The Kingdom of God
Matthew 25: 31 - 46

Grace, Mercy, and Peace from God our Father, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the last Sunday of the Church Year. This is also the Sunday we celebrate The Feast of Christ the King: – Jesus' Kingship of all Creation: Jesus' Kingship: Which is one of the main themes of the Gospels. Yet - It only seems like a short time ago we read the Gospel account regarding Jesus' riding triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey – being welcomed as a king - but only to be crucified as a criminal a few days later. -- Jesus just did not fit the expectation of the peoples' desired King: They wanted an earthly king to free them from the occupation of Rome: Not a king who would be a convicted criminal who would die on a cross. Jesus surrendering Himself to His Father by going to the cross was an affront to them. However: The great news is that Jesus, by His death and resurrection, redeemed us of our sins and restored us into a right relationship with God was also given the authority of Kingship: To rule and to reign forever. Reality is, the skeptics and unbelievers, then as well as today, continue to ask: Just where is His Kingdom? Their reasoning is since we do not see His kingdom on any map or have a recognized space in the known world: He must not have any kingdom. We know their reasoning is without merit.

It is a mistake to understand the Greek phrase that is translated as -- "the Kingdom of God" -- to mean a particular place documented on a map or a designated space where Jesus specifically rules for a specific period as we measure time. "The Kingdom of God" is significantly much more because it signifies the fact that Jesus Christ reigns as Savior – the Lord over all creation. As such: "The Kingdom of God" does not refer specifically as to "going to heaven" - but should be understood as "accepting God's rule and sovereignty over all creation since the beginning of time": That God's Kingdom is also now. Welcoming Him to rule over us during every moment of our life being subject to the Triune God in all things and in all places – here on earth and in heaven: The "Kingdom of God" ultimately means that we are His chosen children; that we are loved and forgiven unconditionally of all our sins; no matter how great our sins may be.

We as members of the Kingdom of God have done nothing, absolutely nothing, to be included in the Kingdom of God. There is no way, what-so-ever, to earn our way into the Kingdom of God. We are made part of the Kingdom of God through our Baptism, being made righteous by the death and resurrection of Jesus: For most of us, our parents were called by the Holy Spirit to bring us to the Baptismal font and to instruct us in the faith. As we became adults, God by

granting us free will we were given the choice to remain faithful to this gift Christ has given us – or not. Regardless, of our decision; the one thing that is constant is the Holy Spirit continues to Call us to faith regardless of what our choice may have been. For some, our Gospel reading may have given them the false impression that we can "earn" our way into the Kingdom of God by doing good deeds: A concept called works righteousness. This is the opposite of the true understanding of Grace: That is: That we are saved by the Grace of God through faith and not works: Yet realizing that faith without works is dead. Thus, we need to take a very critical look at this Gospel reading to truly understand what it means.

Please note in the Gospel account: The righteous are surprised when the King welcomes them to eternal life. The righteous did not know of all their good work: They were truly surprised when their good works were told to them. This is clearly seen when they responded to Christ: When did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You something to drink? When did we see You a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe You? When did we see You sick or in prison and go to visit You. The righteous through their actions simply responded to the people they encountered in their lives because of the gift of faith they were given and accepted. The reality of their actions became clear when they heard the response of Jesus: If you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me.

Many of us have had similar types of "surprises" as those welcomed into eternal life with Christ in our Gospel reading. We experience this when someone comes up to us and says, "What you did for me sure helped me a lot. It truly means a lot to me. - or – "What you said to me had a powerful influence on my life. I am truly thankful and will be forever grateful." Then it hits us: While they were saying these things to us, we were trying very hard to remember what we did or what was said that was so beneficial for them. Reality is many times we don't know the good we are doing at the time of our doing it – we are just responding in love to the people God puts into our presence; people many times who are called "the least of these" and perhaps people we do not care for. The critical fact is the righteous do not keep score. Their good works in reaching out to others were done as a response in gratitude to Christ's gracious gift of the redemption of their sin given to them with these caring acts coming naturally, perhaps even unconsciously: Just like a good tree naturally producing "good fruit". The tree does not have to "think" about producing "good fruit" - it just does. So, it is with the person who professes Christ as the King of all Creation: They naturally strive to do good.

There are also the dynamics of the unrighteous giver. They like to recite their good deeds to as many people as they can – many times in great detail. The unrighteous are quite confident about their perceived righteousness and they like to keep score: A fact that is always true with humanly crafted perceived righteousness. In addition, many times there are strings attached to their giving as their deeds are mainly done for themselves. As such, they are not gifts of faith,

they only see what they may gain by their actions. Remember: Love is not love, and devotion is not devotion, if it calculates the costs. Christ is very clear in the teaching about the people who measure their righteousness on human scales: They may be in for a shock at the day of judgment: Jesus clearly said: “Not everyone who says to Me: “Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of Heaven”.

So where does that leave us here today at Memorial Lutheran Church in Ames. Iowa. When the Holy Spirit called us - we responded and accepted the invitation to follow Christ. We, as such, are a Redeemed people and have “accepted God’s rule and sovereignty” over our lives - in every moment of our life. Thus, we are already participating in the “Kingdom of God” and have been assured of eternal life by the gift of Grace of Jesus Christ. This precious “Gift” that transforms our lives - even though we remain sinners until the day we die. A “Gift” that we respond to in love and gratitude many times generating good deeds without realizing we are even responding to this miraculous “Gift of Grace”. This is true because we have been made righteous and being righteous, we do not keep score. Yes, even though we know of our salvation – I believe we will to be very surprised on the Day of Judgment of all the people that we touched in our lives with the love of God. Remember: Jesus is profoundly clear: The life of the Christian is a life given in love to those we encounter. We have the choice how we respond in any giving situation: We need to Remember: The last thing anyone can take from us is our ability to make a choice on how we respond to any given situation we encounter.

To understand the resulting joy of the gift being a member of the Kingdom of God, to be unconditionally loved by God, was clearly and passionately expressed by Brennen Manning, one of my favorite spiritual writers: Manning, a former Roman Catholic priest, was said to have experienced the following when he was alone for several months living in a cave on a solemn retreat in the mountains of Spain while he was struggling with his faith. During this retreat Manning recalls a divine encounter with the Almighty. Brennen Manning stated in faith that he heard Christ say to him:

> *“For love of you I left my Father’s side. I came to you who ran from me, fled me, who did not want to hear my Name. For love of you I was covered with spit, punched, beaten and affixed to the wood of the cross.” -- This is not a joke, it is not a laughing matter to Me that I have loved you.”*
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> *Whereupon Brennen Manning shouted out …“Jesus you are crazy…Are You out of Your mind to have loved me so much?” Christ replied --- “NO !” I’m not crazy to have loved you this much!*

I must confess there have been some moments in my life that I can identify closely with Brennen Manning: Where I questioned why Christ would care about me and why I would be

included in His Kingdom. But Jesus had the same response for me that he had for Brennen Manning:

Not in the same manner but in similar words: Regardless, the meaning was the same: “NO! – I’m not crazy to have loved you this much!” You may have also had a similar experience in realizing Christ’s love for you. Christ’s love for us calls us to respond in love and gratitude for all He has done and to show that love to others. To live life in its fullness in His Kingdom - giving thanks and praise to God for my debt of my sin has been paid in full: I am a redeemed Child of God. Brennen Manning summed it up in the following words that I like to quote often: “If you truly believe in the Death and Resurrection of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. - Go forth and live a risen life: Think big and love a lot.”

As a Redeemed Child of God we can truly proclaim: “Yes – I am the one Jesus died for.” “Yes – I am the one Jesus loves.” “Yes, I am a citizen of the Kingdom of God.” For this great gift for the forgiveness of our sins, and for the great surprises that await us when we find out how God has used us and we did not even know it. --- we say -- “Thanks be to God”. Amen.

May the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in our Risen Lord and Savior; Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pastor James Fuchs
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