well being of everyone else and acting accordingly. (We would be) like the apostles after they lost Jesus - they lived in community, shared what they had, and made sure their neighbor was okay. If the world were what I wish it could be...(We would have) more love for other people; less pursuit of narrow self interests. No marine animals stuck in a bunch of plastic. Everyone showing compassion and unconditional love to each other. Equality for all! We would...all listen a lot more, grow in our love, and look for ways to serve. Put others' needs first and have a beautiful planet with enough water for everyone. All persons would have the freedom to "choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19-20) in its most expansive sense. Our world would be ...Calm, quiet, gentle, loving, full of wonder and beauty, with a smattering of surprise to keep us on our toes. Everyone would get to live their best life - whatever that means to them. And all of that would be sustainable - environmentally, emotionally, financially...etc. If the world were what I wish it could be ...We would accept differences and not be scared of them.

Do any of these ring true for you? Would you answer my question with any of these same words or phrases? I suspect that many of you would. We dream of a world which is just and peaceful, where people are compassionate and kind, where people care for each other and the earth and her creatures. What we often forget is that these dreams of ours are God's dreams, too. This vision we have of what life on this planet earth could be is God's vision, too. And that is the purpose of the church. We are here in this community of faith to help bring our world a little closer to what we dream of - to what we often call the kingdom or kin-dom of God - a world in which God reigns within us and among us.

So, let me explore that a little further. The idea of God as a king is woven throughout the Old Testament, and it has always had two different meanings. The first is that the Hebrews understood God to be our creator and sovereign over all Creation. You can hear it in these words from Psalm 47.

God reigns over the nations;  
God sits on his holy throne.  
The princes of the peoples gather  
as the people of the God of Abraham.  
For the shields of the earth belong to God;  
he is highly exalted!

Yet, we, God's people, don't always live according to God's ways. From the very beginning, we have made choices that don't align with living in a world of love, justice, and peace. So, in the Hebrew scriptures, we begin to read about the idea that God will create a kingdom in which all the people live according to God's values and, according to Daniel 2:44, it will be a kingdom that can never be destroyed.

Still, as we read through the stories of the Old Testament, we realize that humanity just didn't get it. They kept walking away from God and doing things to hurt each other. So, God came to us in human form to teach us what living a kingdom life looks like. God came to us in Jesus, known as the Christ, which means king. And that brings us to our scripture reading for today. In this passage from Luke, the Pharisees ask Jesus when the kingdom of God is coming. When we will live in a world in which all people have what they need to live whole and healthy lives, a world in which we treat each other with acceptance and respect. And Jesus responds - The kingdom of God is already among you. I am here among you to usher in this new way of living. If you change your lives to live as I do, the kingdom will spread - like a mustard seed grows to a giant bush or leaven expands in bread. The kingdom will spread from my heart to yours and from your heart to someone else's.

That is the work and the purpose of God's church - to live our lives as Jesus did so we can transform the world with love. We sometimes call this the *missio dei* - the mission of God. In his book entitled "Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World", J.R. Woodward describes it this way, "When we read the Scriptures, we learn that it is God's mission to set things right in a broken and messed up world. God's mission is to redeem the world and restore it to its intended purpose. The church exists to fulfill God's mission, and when we participate in God's mission we become living signs of God's intended future for the world". Woodward goes on to describe three characteristics of the church when the church is aligned with God's purposes. First, we are a sign of hope - a sign that no matter how much struggle and pain and violence we see in the world, God's kingdom is still unfolding. Second, we are a foretaste of that kingdom. Woodward says, "When the church is a foretaste, it demonstrates what life is like when men and women live under the rule and reign of God, when the people of God love one another, exhort one another, encourage one another, forgive one another and live in harmony with one another". Finally, the church is an instrument - the tool through which God's will for justice, peace and freedom is done in the world."

So, the question that lies before us here in our church as we begin to come back together, as we make this new start, is what is our next faithful step in being God's instrument for growing the kingdom of God? What is God calling us to do in this brand new landscape that is the world - or just Washtenaw County - in June of 2021?

Last week at the opening worship service of the Michigan Annual Conference, our bishop, Bishop David Bard, spoke of the mission of God saying, "God is at work, always at work, to transform human lives. To heal, mend, forgive, renew. God is at work, always at work, within us - transforming our hearts, minds, and souls. And God is at work, always at work, to create a new world - a world of justice, peace, reconciliation, compassion, gentleness, kindness and love."

So where, friends, will we join God in this work? Our task this summer is to listen to God, to each other, and to our community. To listen and discern how God is calling us to be a

sign, a foretaste, and an instrument of the kingdom of God. Through our listening and discernment, God will reveal to us what our next faithful step will be. May it be so. Amen.